



10 Effective Classroom Management Techniques Every Faculty Member Should Know

SPECIAL REPORT: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT



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How to Get Wet Without Plunging In: Creative Ways to Start Class

Patty Kohler-Evans, EdD

Starting a lecture can be challenging: getting everyone seated, attentive, and ready to move forward with the content can take several minutes. I have found that sometimes it feels abrupt and disjointed, especially when it has been a week since the last class meeting, so I've been working on strategies that help me get a class going without wasting time and that get all the students engaged and ready to learn. I now begin each lesson with a creative review of the last week's materials. The reviews involve a variety of techniques for getting students to reflect on previous content and ready to move on to new information. They also help with building relationships, a critical component of teacher-student interactions. Here are some of the strategies that I think work best to accomplish these goals.

Who's Your Partner?

Using sticky-back name tags, I put three or four names that go together on the tags. Some examples are John, Paul, Ringo, and George, or Bill, Chelsea, and Hillary. I then randomly put the name tags on the backs of students. The students are allowed to find their partners by asking only yes and no questions. When they find the rest of their group, I have them work on a short review assignment. This can be a list of questions from the previous week's content or a reflection or

anything that requires that they work together. The process of finding the rest of the group takes only a few minutes and gets students active and focused.

Piece the Puzzle

For this activity I break the content from the last lecture into four or five sections. Then I take key points from each section and make them into jigsaw puzzles, one puzzle for each section, with five or six pieces per puzzle. I jumble the pieces and give a set of puzzles to each group of students. I generally make each set of puzzles on a different color of paper and put the jumbled pieces in a Ziploc bag. Each group completes all the puzzles. This requires them to categorize previously learned information. I like to engage in competition for prizes from the local dollar store. The first table to complete all the puzzles correctly wins the prize. Another variation is to give each student a piece of a puzzle and have the student locate the other four or five students who have pieces to the same puzzle—I don't make the puzzles different colors in this case.

Roundtable Review

With this activity, I have students get out a sheet of paper and write a list of numbers from one to ten. Then I instruct them to put one

important idea from the previous lecture on the first line. The paper is passed to the person on the left. Each time the paper is passed, the person receiving the paper writes a different idea. After a few minutes I call time, and the papers go back to the original owner. This represents a collection of

ideas for future review and study.

I have found that the preparation for these activities takes very little time and that the results are very worthwhile. My students anticipate the activities, and I look forward to having the students in a place where they are ready to learn.

Exploring What the Syllabus Communicates

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

The syllabus is often described as a road map to the course. But along with laying out the direction and details of the course, it also conveys messages about what the course will be like. These messages are not communicated explicitly but are more a function of the language and tone of the syllabus. A group of psychology faculty agreed, but they also wondered if the theoretical framework of the syllabus might influence students' perceptions of the course and its instructor.

To test that hypothesis, Richmond, Slattery, Mitchell, Morgan, and Becknell created two syllabi: one that represented learner-centered approaches to course design and one that represented teacher-centered approaches. They modified a rubric created by Cullen and Harris in a work published in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* and used it to guide construction of the two syllabi. The rubric identified learner- and teacher-centered factors in three areas: community (how accessible the teacher was), power and control (the focus of the syllabus with respect to policies), and evaluation and assessment (the relative emphasis on learning and

grades). The learner-centered syllabus created for the study focused more on student learning, and the teacher-centered one focused more on the delivery of course content.

To ascertain whether each syllabus was correctly perceived as teacher- or learner-centered, they were blindly rated on 12 subfactors, derived from the three main factors, and both were correctly identified. Examples from each of the syllabi are included in the article.

These two syllabi were then given to 90 introductory psychology students, who received course credit for participating in the study.

The students were given either the learner- or

teacher-centered syllabus.

They were told to read the syllabus, took a quiz on it, and then were asked

to rate the instructor (who they were told wrote the syllabus) on 12 teacher behaviors taken from a Teacher Behavior Checklist (TBC), developed empirically, that listed the characteristic behaviors of master teachers (behaviors such as effective communication, preparation, enthusiasm, flexibility). They also rated the hypothetical teacher on another instrument that measures levels of teacher rapport with students.

The syllabus is often described as a road map to the course.

The findings confirmed both of the authors' hypotheses. Students did perceive the instructor who wrote the learner-centered syllabus as having significantly higher master teacher behaviors than the instructor with the teacher-centered syllabus. They also rated the teacher with the learner-centered syllabus as having significantly higher rapport with students.

For instructors who worry about establishing connections with students in online courses, the results of this study are promising. They indicate that messages about who they are and what they hope will happen in the course can be conveyed by the course syllabus. It can be used to help set the tone for the course.

For instructors with face-to-face classes, there is an important caveat. The study setting was, in the words of the researchers, "highly controlled" and "artificial." In face-to-face courses the syllabus is often delivered by the instructor who in most classes then talks about it at length. How the instructor's presence and discussion of the syllabus affects students' perceptions of it were not studied in this work. There are some instructors who now make the course syllabus available online before the class convenes so students may first review it without the instructor being present. We don't know at this time if their initial impressions are changed when they meet the instructor in person.

Whether the syllabus is first encountered with or without the instructor's being present, work like this confirms the importance of this artifact of teaching. We've recognized its value as a road map for some time now. There are many articles and some books that delineate the various course details that can be included on the syllabus, often recommending a collection of them. What isn't as regularly recognized are these important "meta" messages that lurk between the lines of this course document. The syllabus subtly hints at what instructors believe about students, how much they care about learning, and whether the learning environment in the course will be open and inviting or closed and controlled. It's more than just a road map. The syllabus strongly suggests what the trip will like.

Work like this should encourage us to look closely at our syllabi. What would students conclude about us and our course? It's an important part of how they are introduced to both.

Reference: Richmond, A. S., Slattery, J. M., Mitchell, N., Morgan, R. K., & Becknell, J. (2016). Can a learner-centered syllabus change students' perceptions of student-professor rapport and master teacher behaviors? Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology, 2(3), 1-10.



Getting to Know You: The Importance of Establishing Relationships

Patty Kohler-Evans, EdD

About two or three semesters ago, I conducted an informal experiment with two of my classes. With one, on the first night of class, I asked students their names and major courses of study. I introduced myself in much the same way, with a brief statement about my chosen field. With the other class, I spent time during the first and second class sessions on activities designed to acquaint students with each other and established how we would conduct the class. I used what I learned about students that first night throughout the rest of the course. When I compared feedback from the two classes, I was amazed at the differences between the two. For example, one student from the second class noted that these activities made the class more “user friendly.” He left class looking forward to the rest of the semester.

I’d like to share some of the activities I used to get students connected with each other and with me.

What’s in a name?

When students introduce themselves, I ask them to tell us their name and also to share what that name means, if they know that; to talk about the individual for whom they were named; and to indicate whether or not they like their name. I

have also asked whether they live their name. For instance, my name, “Patricia,” means loyal. I tell students that fits because I am generally a faithful friend. In some cases students don’t know what their name means. I have found that they are very willing to do some research to find out what it means and to then share that information with the rest of the class.

T-shirt collage

Sometimes I have students introduce themselves to each other by creating a T-shirt that represents who they are. I supply each student with a pre-drawn T-shirt pattern on a sheet of paper. I ask students to use magazine pictures, markers, crayons, etc., to design the shirt.

Usually, I bring all the materials to class. Students tend to talk to each other about themselves as they are designing their T-shirts. I do a shirt too. I believe this shows students that I value this activity. Students seem to really enjoy doing this activity, and they usually work very hard to include multiple aspects of themselves in the collage. Students listen attentively when it’s time to share the T-shirt collages, and even at the end of the semester they still remember information about their classmates.

Identification of personal interests

In many of my classes, I ask students to share information about their personal interests and learning preferences. I use a questionnaire to obtain this information, and I tell students to only share what they are comfortable having me know. A commercially available product that generates this information is the Learning Express-ways™ folder.

Asking for written feedback

I frequently ask for written comments at the end of lectures. Students may comment about the class, express a concern, or share other information. I respond to all comments in writing and return them at the next class. Sometimes I ask students to rate their understanding on a 1-to-10 scale, and sometimes I ask for a brief reflection.

Since I have started to invest more time in

getting to know my students, I have noticed that my relationships with them have improved in numerous ways. When students come to me after the course has ended, I still remember their names and something about them. I have also noticed that I have more students asking questions about their chosen fields. They regularly tell me that they value the activities as well. I believe that the time invested in relationship building increases students' motivation and commitment to the course. Recently, I overheard one student commenting to another about a group assignment that I had made. She was admonishing her fellow classmate to seek out other students who were different as a way to enrich the experience. Whether these examples are a direct result of the relationship building I can't say for sure, but I am convinced that it does make a better climate for learning in my classes.

Conditions Associated with Classroom Conflict

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Students can and do regularly disrupt the classroom. Sometimes they are openly hostile, challenging the teacher's authority and objecting to course requirements and classroom policies. More often, the conflict grows out of their inattentiveness and passivity. They arrive late, leave early, talk during class, and don't even bother to hide their boredom.

Faculty researchers (reference below) wondered whether characteristics of courses and instructors might be associated with conflict. They also wondered whether instructors' preparation and caring attitude toward students related to the

presence or absence of students' disruptive behaviors. And they were curious as to how instructors went about resolving conflict and whether they perceived the techniques they used as being successful.

To find answers to these questions and to document whether the differences between hostile and inattentive conflict were real, they surveyed a national sample of psychology professors. Faculty who completed a 71-item questionnaire were asked to answer while thinking about a single course they had taught recently in which they experienced a high level of student conflict.

Analysis of the survey results documented a number of important findings. First, the hypothesis about there being two different kinds of conflict was confirmed. Second, “we found that the amount of conflict that faculty reported was actually unrelated to many characteristics of courses or instructors.” (p. 183)

In other words, things like the instructor’s gender, race, age, years of teaching experience, full-time versus part-time status, and class size did not relate to the amount of reported conflict. These findings are at odds with some previous research that has documented that students tend to challenge the authority of female professors and faculty of color more often than they challenge white male faculty. Other research results do not find correlations between instructor characteristics and such things as student ratings of instructor effectiveness.

However, these researchers did find some interesting correlations between instructional methods and conflict. For example, “the use of lecture correlated directly with inattentive classroom conflict. On the other hand, using discussion or active learning related inversely with inattentive classroom conflict.” (p. 182)

Hostile conflict—as in challenging, open resistance—was found to be related to “whether

faculty expressed care toward students, communicated respect, behaved sensitively, and remained warm and engaged.” (p. 184) Faculty who did not approach students in these ways reported higher levels of conflict. And these faculty behaviors were also found to be most effective at reducing conflict. The researchers describe these methods as “working alliances” and report results that suggest faculty build them when they attend “to the emotional bonds that exist in the classroom,” when they promote “a common sense of purpose when teaching,” and when students are treated respectfully despite disagreements. (p. 185) Even though more than 61 percent of this sample reported that they ignored conflict and the behaviors associated with it, this strategy was related to poorer outcomes.

In sum, based on these findings, faculty are well advised, yet again, to take seriously their relationships with students. In this case it seems that an ounce of prevention may well be worth the pound of cure.

Reference: Meyers, S.A., Bender, J., Hill, E.K., and Thomas, S.Y. (2006). How do faculty experience and respond to classroom conflict? International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 18 (3), 180–187.

Those Students Who Participate Too Much

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

What would we do without those few students who are always ready to speak—who make a stab at an answer when no one else will, who ask for clarification when they are confused, who even respond to

things other students say in class? Most of those students we would like to clone. But then there are those who communicate to excess. They would happily dominate every classroom discussion if allowed. We call these students the

over-participants; in the research literature they are known as compulsive communicators, and researchers estimate that a bit more than 5 percent of students fall into this category.

The rest of the class loves and hates these classmates. They are loved because they take the pressure off everyone else. They are hated because they speak so much. Their endless contributions soon bore others. And they are hated because they make those who struggle to contribute feel woefully incompetent.

Their behavior also presents all sorts of problems for the teacher, who would love to call

communicators results in even more negative student perceptions than does addressing the problem punitively.

What's the best advice, based on this research? Address the problem using positive and constructive communication strategies. It helps to have a discussion early in the course about the characteristics of effective discussion and teacher-student exchanges. If students are asked to describe those conversations that hold their attention and help them learn, they are usually quick to name the over-participation problem and state preferences for dialogue in which many people participate.

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on somebody else, but often that familiar hand is the only one in the air. Generally over-participants are bright students. They care about the content and have the level of motivation a teacher would like to see in all students. But their determination to keep themselves always at the center of discussion tests in most of us the patience and commitment to participate.

Generally, teachers do not rebuke the over-participant in public. Researchers in the study mentioned below asked students what they expected teachers to do about fellow classmates who over-participated. They found that students expect teachers to manage compulsive communicators through management strategies that are not rude or demeaning. Students "do not want to witness a fellow student subjected to negative sanctions when it comes to this particular transgression." (p. 28)

When teachers do not address the problem, according to this research, students rate them lower on measures of credibility and affect or liking. In fact, doing nothing about compulsive

Teachers should design participation activities that require the contributions of many: small groups presenting brief reports, sharing examples, or offering summaries.

It may be useful to talk privately with the student who is participating too much. It may help to make clear how and why too much communication from one student inhibits the learning of others. Perhaps the student could be encouraged to move his or her participation to the next level by not just answering questions, but asking them; by not just making comments, but specifically responding to things other students say in class.

Participation norms are established early in the course. If a teacher holds fast to hearing from lots of students right from the start, that norm will be established and can be maintained throughout the course.

Reference: McPherson, M. B., and Liang, Y. (2007). Students' reactions to teachers' management of compulsive communicators. Communication Education, 56 (1), 18-33.

Technology Policies: Are Some Better Than Others?

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Students now arrive in our classrooms with a wide array of electronic devices. They also arrive used to being able to use those devices wherever and whenever they please. Should that include the classroom? The research is pretty conclusive that most students don't multitask well (certainly not as well as they think they do), and when they are attending to those devices they are not focusing on what's happening in class. But enforcing a ban on electronic devices can be difficult and time consuming, to say nothing of the adversarial relationship it cultivates between the teacher and students. Some teachers have decided that using the devices makes more sense than banning them. They have their students finding relevant information, locating answers, and even asking and responding to questions.

Faculty writing about technology policies usually recommend one or the other of these options: forbid the use of technology in the class or integrate it fully with course material. Generally faculty opinions on the topic are strongly held. "What remains unclear is the extent to which such policies foster or undermine instructional outcomes." (p. 302) And that's the underlying question that has motivated several studies by Ledbetter and Finn, who report that their previous work "suggests that the relationship between teacher technology policies and instructional outcomes is complex and functions together with other instructor communication behaviors." (p. 302)

In this study, these researchers investigated the extent to which teacher technology policies predicted learner empowerment or "the student's motivation to achieve educational goals." (p. 302). They predicted that if the teacher's technology policies aligned with students' technology expectations, then learner empowerment would improve.

To address this and several other related hypotheses, the researchers looked at these two teacher policies—those that encouraged technology use and those that discouraged its use. They found that "students are most likely to feel that the course is valuable (meaningfulness) and that their participation makes a difference (impact) [both of these being established measures of empowerment] when the teacher highly encourages students to use technology for course-related purposes." (p. 312)



Another hypothesis proposed that if teachers moderately discouraged non-course-relevant use of technology that would also be associated with increased student empowerment. However, results here were opposite of what they predicted. Students were less empowered when the teacher moderately discouraged non-course-related technology usage than when the teacher either strongly discouraged or minimally discouraged its use.

They offer this implication of these results: “Although students may indeed prefer that instructors use a moderate level of technology, perhaps what is most important regarding technology policies is that the teacher has explicit rules regarding the use of technology in the

classroom, clearly communicates the rules, and consistently enforces the rules.” (p. 312)

This is a small study, and it addressed only one of many possible student outcomes. Nonetheless, it is interesting that discouraging the use of technology for non-course-related activities did not diminish how empowered these students felt about the course and their learning in it. Empowerment, or the motivation to learn, in this study suffered when teachers did not clearly either forbid it or permit it.

Reference: Ledbetter, A. M., & Finn, A. N. (2013). Teacher technology policies and online communication apprehension as predictors of learner empowerment. Communication Education, 62(3), 301-317.

Use ‘Stuff Happens’ Cards to Handle Student Excuses

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Students and excuses seem to go hand in hand. Sometimes the excuses result from real events and personal problems that legitimately prevent a student from being in class, completing an assignment on time, or doing what some other policy or procedure may stipulate. Not having the wisdom of Solomon, most faculty struggle to fairly adjudicate between the real and unreal reasons offered for noncompliance.

Professor Daniela A. Feenstra, who teaches a variety of business classes at Central Pennsylvania College, has developed an interesting way through this dilemma. On the first day of class she gives each student a “Stuff Happens” card. It’s about the size of a business card and also includes the semester date and a place for the student’s name.

In the syllabus (and in class) she explains that this is a student’s “one time only” forgiveness card. If a student is late for class or might need a one-day extension on a paper, the student may trade the “Stuff Happens” card for this exception. Students don’t have to get her approval or permission to use the card. Use of it is entirely at their discretion. However, each student gets only one card, which is not transferable and won’t be replaced if lost.

If no “stuff happens” during a given a semester and a student follows all classroom policies and procedures, the “Stuff Happens” card may be traded in the last week of class for 20 bonus points.

Sometimes more than one “stuff happens” event may occur during the semester. When it does and the student presents the excuse or excuses, the teacher once again faces the problems described at the beginning of the article. However, Professor

Feenstra notes that the “Stuff Happens” card takes care of most emergency situations. It covers the conscientious student who may occasionally have a problem. Other students are probably going to need more instructor feedback anyway.

Humor: Getting a Handle on What’s Appropriate

Mary C. Clement, EdD

The contribution that humor makes to learning is well established in research. It is not that humor causes learning; rather, it helps to create conditions conducive to learning. It helps learners relax, alleviates stress, and often makes it easier for students and teachers to connect personally. The presence of humor in a classroom can be very beneficial.

But there are a couple of problems. First, faculty often don’t think of themselves as funny—some are, but most academics would not make a living as stand-up comedians. In fact, any number of faculty cannot successfully tell a joke, even after carefully rehearsing the lines and easing their tension with liquid libations. So, how might a serious academic find his or her way to humor that works in the classroom?

And then there’s the problem of propriety. Not all humor is appropriate, especially given the commitment of higher education to cultural respect, diversity, and equality. If you can’t make jokes about ethnicity, politics, religion, or sex, is there anything left for one-liners?

Fortunately, some recent research offers help on both fronts. For faculty who don’t think they can be funny in the classroom, there is a wide range of different kinds of humor. Options abound. Early research (referenced below) identified seven

different kinds of humor: funny stories, funny comments, jokes, professional humor, puns, cartoons, and riddles. And each of these kinds of humor can be employed with great creativity, such as using weird names in math word problems; referring to aspects of content with humorous names, such as calling bacteria “baby beasties”; using different voices; wearing funny clothing; or telling stories about family or college days. The best news is that all of these kinds of humor have the same positive impact on learning environments.

The purpose of the study referenced below was to identify what students consider appropriate and inappropriate humor. Researchers did that by asking 284 undergraduates to list several examples of “appropriate and suitable” humor and then asking them to do the same for humor that was “offensive and/or not fitting for the class.” The students had no trouble identifying examples in both categories. This student sample generated 712 examples of appropriate teacher humor, which researchers placed in four different categories.

The first, which contained almost half the listed examples, researchers called “related humor.” This humor linked with course materials; examples included a physics instructor who

regularly played with a Slinky to demonstrate certain physics principles or another who used course material in jokes: “What do you call someone who likes to go out a lot?” Answer: “Fungi.”

The second category was unrelated humor. These first two categories contained more than 90 percent of the examples students provided, although researchers note that there was overlap between the two categories. Examples in this second category include some teasing of student groups or individual students, or some stereotypical student behavior such as procrastinating.

The remainder of the appropriate examples were self-disparaging humor in which the instructor made jokes or told stories that poked fun at or belittled him or herself. Then there was a very small category of unintentional or unplanned humor when something funny happened spontaneously in class.

Equally valuable in this research is the analysis of inappropriate humor, for which students offered 513 examples, which researchers again placed in four categories: disparaging humor targeting students, disparaging humor targeting

others, offensive humor, and self-disparaging humor.

More than 40 percent of the examples fell into the first category where instructors disparaged students individually or collectively. Students were disparaged for their lack of intelligence, gender, or appearance, as well as for their opinions.

When the disparaging humor targeted others, it used stereotypes and such specific group characteristics as gender, race/ethnicity, or university affiliation. Some inappropriate humor examples were listed as offensive because they contained sexual material or vulgar verbal or nonverbal expressions, or they were too personal.

In conclusion, researchers encourage faculty to explore humor related to the course content. Students always considered it appropriate. Moreover, many reported that it helped them relate and recall important course information.

Reference: Wanzer, M. B., Frymier, A. B., Wojtaszczyk, A. M., and Smith, T. 2006. Appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor by teachers. Communication Education 55 (2): 178–96.

A Behavior Contract That Made a Difference

Lori Norin and Tom Walton

It seemed that almost every day we would come back to our offices after our speech classes with a frown on our faces and the need to tell a story about the latest shenanigans that happened in class. A student “accidentally” showed an inappropriate image on a PowerPoint slide during his speech. A student walked in 20 minutes late during a classmate’s speech—with a

pizza in one hand, a Mountain Dew in the other, and a cell phone on one ear. A student refused to give her speech as scheduled and dared us to do something about it.

Finally, one day we decided we had had enough. We created a list of behavioral expectations, which we asked students to sign, and thus was born the Speech Department Behavior

Contract. Since then it has grown into a well-defined instrument that has had as much impact on student retention, success, and well-being as any other strategy we have added to the curriculum.

Initially the document contained 10 items—rudimentary things like students taking responsibility for reading the syllabus, signing the attendance sheet, taking the pretests and pre-assessments, meeting deadlines, etc., and understanding the consequences of making excuses for missing speeches. Even in its early format, the contract positively impacted retention and behavior in the classroom as observed by us and noted by our dean. Students told us that they appreciated the precise listing of their responsibilities because it made the rules and consequences clear.

At the end of each semester, we revise the document based on the events of the previous semester. For example, we added a statement concerning the campus electronic policy based on a serious plagiarism case that occurred in one of our sections. Once it became prevalent and blatant, we added a statement about text messaging in class. Some of our other colleagues are using contracts similar to ours, and they report the same positive effect. We hope that by sharing our contract, you will consider how it might help in creating an ideal learning environment in your classroom.

Classroom Ethics Contract

1. I received, read, and understand the department general syllabus for this course, including the attendance policy.
2. I understand failure to sign an attendance sheet at the appropriate time and date results in me being marked absent.
3. I verify that my professor has requested that I meet with him/her first should I have any concerns about the conduct of the course. If that meeting does not resolve the concerns, then my

professor will recommend I meet with the department's lead faculty member or department chair.

4. I understand that my professor expects respect from everyone in the classroom at all times. This includes rules about sleeping, inappropriate talking, rudeness, doing homework, answering cell phones, and any disruptive behavior as defined by each professor, etc.

5. I understand it is my responsibility to take the online content pre- and post-test(s) by the assigned date(s).

6. I understand it is my responsibility to complete the written pre- and post-assessment(s) by the assigned date (PRCA, Speech Anxiety, Listening).

7. I understand it is my responsibility to complete all assignments on time and that there are penalties for late assignments (if allowed) at each professor's discretion.

8. I agree that if I don't understand an assignment it is my responsibility to ask for clarification.

9. I understand my professor's policy about being tardy and the consequences of not following his/her policy.

10. I understand the ramifications of missing a scheduled speaking day.

11. I understand that should I miss class it is my responsibility to get any handouts, etc.

12. I understand it is my responsibility to check my e-mail daily or weekly depending on my professor's guidelines.

13. I understand it is my responsibility to follow directions and that failure to do so will result in a loss of points.

14. I understand it is my responsibility to read and follow the Electronic Communications Policy. The link is available at the bottom of the UA-Fort Smith homepage <http://www.uafortsmith.edu>.

15. I understand I should not enter the classroom during a student speech. I should wait to hear applause and then enter.

16. I understand that plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated and may result in receiving a zero (0) for the assignment, withdrawal from the course, or suspension from the university.

17. I understand that cell phones must be turned off or turned to vibrate during class and that each professor may, at his/her discretion, enforce a consequence for any cell phone ringing or text messaging during class.

18. I understand that iPods and/or MP3 players must be turned off during class and that each professor may, at his/her discretion, enforce a

consequence for any music being played during class.

19. I read, understand, and agree to abide by the student handbook guidelines for classroom ethics.

20. I understand that each professor may add additional rules in writing to this departmental document.

21. I understand that failure to sign this document does not exclude me from its requirements.

Student Signature: _____

Collaboration or Cheating: What Are the Distinctions?

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

The line between collaboration and cheating is fuzzy. It's still clear at the edges, but messy in the middle. When students are working in groups, searching for a solution to a problem, looking through possible answers for the best one, or sorting out material to include in a presentation, that's collaboration. When one student in the group solves the problem and everyone else copies the answer, that's cheating. When one student fails to deliver material she or he's been assigned and the rest of the group covers, that's cheating.

But what about when students study together? Given what we know about how much they can learn from and with each other, it makes sense to encourage students to work together on course content. To us that means collectively looking for answers, explaining things to each other, and

using questions to test their knowledge. But what if they divide up the homework problems or study questions so that each person does only a few, but everyone gets the answers?

Collaboration on exams or quizzes further highlights the messiness of the distinctions. If a student admits to a group working on quiz questions that he doesn't know an answer and someone else in the group identifies the right answer, explains what makes it right, and that explanation enables the first student to

understand, has cheating occurred? For exams, must a student discover all answers working alone? The question can be framed more globally, when does collaboration cross the line and become cheating?

Teachers have the responsibility to assess individual mastery of the material. Grades provide

Promoting collaboration and preventing cheating can feel like one of those spots between a rock and hard place.

a measure of how well an individual knows something. When students collaborate, when they produce work collectively, that makes it much more difficult to determine who knows what and how well they know it. Promoting collaboration and preventing cheating can feel like one of those spots between a rock and hard place.

The distinctions matter because collaboration is an expectation in most professional settings. Professionals “cheat,” as we usually define it. If they don’t know an answer, they look it up. If they don’t know how to do something, they ask someone to show them. Most decisions are group decisions. Who contributed what is of little concern; it’s the quality of the decision that matters.

Are we conveying mixed messages if we put a problem on the board and tell students to work on it with someone seated nearby, but then silently expect all homework to be completed independently? Do they see what differentiates in-class collaboration from the individual work we require that they do for grades? As far as that goes, how clear is our own thinking about what makes them different?

If we don’t understand the distinctions, then we don’t have much hope of clarifying them for students. Students already have permissive attitudes about cheating—so many of them do it, despite our efforts to prevent it. If we’re teaching

students in that traditional 18-23-year-old cohort, then there’s the added power of peer pressure. If the student asking for your answer is a friend, can you say no without doing damage to the friendship?

Unfortunately, it’s also possible for groups to collaborate with the intent of cheating—the giving and taking of answers without any attempt at learning. We focus our efforts on the person who’s cheated—the one who’s gotten the answer from somebody else. We don’t pay much attention to those who enabled the cheating—the ones giving away the solutions and facing no consequences when they are in fact co-conspirators.

Finally, are we so focused on preventing cheating that we’re neglecting to teach the skills of collaboration? I’m wondering if the place to start is by exploring with students what it means to work collaboratively, how everyone has the responsibility to contribute, and why it’s everyone’s responsibility to prevent the undeserved taking of ideas and information from others. That doesn’t mean everyone must always know the answer, but everyone ought to have ideas about the possible answers or at least some thoughts about how to probe the problem further. Handing out an answer to somebody who hasn’t done any work is different from trying to help someone who’s struggling but still working to understand the content. Effort on the part of the receiver is key.



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