



Despite our best efforts to be well-prepared, receptive to student needs and interests, and confident in the worth and relevance of the subject we teach, sometimes student inattentiveness or disruption arise in the classroom. This resource provides some guidance and strategies for managing common or problematic issues that might arise in your classroom. And remember: **your TA Supervisor, the CTL, and more experienced TAs are great resources to help you navigate unexpected or difficult circumstances that arise!**

RESPOND TO STUDENT INATTENTION

In cases of student restlessness or inattentiveness, give students the benefit of the doubt and give yourself time to look for possible causes of the problem. Throughout the course, your conscientious attempt to involve your students and to make the material you present relevant and comprehensible will greatly increase the probability of a productive classroom atmosphere.

Strategies for Responding to Student Inattention

- **Give students the benefit of doubt.** If your students' attention is waning, do not initially blame them. Consider how you can help remedy the situation.
- **Assess complexity.** Perhaps your material is too easy or too hard. Students learn best when the material is not too challenging to too simple.
- **Reflect.** After your class, reflect on the possible causes for student inattention.
- **Respond.** After reflecting from previous classes, respond by adapting the material to be more relevant and more comprehensible in the future.

ADDRESS STUDENT DISRUPTION

In the unlikely event that a student should deliberately or inadvertently disrupt the class, it is especially important to deal with the matter in a calm, courteous manner. If you are unable to resolve the disruption satisfactorily during a class period, report the matter to your TA Supervisor and ask for guidance on any further action. In the case of persistent unruliness and/or more serious circumstances, report the matter immediately to the University Police at 706-542-2200 (or 911 for immediate emergencies).

MANAGING HOT MOMENTS

Prepare for "hot moments," or those moments where tension or conflict develops in the classroom. Your role as instructor or TA is to preserve the learning environment: in addition to protecting any classroom debate from becoming an attack on any particular individual, keeping a cool head in the classroom when challenged preserves your students' trust and respect in you. When possible, look for the teachable moment in an argument. For example, what is the value in hearing opposing viewpoints or challenging commonly held stereotypes? Is there a way to use the content of the argument to serve your teaching goals? Or is student learning best served by diffusing the tension and swiftly refocusing students?

Keep reading for some strategies on handling hot moments as you teach.

Strategies to Manage Hot Moments

- **Take a deep breath and assess the situation.** Is a student voicing frustration? Is a student enthusiastically expressing an opinion? Are two students misunderstanding each other?
- **Encourage students to discuss ideas**, not individuals in the classroom.
- **Ask for clarification.** If a student attacks another student's idea, ask that student to restate what he or she thinks the other student meant. Make sure that the interpretation is accurate and allow both students to clarify their statements.
- **Consider both sides.** Ask the students to generate all possible evidence for both sides of a debate as a way of suspending judgment and encouraging reflection. Ask students to find counter examples as well as examples.
- **Provide a space to continue discussions.** Offer to continue a discussion after class or ask interested students to email you or post their thoughts to eLC if the topic of the argument is not central to the goals of the class session.

In general, make your response as calm as possible and avoid making an issue out of a small incident. Try to use any conflict in the classroom as an opportunity to further your teaching goals: it may be possible to use an argument to clarify material, model critical thinking, skills, foster open-mindedness, and enhance students' trust in you.

Strategies to Remain Calm and Find Value in the Exchange

- **Take a breath and try to understand.** Again, take a deep breath, and try to understand the content of the student's complaint or challenge. Ignore, for a moment, any rudeness; if you respond to the content, the student's attitude and approach may soften.
- **Remain calm and nonjudgmental** no matter how agitated the student becomes. Your emotional response will only become further fuel for the student's anger. This is especially true if the student makes a personal attack.
- **Don't claim to know.** Don't use your authority as a teacher to simply claim superior knowledge or logic; while in some cases it may be true, it will almost never convince your students, and it discourages their active engagement with ideas.
- **Use evidence** when disagreeing with a student and ask students to provide evidence for their positions. You may ask other students to evaluate the evidence that you, or the student provide, if the argument is related to course content.
- **Never get into a power struggle with a student.** As the teacher, you already have the power; any retaliation to a student's provocation is likely to be viewed as an abuse of power.
- **Ask student to report to higher authority.** If a student is agitated to the point of being unreasonable, ask him or her to carry the grievance to a higher authority. Do not continue trying to reason with a student who is highly agitated.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom](#) (University of Michigan)
- [Handling "Hot Moments" in the Classroom](#) (Georgia Tech)