Best Practices in Classroom Management for Today's University Environment

Dr. Jumoke Oluwakemi Ladeji-Osias, Morgan State University

Dr. J. 'Kemi Ladeji-Osias is Associate Professor and Associate Chair for Graduate Studies in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Morgan State University in Baltimore. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in computer engineering. Dr. Ladeji-Osias earned a B.S. in electrical engineering from the University of Maryland, College Park and a Ph.D. in biomedical engineering from Rutgers University.

Dr. Ladeji-Osias' involvement in engineering curricular innovations includes outcomes-based articulation and online delivery of undergraduate engineering degrees. In addition to conducting research on color image fusion and real-time implementation of algorithms, she is the immediate past chair of the Middle Atlantic Section of the American Society for Engineering Education and a member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. She enjoys observing the intellectual and professional growth in students as they prepare for engineering careers.

Dr. Anita M. Wells, Morgan State University

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Abstract

The college classroom has changed in many ways over the last two decades due to enhanced technology and updated methods of information communication. Disruptive behavior and cheating in the classroom also have increased over the last 20 years. Engineering is among the top five disciplines with the highest rates of misconduct. In addition to developing the curriculum for their courses, faculty must be proactive in establishing effective classroom management practices. To this end, instructors increasingly are encouraged to gain a better understanding of problematic behaviors and to become more aware of campus policies, procedures and services related to academic integrity, student conduct, and mental health problems in order to reduce disruptive occurrences. This paper, which may be particularly useful for those with limited teaching experience, describes research on incivility in the classroom and features a classroom management workshop for faculty developed and convened at an historically black college and university in the southern part of the United States. The workshop example presented highlights best practice recommendations from the workshop and the literature.

Keywords: Classroom Management, incivility, professional ethics

Introduction

This paper, which may be of particular value to new faculty and those with little classroom experience, provides a summary of the problem of disruptive behavior in the college classroom and discusses common issues faculty may encounter. Issues and behaviors are categorized as mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, incivility such as talking and inappropriate use of electronics in class, and unethical behavior such as cheating and plagiarism. The authors highlight a recently implemented intervention at an historically black college and university to educate faculty about the origins of students' disruptive behavior. Strategies to address classroom management are discussed.

Background and Statement of the Problem

Classroom management is defined as the responsibility of the instructor and broadly encompasses organization of a classroom environment in which learning can take place.^{1,2} More specifically, classroom management can be defined as the establishment of policies and procedures with attendant consequences, engagement of students for maximum learning, and the utilization of techniques and resources to address conflict should it arise.^{1,2} Research suggests that teachers who are most effective at classroom management demonstrate interest in and establish positive relationships with students, can respond to the individual and group needs of students, are consistent in how they present themselves.^{1,2} The development of a readiness to adapt one's pedagogy to technology and to the learning styles of

today's college student is an additional strategy, which may enhance classroom management.

The modern engineering classroom, for example, is changing in format. There is the traditional lecture (possibly accompanied by recitation sections), the flipped classroom where students watch recorded lectures prior to class and engage in active learning during class time,³ and the online classroom where students access course material through the internet and laboratory sessions. In all of these formats, faculty must manage the environment to ensure a supportive learning experience. Faculty come to higher education well-versed in their subject matter but largely unprepared to successfully confront and manage disruptive behavior.⁴

Disruptive behavior in college and university classrooms is an increasingly concerning problem.⁵ Challenging behavior, which is not immediately addressed can negatively impact the learning environment if instructional time is spent addressing this behavior.⁶ A survey of college students by discipline showed that business and engineering students were more likely to cheat than natural and social science students, with approximately 80% of engineering students reporting at least one cheating episode.⁷ A 2006 study of engineering students indicated that the frequency of cheating varies by assessment type. Cheating on homework occurred more frequently among lower-division students; advanced students or those who cheated in high school were more likely to cheat on examinations, which often carry more weight than homework. Other factors that predicted a higher likelihood of cheating on examinations among engineering students included cheating in high school, fraternity or sorority membership, and unenforced academic dishonesty policies.⁸ Students who held a moral obligation not to cheat agreed that it is wrong to cheat, even in difficult circumstances, and were less likely to cheat on homework and exams.⁸

Sources and Categories of Disruptive Behavior

Incivility in the classroom has been attributed to various causes including a sense of entitlement among students,⁹ (for example, feeling entitled to a passing grade simply for showing up to class), being unprepared for the academic demands of college,⁵ (disruptive behavior can be an attempt to mask academic struggle), distrust of faculty as the authority in the classroom,⁵ processing difficulties, boredom, and mental health problems.¹⁰ Related to these trends, many students feel overwhelmed, and have difficulty managing the stress and pressures of college, and some come to school predisposed to mental health problems. Signs of distress can include academic challenges and disruptive behavior.¹¹

Mental health challenges

Today's college students are under increased stress and are presenting with more mental health challenges.¹⁰ According to the 2013 National College Health Assessment survey, college students reported the following as the top four issues that negatively impact their academic performance: stress, sleep difficulty, anxiety, and work. Survey results showed high percentages of students reporting

significant mental health symptoms in the prior 12 months including: 84% who felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, 79% who felt exhausted (not due to physical activity), 51% who felt overwhelming anxiety, 46.5% who felt things were hopeless and 32% who felt so depressed it was difficult to function.¹² The same 2013 survey showed that 46% of students also reported that academics were difficult to handle.¹² The 2013 National Survey of Student Counseling Directors indicated that 95% of survey respondents reported an increase in the number of students on campus with severe psychological problems including crises requiring immediate attention, psychiatric medication issues and learning disabilities.¹³ These and other mental health challenges can lead to academic challenges and incivility in the classroom.⁶ Whether or not related to mental health challenges, incivility in the classroom is disruptive and must be addressed.

Incivility

Morrisette defines incivility as “the intentional behavior of students to disrupt and interfere with the teaching and learning process of others.”¹⁴ These behaviors can include passive action (inattentive conflict) such as attending class unprepared, sleeping in class and refusing to participate; and active behaviors (hostile conflict) such as displaying disrespect through mannerisms and tone addressed to the instructor including intimidating remarks or threats^{14,15} (via face-to-face and online communication), regular lateness, frequent trips in and out of class, talking, texting and tweeting in class, and inappropriate use of one’s computer. Students with laptops and tablets increasingly are engaging in non-course related internet activity including instant messaging or using earbuds to listen to music or audiobooks during class.¹⁶

Unethical conduct

Ethics is a cornerstone of fields like engineering and is often one of the tenets of the Code of Conduct for licensure, accrediting bodies and professional organizations. Cosma and Joy provide a comprehensive definition of source-code plagiarism that can be broadly applied to other kinds of cheating and plagiarism that involves intentional or unintentional use of another’s work without appropriate attribution:

*Source-code plagiarism in programming assignments can occur when a student reuses source-code authored by someone else and, intentionally or unintentionally, fails to acknowledge it adequately, thus submitting it as his/her own work. This involves obtaining the source-code, either with or without the permission of the original author, and reusing source-code produced as part of another assessment (in which academic credit was gained) without adequate acknowledgement. The latter practice, self-plagiarism, may constitute another academic offense.*¹⁷

Within engineering, students have been known to cheat on graded assessments such as homework, examinations, and laboratory reports and plagiarize text, source-code, diagrams, and other

representations of their work. Examples of unintentional source-code plagiarism include reusing their own code from previous assignments, providing false references, extensive collaboration with peers, and using code without attribution if converted to another language.¹⁸

Contextualizing the Problem

During the Fall 2013 Faculty Institute (an in-service workshop for faculty) at an historically black college and university a 90-minute workshop titled “Best Practices in Classroom Management for Today’s University Environment” was presented to 50 university faculty and administrators. The facilitators were an engineering faculty member (one of the co-authors of this paper) and the Director of the University Counseling Center. The workshop began with faculty in groups of four, discussing scenarios similar to those below using questions (these follow the scenarios) to guide the interaction.

Scenarios

As faculty, we may encounter situations that may require us to make decisions about how to respond in the moment, and what campus resources are available to assist in the long term. Below are some examples of such situations. *These scenarios are composites and do not represent specific incidents or individuals.*

- A student in Dr. May’s online course just complained to her that it was not fair that other students are texting each other for help during their online quizzes.
- The student Dr. Lin is advising for the senior capstone project provided some new source-code that seems impossible to have been completed since their code review last week.
- Dr. West, a newly hired assistant professor had a male student who was openly defiant and disrespectful to her in class. Another student comes to her defense and a scuffle ensues.
- A student in Mr. Singh’s course just posted in the online discussion a response to another student that included threats of violence. Additionally, some portions of the post appeared to be unrelated.
- A student comes to Dr. Ayo’s class exhibiting what she suspects are signs of substance abuse – the student’s eyes are red and the student is incoherent and listless.

Questions - The following questions were provided to guide the small group discussions.

What are your initial reactions to the scenario? How would you respond in this situation? If you were to speak with the student, what might you say? With whom would you want to consult? Do you need to document your interventions? Is there anyone you would want to inform? What are some possible pitfalls of your approach? What would be your “plan B” if your initial course of action was not effective?

Large group discussion

After the small group discussions, participants reported to the larger group. Many faculty expressed appreciation for the opportunity to discuss classroom management issues. Following the large group discussion, facilitators shared best practices (some of which already had been generated by the small

groups) and available institutional resources. The topics covered during this discussion were academic issues, disruptive behavior, and emotional and mental health issues.

Academic Issues. The discussion of academic issues included identification of behavior such as boredom, sleeping or being unprepared. Additionally, related institutional policy, recommendations to prevent this behavior and how to respond when it occurs were presented. Many of these suggestions are detailed in a separate section of this paper. Institutional resources around academic issues were provided including tutoring, online proctoring software, and student support services.

Disruptive Behavior. The discussion of disruptive behavior centered on more egregious behavior like threats, walking in late and talking loudly. Related areas of the university Student Conduct Code were presented along with preventative strategies and responses to the behavior. Recommended institutional resources included the Department Chairperson, Judicial Affairs and Public Safety.

Emotional and Mental Health Issues. The discussion on emotional and mental health issues centered around disabilities, anger, anxiety, depression, suicide, and disorientation. Facts, symptoms, how to respond, and what to avoid were provided by the Director of the Counseling Center for each condition. Faculty also received information on the signs of suicide and effective ways of steering students in need toward mental health services. Data on counseling service usage and mental health diagnoses by discipline, including engineering, were shared. Some faculty were not aware of the most commonly occurring mental health conditions, the considerable use of the counseling center by students (with Engineering students being high users), or how to help students receive counseling services. The data allowed faculty and administrators to begin to better understand the needs of their students.

Best Practices and Practical Solutions

For engineering programs that are ABET accredited, students are expected to meet outcomes in the area of *the professional and ethical responsibility of engineers* and *designing within ethical constraints* by the time they graduate.¹⁹ Some of the uncivil and unethical behaviors that students exhibit are in violation of the ethics of the profession. In this section, we will provide answers to the following questions: How can you structure your undergraduate classroom to minimize disruptive behavior? When there is incivility or ethical misconduct how should you handle it?

Minimizing Disruptive Behavior

Researchers note that the most effective way to minimize disruptive behavior in the classroom is to preclude its initial occurrence through organization and communication.¹⁵

Recommendations for faculty include the following:

1. *Define expectations early in writing and verbally:* The communication of policies, requirements and expectations on the first day of class via multiple modalities is an important practice. The course syllabus, for example, is an appropriate tool for written communication;^{4,14} it should be explicit and, where relevant, should direct students to university resources containing more in depth

explanations of policy and procedure. Passow et al. caution faculty to explicitly define what constitutes cheating, especially in light of increased collaborative activities.⁸ To reduce plagiarism, students should be informed of faculty expectations regarding source-code reuse and attribution¹⁷ and informed that faculty will use software programs (such as *Software Similarity* and *JPlag*) to detect plagiarised source-code²⁰ and plagiarized text (*TurnItIn*, for example).¹⁶

Respectful and non-confrontational dialogue regarding policies and expectations establishes the beginning of a relationship between instructor and students, allows for clarification and student input as appropriate, and sets a tone for the learning environment;^{4,9} dialogue can be accomplished both face-to-face and via online formats such as video chat. Hostile conflict has been found to be more common in the classrooms of instructors that demonstrate insensitive or uncaring behavior towards students.²¹

2. *Decrease anonymity*: Faculty who get to know their students, which is part of relationship building, tend to have less conflict in the classroom.¹⁵ Faculty who can call their students by name are seen as more approachable by students who in turn are more likely to demonstrate respect toward that faculty member and to feel valued as a member of the class. Even when a class size is large, faculty members who make themselves accessible within appropriate boundaries and, as able, schedule time to meet individually with students¹⁵ foster positive rapport.
3. *Encourage active learning*: Classes in which students participate in peer-to-peer education tend to have fewer instances of incivility and unethical behavior.¹⁵ When a sense of the classroom as a learning community has been established, students tend to take more responsibility for themselves and to hold each other accountable for behavior. Inattentive behavior such as reading non-course related materials, having side conversations and sleeping was found to be more common in undergraduate courses and lecture courses and less common with interactive teaching such as discussions or active learning techniques.²¹ Small group work, even in large classes, can reduce inattentive behavior and positively affect learning.⁶ Utilization of the learning community model does require additional thought and advanced preparation on the part of faculty¹⁴ who must present this framework as desirable and beneficial and who must determine and consistently utilize appropriate activities to keep students engaged as a group.
4. *Seek feedback from students*: Students who feel heard and respected are more civil and accountable. Faculty who seek students' feedback about class¹⁴ provide students an opportunity to share their thoughts, which faculty can then utilize to improve their teaching in tangible ways. If faculty seek feedback mid-way through the term¹⁴ this allows them to increase modes of information delivery that are effective and decrease those that are less effective to positively impact the learning environment. For example, an instructor may find it beneficial to student engagement to increase group work and the use of activities that incorporate cell phone and computer use in the classroom,

and decrease lecture time.

Responding to Disruptive Behavior

As described earlier, classroom disruptions can broadly be categorized as incivility or ethical misconduct and may be exacerbated by mental health challenges. The uncivil behaviors most commonly observed by faculty and students include students arriving late, acting bored and not paying attention.²²

Recommendations for faculty include the following:

1. *Address the behavior immediately:* Both faculty and students agree that ignoring classroom incivility is not an effective technique for stopping the behavior.^{21,23} When surveyed, students reported that the most effective ways to respond to classroom incivility are to address the behavior immediately when it is hostile, or confront the student in private for inattentive conflict.²³ The type of response inevitably will vary based on the observed behavior. Unprepared students can be given study guides or online quizzes, due at the beginning of class. Active learning techniques such as Think/Pair/Share or One Minute Papers can refocus all students on the topic at hand. When cheating is observed on homework, a reminder of academic integrity policies to the whole class may be appropriate.⁶ If a student is observed cheating on an exam, the instructor may choose to take away the exam immediately and assign a grade of 0.
2. *Utilize conflict reduction strategies:* Conflict resolution strategies should allow the faculty and student to develop a long term solution that is mutually acceptable. When faculty are discussing the problem, they should identify the problem, highlight the impact on the classroom environment and acknowledge the student's emotions when repeating their perception of the problem. Faculty can help students think through alternatives when, for example, discussing group conflicts.¹⁵
3. *Refer students to campus resources:* Universities often have a myriad of student services to address student conduct. Students who violate policies on academic integrity may be referred to an office for student conduct. In addition, an accommodations office can provide faculty with expectations and resources to provide accommodations to students with documentation. And, counseling centers are available to assist students with ongoing mental health challenges.⁶
4. *Be willing to end the class:* One of the recommended techniques for handling classroom disruptions is ending the class. If attempts to address a problem result in further escalation, the faculty member may opt to end the class and reconvene at the next class period in order to diffuse the tension. If the disruption is severe, the faculty member may have no choice but to end the class period and follow University protocol such as submitting an incident report or contacting Campus Security.¹¹

Conclusions

Classroom management has become increasingly important in the current engineering learning environment. A recent faculty workshop on classroom management at an historically black college and university highlighted the need to disseminate information on this topic to the larger community of faculty and administrators. Faculty should be encouraged to implement best practices to create an environment that minimizes the potential for disruptive classroom behavior by defining expectations early, decreasing anonymity, encouraging active learning, and seeking feedback from students. In the event that an incident occurs, faculty should address it immediately, utilize conflict resolution strategies, refer students to campus resources, and be willing to end the class period. Outcomes from the workshop suggest that more research is needed to determine if there is something intrinsic to the experience of engineering students resulting in the heightened use of counseling services.

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