Managing Difficult Behaviours in the Online Classroom

> *Managing students in the online environment is both really exciting but also really challenging because whenever a group of human beings come together and if they truly do engage, there's going to be times of tension and there's going to be times of tension that are directed towards ourselves as facilitators.*
>
> Colleen Kawalilak, instructor, Adult and Continuing Education Certificate

Defining difficult behaviours

In the online classroom, you'll find pretty much the same student behaviours as you find in the face-to-face classroom. There are the students who rarely take part in discussion and their opposites – the take-charge students or the 'noisy' ones (Ko and Rossen, 2010, p. 343). Some students disengage because they're coping with problems unrelated to the course. And, once in a while, a student will make a point of challenging your knowledge or your authority. These difficult student behaviours can make your job harder.

Students who could be considered difficult or disruptive in the online classroom:

- Don't participate regularly in forum discussions.
- Respond only to the instructor's posts.
- Spend a lot of time beginning new topic threads that are only marginally relevant to the discussion underway or generally ignore the direction of the discussion and make pointless comments; Ko and Rossen (2010) describe these as 'noisy' students (p. 343).
- Contribute inappropriately to group tasks.
- Disrupt other students through their behaviour.
- Make offensive remarks.
- Challenge the instructor's authority or credibility, either publicly or privately.

Heading off difficult behaviours

Here are some tried and true strategies used by our Continuing Studies instructors to head off difficult behaviours:

- One way to establish credibility with your students is to provide some background information about your experience with the course subject matter, your professional interests and /or your research, etc. in your welcome note or audio message.
- Communicate the value you place in the online classroom community:
  – Follow up your personal introduction with an invitation to students to introduce themselves. You can ask each learner to post a short bio to the discussion forum, giving a little of their personal backgrounds, what they hope to get from the course, and even some of their work history/experience, if appropriate. Then ask each learner to respond to one other learner's introduction.
  – Use your students' names in your public responses to their discussion forum postings.
- Clearly set out your expectations for online participation and interaction in several places on the course site – for example in the introductory module, your personal introduction and your first posting:
  – Let students know how frequently you intend to be present in the online classroom, and how they can contact you privately.
  – Set up the rules of engagement or ground rules for online behaviours in the discussion forums. You can outline your expectations for interaction in a posting at the start of the course or you can work with the class to create ground rules for appropriate language, sharing, confidentiality, respectfulness, etc.
  – Develop a clear policy about minimum required participation and review this with the program administrators. Publish your policy at the beginning of the course.
- Monitor your students' progress. If you find students are disengaged (e.g. not participating in forum discussions, submitting assignments after the due date), contact the student privately. Ask them to respond back to you within a specified time frame, to let you know that they've received the email, and whether they'd like to set up a Skype or a telephone call to discuss their circumstances.
- Model the behaviour you expect. As Butler (2003) points out, the way you relate to your students will influence their understanding of how you want them to operate in your online classroom.
- If a student challenges your authority or credibility:
  – Stay open minded as the student may have a point.
  – If it happens in a public forum, respond quickly in a general way.
  – Follow up with the student privately to discuss in more depth the various issues that the student may have.
  – Acknowledge his or her opinion and be positive about their input and their desire to improve the course or their learning experience.
  – State your own opinion clearly and add context that the student may not be aware of.
  – If necessary, seek guidance from the program administrators.

Responding to common difficult behaviours

Lack of response or expected activity

Regularly remind students as to what you expect. Some Continuing Studies instructors regularly post check-in messages which include reminders (or nudges) about upcoming required activities or assignments and help to keep students on track with the course schedule.

Set up a process for monitoring student input to learning activities, forum discussions and assignments so that you can intervene quickly. If a student is not participating in class activities and is consistently late with assignments, make it clear to the student what you expect and how s/he needs to improve in order to complete the course successfully. Keep the program administrators updated on your actions. They may be aware of special circumstances impacting the student.

Don't wear yourself out if it becomes clear the student is not going to participate, as they should. Ultimately it is their choice and responsibility to manage their own progress.

Noisy students who take the discussion off-track

Intervene quickly by briefly summarizing the key points, and ask follow up questions to steer the student back on track; you can also invite other students to ask questions that will guide the discussion back on track.

Noisy students are often just looking for the instructor's attention so a personal email is often a good way to acknowledge their efforts.

Turn this situation into a learning experience by having a follow up discussion on the best way to participate in discussion forums.

Disruptive behaviours that causes offence to other students

Intervene quickly and supportively so that the other students know you are involved and that they are being protected.

In the public setting of the discussion forum, rely on formality. Respond to the question or issue in a general way; do not be drawn in by personal comments or challenges.

Open up a private discussion with the offending student to try to ascertain the reason for his or her behaviour.

Dealing with academic dishonesty

You can discourage plagiarism or cheating by clearly stating what unacceptable behaviour is. You can foster academic integrity by designing assignments that make plagiarism or cheating difficult. For suggestions on how to design assignments that discourage plagiarism or cheating, see the resources on the *Academic Integrity* web page, and talk to your DE Consultant.

If you suspect academic dishonesty:
  – Give students the opportunity to explain themselves.
  – Consider giving them the chance to resubmit work.
  – Talk with the program administrators about having someone other than yourself investigate the allegations so that you can continue working with the student.