

Dealing With Difficult Students

by Jeffrey Kottler and Wayne Lanning
University of Nevada-Las Vegas

A student comes to your office absolutely livid about some injustice that he/she believes you have committed. Your tests are too hard or your grading unfair. You were rude or insensitive or stupid.

In class, this same student is a continual challenge, interrupting with irrelevant questions, demanding special attention, acting inappropriately and disruptively. What do you do with such a student? How do you handle the student who is hostile or manipulative or apparently disturbed?

As professors and counselor educators we have wrestled with these conflicts before. Students may become obstructive for a number of reasons.

- They don't understand what is expected;
- they lack the ability, skills, or knowledge to comply with what is expected;
- they have some underlying emotional problem;
- they're highly skilled at using manipulation to get their way;
- they don't perceive any incentives to cooperate;
- they're acting out transference feelings towards an authority figure;
- they're receiving secondary gains from the behavior (attention, feelings of power, etc.); or
- the professor is being unreasonable, confusing, or difficult.

It is important to find out what motivates the student's behavior and which kind of resistant, obstructive behavior you are witnessing before you intervene. It is also important to determine whether the student is characteristically obstructive as a style of interaction, or whether the student is being difficult only in your class. The answer to

that question will give you the first clues in finding out your own role in creating or exacerbating the problem.

Let's use the following cases supplied by two readers of *The Teaching Professor* to illustrate some basic principles to keep in mind when dealing with difficult students.

The Case of the Demanding Student

"I had a student once (and since have prayed that it remain only once) who was a walking nightmare. During a discussion on resumes, my class decided that white paper was best and understated tones such as ivory and cream were OK for the more daring. My nightmare student's face burned red; he didn't wait to be called on. 'Those are dumb ideas 'cause if you want to get noticed you need to stand out.' Despite his insulting tone, he was right — that is until he demanded that the whole class use fuchsia, neon green, or sunshine yellow paper for their resumes. I decided to let the class handle it. Big mistake. The class basically booed him down, which made him all the more adamant. Thank God class ended.

"A few days later (after things calmed down) this same student came up to me before class to discuss his grades. I prefer to discuss grades in my office or after class when I have enough time to address those issues, and I explained that to my student. "Why can't we talk about it now?' he demanded. 'I have to get ready to teach, and I prefer to discuss your skills and grades privately.' 'I don't care if everyone knows you gave me a C. They probably all got C's too. You never give A's.' "I do give A's, and I'll help you find ways to earn them too — after class.' After saying, 'It doesn't seem fair,' he sat down. Class started late, and I felt frazzled the rest of the day.

"After class, I found out that he really wanted to talk about the numerical value of a check (as opposed to a check plus or

check minus) on his homework. I explained that my check system was not a grading system; it simply helped me monitor homework assignments and give students brief feedback. He insisted that every grade was quantitative. Out of frustration, I ended up telling him that the checks represented A's, B's, and C's, even though they don't.

"The rest of the semester, this student plagued me with inappropriate classroom behavior. He would raise his hand in the middle of a lesson to ask when the next project was due, despite the fact that I had already written the date on the board. He even asked in the middle of one class if I would dismiss them early that day.

"By the end of a whole semester with this student, I felt abused, frustrated, and manipulated; my teaching nightmare had actually come true."

Discussion of the Case

In this first example, the professor was not so upset that the student was demanding but that he was unreasonably demanding. As is so often the case when we experience conflicts with students, this student had a hidden agenda. He may have been attempting to exercise control over an authority figure, or he may have been frightened by the authority and attacked it. In any case, the difficulty seems to be in the way the student deals with the authority represented by the professor. There is a wonderful metaphor for his primary need when he argued that resumes should be neon green or fuchsia: "If you want to get noticed, you need to stand out." Well, he sure got noticed!

There are a number of ways that the professor exacerbated the student's abusive behavior — much to her later regret. First, she relinquished control to the students; he was in charge of their interactions. Second, she let herself become so exasperated that she gave

him wrong answers for the wrong reasons. To get rid of him she made up an answer to his question about grading. Throughout the whole semester the professor hoped that the difficult student would just go away, or at least stop acting out in class. This illustrates the very important point that difficult, and especially demanding students don't go away or stop their behavior unless we intervene decisively. The last error occurred when the professor allowed a power struggle to develop between them, and she responded on the student's terms rather than her own. She gave in when she didn't want to.

In this case we'd make the following recommendations:

- Decode the meaning of the student's behavior, and try to determine the hidden agenda (power, control, manipulation, seduction).
- Set limits regarding acceptable behavior, and enforce those boundaries.
- Do not allow a difficult student to be in control of the interactions, but insist that they take place according to your rules. Part of our job is to be in charge and set appropriate parameters for professional conduct.
- Do not become defensive about something you do not need to defend. An explanation does not need to be defensive. Schedule an individual conference with the student as soon as the trouble starts. State clearly what you find unacceptable and what changes need to take place.

As professors, it is acceptable not only to give students feedback on their products, but also on their style.

The Case of the Demanding Professor

"After my hour exam was over, one remaining student did not want to surrender his paper. He claimed he had written the answers on the question sheet and needed time to transfer them over to the answer sheet. I got angry, but then thought, 'What the hell,' and said, 'OK, you have five minutes.' Ten minutes

later he was still writing. 'What's going on here?' I demanded. Then I realized that he wasn't just transferring answers; he was still reading the questions. I went into a rage but didn't receive his paper until 15 minutes after the exam was over.

"A week later, after discussing his grade of 71 on the exam (the average was 75), he complained that his score was my fault because he had received his exam eight minutes later. I reminded him that I gave him 15 extra minutes, but that did not appease him. He argued that because I yelled at him he could not use the time to his advantage. He continued to badger me to admit I had handed the exam out late to him and many others. Would I admit it? Would I put it in writing? He persisted, and I realized there was some truth to his complaint. The first exam of the semester usually is accompanied by confusion, and it can take several minutes before everyone has an exam.

"As he continued to accuse me of ruining his grade, I finally exploded and unprofessionally told him he needed 'professional' help. Then he began to complain I was now biased against him, and he could no longer expect a fair evaluation of his work. True enough, if I did not give only objective exams that do not allow for any manipulation of grades.

"This student was playing a head game with me, and I was too blind to realize it and use careful judgement. I finally told him to file a written complaint with the department head. He never did, but the son of a bitch scared me."

Discussion of the Case

This example raises a different set of issues, since it is not only the student who is the problem but also the professor. In many instances of interpersonal conflict in the classroom there is an interactive effect, in which both professor and student contribute to an escalation of the difficulty.

In this case, there was apparently a kernel of truth in what the student said to the professor. The professor then behaved in an inappropriate manner ("I got angry..." "I demanded..." "I went into a rage.") and became vulnerable to

that loss of control. A competitive "head game" then ensued between them in which each struggled for supremacy. In such conflicts, the professor always loses, since we end up sacrificing our dignity in the process. The student may end up feeling powerful because he was able to get under our skin. It is important to remember that we are wonderful targets for anyone who is seeking to cut an authority figure down to size.

The major lesson to be learned from this second case is that some students do not start out difficult: we train them to be that way! Whereas, in the first example the professor had boundaries that were too loose, in this case the professor was too rigid and demanding — both conditions that invite students to act out.

Two final points are important to remember from this case. First, when you catch yourself in an interactive struggle with a student, admit it, at least to yourself, and call time out. Back up and get some distance from the fighting. Second, monitor your attitudes toward students who are different from what you would normally expect. To this professor's credit, he recognized his fear ("the son of a bitch scared me") but he lost his compassion and objectivity in the process and, therefore, also lost his effectiveness to educate.

Conclusions

Both of these case examples illustrate the need to communicate clearly what we expect from students and to enforce the rules consistently. We must remember that difficult students will not go away and stop their inappropriate behavior unless we do something.

The choices available to us include: interventions in the classroom (establish healthy class norms and stop students from acting out); interventions with the student (conferences, referring for professional help, setting limits); and most important, interventions with ourselves. In this last category professors should try not to take the conflict personally.