

Classroom Disruptions: Classroom Scenarios, Reflections on Response

Scenario One

During chemistry class a couple of students are working together on the assigned material and chatting. One of them expresses feeling upset about statements in the news they heard regarding immigrants to the United States. They say that they feel saddened about how divisive the issue has become.

The other student says, “Those people shouldn’t be coming here in the first place, if they know what is good for them. We need tougher laws to keep immigrants out. This is our country, after all.”

Some other students in the class are now looking over questioningly.

Response: The student’s comment has likely raised the temperature of the room, and many students may have strong reactions. Calmly acknowledge that a heated exchange has taken place; this can help support students who feel upset or targeted. If you’ve established parameters for respectful dialogue, you may wish to cite them; this can be one way of acknowledging the potential impact of the comment while also pivoting back to the course material (“I’m hearing some forceful opinions and generalizations. We’ve agreed in our classroom guidelines that when something like this happens, we’ll pause and reflect about it, and discuss it using evidence. How might the scientific method and its approach to evidence help us here?”).

You can also give students time to process with a short break or reflective writing exercise (“Wait a minute. I’m noticing some strong reactions right now. I think we should pause and consider what was said and what we’re feeling. I know I’m feeling uncomfortable just now and could use a short break to refocus. Let’s come back in 5 min,” or “Hold on a second. Immigration is an issue that many people have strong feelings about. I can see emotions coming to the surface in our class right now. I want to recognize that. I’m concerned that this isn’t the best moment to have a serious discussion about it, though, so I’d like us to take a minute and reflect and write down what we’re feeling, and then we’ll move on and finish our work for the day”).

If you choose to substantively engage immigration policy in your response, help the class refocus around the idea that the student expressed, rather than the student (“Immigration policy is in the news right now, and I’ve heard similar views expressed in the media. What are some other perspectives, and what is the reasoning behind them?”).

New Layer One: The class includes a unit on immigration policy and today’s class session is scheduled to include a discussion of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program

(DACA).

Response: Practice leniency by providing the student with an opportunity to clarify or rephrase the statement. Draw on the assigned course materials and your expertise about immigration and DACA to engage the student's comment, using this as an opportunity to model critical thinking.

Depersonalizing the student's comment (by locating it within larger debates about immigration policy, for example) can help reorient the conversation around evidence-based reasoning rather than personal political beliefs (ex: "I've heard moderators on some news talk shows express similar ideas. Who might they be referring to when they say 'our country'? Does this kind of statement mean that no immigrants should be allowed into the United States? What are the arguments on both sides of this debate, and what kinds of evidence do they offer?"). You can also cite syllabus language about respectful dialogue or collectively agreed-upon discussion guidelines as part of your response, or pause to give students processing or refocusing time.

New Layer Two: Another student challenges the student with anti-immigration views, who then rises to his feet, complaining that the class and instructor operate with a clear liberal bias. The instructor asks the student to leave the classroom.

Response: Before asking the student to leave, make it clear that the particular **behavior (as opposed to point of view)** they are exhibiting – for example, speaking over others and rising from the chair – is **disrupting the learning environment**. Calmly ask the student to be seated, and provide him with an opportunity to change the behaviors. If the class has a policy statement or has established an agreement for the respectful conduct of class, cite it. You can ask disruptors to leave the classroom, even if they are enrolled students. You can also make the choice to calmly take a break or to dismiss class. Keep in mind that, as the chief of UOPD has explained, disruptors may seek to draw out our own powerful reactions or to create a spectacle, so it's best address the situation as discreetly and calmly as possible. You can call UOPD at 6-2919 to ask for help enforcing that a disruptor leave class: officers' first response will be to try to deescalate the situation. You can also call Cahoots mobile crisis intervention services at 541-682-5111, but know that they will reroute all on-campus requests through UOPD for faster response time. You may also refer the student to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards, or the Office of the Dean of Students, which can quickly mobilize to speak with students. ([Reporting forms are here.](#)) NOTE: Only in extreme cases, such as credible threats of physical violence, can a student be permanently expelled from a class.

Scenario Two

An instructor has growing concerns about a student in their class. The student often shows up late to class, leaves early, and has performed poorly on assignments. In addition, the student sits in the back corner of the classroom and often mutters to himself, and you've noticed that other students seem to be moving away from him in the room. When the student participates in classroom discussions, he often loudly challenges both the instructor and classmates, and insists that "there is a conspiracy to undermine students with disabilities at UO." He has also emailed the instructor on multiple occasions, challenging the relevance and content of assignments. After four weeks in class, there is growing and visible discomfort among the students in the class as this student continues with his confrontational conduct.

Response:

When emailing the student or meeting with him individually

Reflect back what he is saying to make sure that you are understanding and can accurately describe his point of view on the subject. Ask the student more about their experience in the course so far, their goals as a student, and their areas of academic strength. State your goals for the course, as the instructor. Express your concern for his access to education (based on his perception that “there is a conspiracy to undermine students with disabilities at UO”) and ask if he has connected with the many resources on campus including AEC and the University Counseling Center. You can let him know, for example, that AEC supports students with disabilities by addressing barriers to access and that the Counseling Center supports students experiencing academic stress. Let him know that you understand that trusting offices at the University can be challenging, if he has felt let down or betrayed by UO in the past. However, state that it is often worth the risk and effort to continue reaching out to new people and offices for support and resources. Frame your concern about the student’s conduct during class discussions in relation to any syllabus language or other, clearly agreed-upon class expectations for respectful discussion.

Make sure to check if you received a notification letter from AEC and this student (via email or on paper). Note that some students may be in the process of registering with AEC or may have opted not to send a notification letter for your course even if they are registered. If you have received a letter, consult the accommodations and resources listed on the letter. If you have questions about reasonably implementing those accommodations in your course, contact AEC for support.

Addressing concerns of the class

If students in the class are stigmatizing one or more of their peers, or if one or more students are disrupting class discussion, ask the group to return to the syllabus and any other agreed-upon class expectations for respectful discussion and respectful class climate. If class members are physically moving away from the student, change the seating pattern or try alternative discussion formats, like assigned small groups. Varying discussion formats and seating arrangements can often be beneficial to many students, for a wide variety of reasons. Encourage students who are upset, feel triggered, or are feeling unsafe to seek support from campus resources such as the Office of the Dean of Students or University Counseling Center.

Scenario Three

Two people you don’t recognize wander into your classroom and start shouting political and/or offensive slogans while holding up a cell phone to video your reaction.

Response: Members of the local community and students who aren’t enrolled have no right to be in the classroom unless invited by the instructor. Calmly but firmly ask them to leave. Explain that UO classrooms are not open to anyone in the community who wants to show up. You can also make the choice to calmly take a break or to dismiss class. Keep in mind that, as the chief of UOPD has explained, disruptors may seek to draw out our own powerful reactions or to create a spectacle, so it’s best address the situation as discreetly and calmly as possible. You can call UOPD at 6-2919 to ask for help enforcing that a disruptor leave class: officers’ first response will be to try to

deescalate the situation. You can also call Cahoots mobile crisis intervention services at 541-682-5111, but know that they will reroute all on-campus requests through UOPD for faster response time.

Scenario Four

You are a unit head—a faculty member tells you she feels intimidated by behavior of a student in her classroom.

Response:

1. Listen carefully and make sure you have a clear idea of what has taken place. It is good practice to document the conversation by taking notes.
2. Ask how they as an instructor responded in the moment, if they haven't already offered that information.
3. If you think the response was appropriate and sufficient, say so. If they didn't know what to do, or responded in a way that was not as constructive as possible, be sympathetic. It's not unusual for faculty members to feel confusion, anger, anxiety, or some combination of strong emotions. Let the faculty member know that they should try brainstorming some future responses to similar scenarios, especially if the incident is part of a challenge that they will continue to face throughout the term.
4. Be supportive! Ask the faculty member what they think would be helpful going forward. Make some suggestions and provide them with a list of relevant campus resources for further consultation (see "[How Our Offices Can Support You](#)").
5. Consider making classroom challenges a subject of discussion at a department/unit meeting.
6. If you believe the incident is a serious one, please report it to your Associate/Divisional Dean or Dean.
7. Finally, ask for additional support yourself if you don't know how to respond to help you model empathetic and effective leadership support.

20 April 2018, compiled by Carmel Ohman