

Experienced faculty have come up with excellent ideas for solving the discipline problems that plague large classes.

Students Behaving Badly in Large Classes

Elisa Carbone

A few months ago I received an e-mail from a faculty member: “Could we meet to discuss some problems I’m having in my large class?” She went on to list some of her areas of concern: how to set up group work, how to deal with exam logistics, and so on. She came to the Center for Teaching Excellence to meet with director Jim Greenberg and me, and after we had brainstormed some ideas about group work and exams, the real problem surfaced: the students in her large class were behaving abominably. They wandered in late, left early, read the newspaper, chatted with friends during the lecture, and napped; not surprisingly, a large number of them were failing the course. It was her first semester teaching a large class. She never wanted to do it again.

In addition to these problems, faculty generally have found that large classes have poorer attendance, louder packing up of books a few minutes before the end of class, more cheating on exams, and more off-task behavior during discussions and group activities. They also report a startling array of innovative disruptive behaviors during class, including talking on cell phones, watching portable televisions, sitting through the lecture with headphones on, having pizza delivered during the middle of class, fraternity pledges’ pretending to have a nervous breakdown during an exam, and passionate making out in the back of the classroom.

This incivility seems to be caused by the same mind-set that allows otherwise polite individuals to gesture rudely at other motorists in a traffic jam or shout obscenities at a referee at a crowded sporting event. The anonymity and impersonal nature of a large class can inspire students to behavior they would never dream of exhibiting in their small classes.

Concern over student behavior is often at the top of the list among teachers of large classes. It is demeaning and disheartening to have a lecture ignored in favor of chitchat or to have students milling into and out of the lecture hall as if it were a hotel lobby. How can we encourage civility in the large classroom? How can we as faculty stay in control of large numbers of students so that the class time is respected?

Setting Clear Expectations Up Front

There is no one right answer to the question of how much control to exert over the students in a large class. Each faculty member must decide what kinds of behaviors are acceptable in his or her classroom and what kinds of behaviors are intolerable. Do you not mind a few latecomers as long as they take their seats quietly? Or would you rather students not come at all if they cannot get there on time? Control styles range from authoritarian to laissez-faire. An authoritarian lecturer is likely to march up the aisle toward a student who is about to leave early and ask him, in front of five hundred of his peers, where he is going. The laissez-faire lecturer often does not mind side talking, newspaper reading, or other errant behavior as long as it takes place in the upper tiers of the lecture hall and is not a distraction to the students who have chosen to sit up front (Carbone, 1998). And many faculty fall somewhere in between these two ends of the spectrum.

It is important to determine what you expect of your students before the first day of class, so that on that first day you communicate these expectations firmly and clearly. Robin Sawyer (Department of Health Education, University of Maryland) spent many years teaching middle school and high school before joining the faculty at the University of Maryland. He says that in many ways, college students are just big high school students. The twenty minutes he spends going over class rules on the first day of class remind him of his days in public school, but, he says, "It saves me incredible grief down the road." He has found an exponential decrease in behavior problems that stems from expressing his expectations on the first day of class. "You wouldn't think you'd have to talk about these things to twenty-one-year-old college students," he says, "but you do."

I spoke with Rachel, a freshman at a large university where every one of her classes has over two hundred students. She says she and her fellow students are happy to live up to teachers' expectations for conduct, but want to know about these expectations at the outset. In one of Rachel's classes the teacher has just started, in midsemester, to berate students for being late. "She never said anything about how she wanted people to come in on time, and now she's telling us she had this expectation and we're getting yelled at for it," said Rachel. She has noticed that the teacher's anger, along with the students' feeling that they were not forewarned, has damaged the rapport in the class. If you are reading this and thinking, "But students should know that coming in late is rude!" think again. Some teachers do not mind lateness and never show

annoyance over it. They feel as though students are paying for the class, they may have to travel a long way across campus from a previous class or come to class straight from a job, and their lateness is their own business. Many students agree with this sentiment. The only way for students to know if they have landed in a class where lateness (or any other behavior) will not be tolerated is for this expectation to be laid out clearly.

It does not hurt to repeat the rules of conduct on the second day of class (since some of the students who most need to hear them may not have shown up on the first day) and periodically throughout the semester, especially if students seem to be forgetting them. It is also helpful to include your expectations in the syllabus, so students will come across them when double-checking the due date for a paper. Jack Osman (Department of Health Science, Towson University) hands out with the syllabus a separate sheet of behavioral expectations, which include his rules about tardiness, attendance, classroom conduct, and cheating. Each student is required to sign a statement at the bottom of this sheet that he or she has read the list and agrees to abide by the rules. It is not a contract, since Osman does not countersign, and he does not collect them but requires students to keep them in their notebooks. If a problem arises, Osman calls students' attention to the list and their signature and reminds an offending student that he or she has made a commitment to behave otherwise.

Tara Torchia (Department of Health Education, University of Maryland) notes that when laying down the law on that first day of class, it is important not only to tell students how you expect them to act but also to explain why. "It's not just, 'Because I told you so and I'm the teacher,'" says Torchia. She lets them know that she wants no side conversations, no one coming in late or leaving early, and no one reading the newspaper "because it's distracting to me and to other students." Giving them an explanation is part of setting a tone of respect, says Torchia. She also gets students to agree to codes of conduct. On the first day of class she asks them if they think one minute is enough time for them to pack up their notebooks and backpacks before leaving for their next class. "Does anyone think that's not enough time?" she asks. Once students have agreed that they can complete this noisy task in one minute, she promises to let them out one minute early each class, so that the commotion of packing up will not interfere with her lecture. If she then notices the beginnings of noise before this one-minute cutoff, she looks at her watch and says, "It doesn't look like time to pack up to me." Students quiet down and wait for her signal. Torchia says that giving students explanations and asking them for their agreement with behavior codes lets them know that they too must take responsibility for creating a positive learning environment in the classroom.

Student Opinions on Classroom Discipline

One faculty member shared this story with me: She was teaching a large class in which two male students consistently engaged in side talking. After several class periods, she finally asked one of the students to move to the other side

of the room. He did so, walking on the tops of the desks as he went. The professor was so stunned that she did not know what to do. As a result, she did nothing. The boys shaped up a bit but continued to be somewhat of a disruption problem for the rest of the semester. In her end-of-semester evaluations, this faculty member received numerous comments about the incident, such as, “We were all embarrassed by how those students behaved. You should have kicked them out,” and “You shouldn’t have let those students be that disruptive.” It became quite clear that the class felt she should have been more forceful in controlling disruptive student behavior.

Although some forms of misbehavior, such as working crossword puzzles or napping, are more distracting to the professor than to other students, there seems to be a general feeling among students that they appreciate it when instructors control noisy behavior. In a questionnaire administered at the University of Washington, students were asked what hindered their learning in large classes. One of the most often cited problems was the behavior of their fellow students—specifically side conversations, arriving late, and leaving early (Wulff, Nyquist, and Abbott, 1987). In a study of large classes conducted by Amy Allen (Department of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Maryland) students wrote the following comments in their end-of-semester evaluations: “Freshmen behave like they’re on a chicken farm. It takes them ten minutes to settle down and they become restless ten minutes before the class ends,” and “These students are awful. They’re loud, disrespectful and totally uninterested. I want to line them all up and beat them with a fire hose” (Allen, 1998). Allen found that in classes where faculty did not regularly address side talking, there was a strong response from students indicating that they felt the noise level was unacceptable.

When you take steps to control student behavior in your large classroom, you are not doing it only for yourself. There is a large silent majority of students who want to spend their time listening rather than being distracted by a handful of rowdy classmates.

Teachers Taking Responsibility

Torchia takes a proactive approach to student incivility in her large classes. She takes on the responsibility of making her classes so interesting and challenging that students want to be there and pay attention. To do this, she uses a number of devices to spice up her lectures: visuals, stories, personal references, props, guest speakers, active learning, and even music that relates to her lecture material. “I take the approach that you have to look at it as theater,” says Torchia. “You wouldn’t put on a play by standing next to an overhead with the lights turned down.”

Torchia finds that moving around the room helps to keep students in every part of the lecture hall tuned in to her. She places visuals all around the room and moves to them as she lectures. “Students do have to turn around in order to see,” she says, “but if you’re turning around to look, you’re going to be paying attention.”

It is also important for faculty to teach by example. If you want to encourage students not to be late, arrive a few minutes early and start class exactly on time. And, most important, if you want students to demonstrate respect for you and for the class time, show respect to them. I recently came across a syllabus that, in an ill-guided attempt to stop students from side talking, stated, essentially, “The people sitting near you are not interested in your personal life. . . . Idle chitchat is immature behavior.” It went on for several more sentences about how annoying and uninteresting side conversations are. It is not surprising that the strongly worded syllabus did not achieve its goal of curtailing side conversations. The syllabus is asking for civility in a manner that is demeaning and uncivil. Students read this syllabus at the start of the semester, before any of them had engaged in side conversations, and they were already being insulted. If we want students to act like adults, or at least more like adults, we need to treat them with the kind of respect we offer adults.

Personalizing the Large Class

Students behave in large classes in ways they never would in small classes. Many students find from the start that the impersonal nature of large classes is alienating, and their uncivil behavior is often an offshoot of this alienation. Making a large class more personal can ameliorate this situation. Maryellen Gleason (1986) suggests treating the large class as if it were a small class. In other words, behave as you would in your classes of twenty-five or thirty: come in early and chat with a few students, when a student asks a question move closer as you answer it, stay after class to talk with interested students, make an effort to learn as many names as possible, and choose twenty or so exams or papers from each batch graded by your teaching assistants and write personal comments on them.

Denny Gulick (Department of Mathematics, University of Maryland) holds a weekly workshop session for his students. This session is not required, but it offers students a chance for more personal interaction with him. About twenty to thirty students attend each week, and the response has been very positive. Students appreciate both the chance to review the material and the more personal tone these meetings bring to Gulick’s large lecture class. “This is my way of walking halfway to them,” says Gulick.

It is not possible to meet with each student in a large class individually, but there are ways to hear from individuals in the class and respond to them. The one-minute paper is an excellent way to find out how students are handling the material, hear what questions they have, and be able to give personal feedback to several students each time the papers are collected (Angelo and Cross, 1993).

William Harwood (Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of Maryland) uses the one-minute paper in his Introductory Chemistry and General Chemistry courses early in the semester and then periodically

throughout the semester. He stops class a few minutes early and asks students to write down any questions they still have concerning the material covered in class. Participation is voluntary, and there are drop boxes stationed around the room. At the beginning of the following class session, Harwood chooses several of the questions to answer for the whole class. He finds that his responsiveness to their questions, and the chance for students to have their own questions answered, helps to establish a positive and personal classroom rapport. “One of the things that is difficult for students in a large class is to ask questions,” says Harwood. “They are afraid of how they will appear to their peers.” He says that the one-minute paper gives students a chance to ask their questions anonymously. And when a question is answered in front of the whole class, it gives validation to anyone who asked that question or a similar one. “When they see my respectful response to their questions, this sends a powerful message that I listen to their voices,” says Harwood. He also finds that after a few weeks of using the one-minute paper, students are much more willing to raise their hands and ask their questions during class. Consequently the number of questions in the drop boxes goes down, and there is more oral class participation.

These suggestions are not particularly time-consuming, and they can make a big difference in how alienating or welcoming a large class feels to students. These types of personalizing behaviors on the part of faculty can help create an atmosphere that is more conducive to civility overall.

Some Questionable Practices

There are some other ways to control student behavior, and each faculty member must weigh the pros and cons of using them. For example, one way to encourage students to attend class, get there on time, and stay until the end of the class period is to give a pop quiz or other surprise in-class written assignment each week, sometimes at the beginning of class and sometimes at the end. This offers a form of extra credit to students who are present because students who are not there get a zero. Unfortunately, this strategy will cause more uninterested students to attend class simply so that they will be there when the pop quiz appears. You may therefore end up with a louder, more disruptive class and with more students working crossword puzzles during your lecture because the only reason they are there is to get the extra points.

Another example is the use of assigned seats, usually with students sitting in their discussion sections. This allows teaching assistants to take attendance and can make it easy to deduct points for poor attendance, thus encouraging good attendance. It also cuts down on side talking because students are separated from their friends. But, notes Amy Allen, assigned seating is unfair to those dedicated students who would normally come twenty minutes early to class to get a front-row seat. About these strategies designed to control the behavior of less motivated students, Allen says, “I wouldn’t sacrifice my A students to get through to my D students.”

To Embarrass or Not to Embarrass?

Yank the student newspaper out of his hands or speak to him about his rude behavior after class? Tell the three girls chatting in the fifth row that everyone around them is giving them dirty looks, so hush up, or simply move into their personal space as a hint to stop chatting? Some faculty use public embarrassment as a deterrent to uncivil behavior, and say that once one student has been embarrassed, it is very unlikely that another student will commit the same offense. Other faculty find public embarrassment distasteful and would rather speak to an errant student in private.

Tara Torchia does not believe in public embarrassment and uses alternative methods for controlling student behavior. For example, if a student has been late several times, she will ask the student to see her after class. She asks him or her, "What is making you arrive late? Do you have another class? Are you having trouble getting up in the morning?" She then goes on to stress that walking in late is distracting to her and the other students, and she has gone as far as suggesting that if waking up on time is the problem, the student switch to an afternoon section of the class. For side talkers, she addresses them pleasantly, saying, "You're probably talking about something really interesting related to the lecture, and maybe we can talk more about it after class, but for right now let's focus on what we're doing here." These gentle nudges create order in her classroom in a way she is comfortable with.

Jack Osman uses what he calls "gracious public embarrassment" and finds it very effective: late students are regularly required to become part of the lecture before they take their seats. As a consequence very few students walk in late. "It is done with humor, and with love," says Osman, "but they know it means something. Here is an example: It is ten after two in the afternoon, and Osman's class began at two o'clock. He is lecturing on the effects of drunk driving and the penalties for drunk driving in a number of different countries. A student, a girl with blonde hair pulled back in a short ponytail, walks into the lecture hall. Osman stops her and asks her name. It is Christina. She is now standing at the front of the lecture hall with Osman, facing the tiers filled with students. "Christina," Osman addresses her in his lecture voice, "if you were out partying and were the one driving, and you had a couple of extra drinks, what would you do?" Christina gives the correct answer: call a cab or give her keys to a friend who has not been drinking. But it is not time for her to sit down yet. "Christina, have you traveled outside of the United States?" Osman asks. She has. "Where?" he wants to know. We hear briefly about Christina's travel history and learn what the penalties are for drunk drivers in San Salvador, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia before Christina, smiling sheepishly with her shoulders hunched over her books, is allowed to sit down.

Rick, a senior, says he appreciates Osman's good-humored methods. "He makes you laugh," says Rick, "and it's better than the way a lot of professors deal with it." Rick described an incident that had happened the previous week in another class. He walked into a class four minutes late, and the professor

screamed at him and told him to get out. “The unprofessionalism was terrible,” said Rick. “It was disgusting.” Not only had the professor reduced his rapport with his students, but he had damaged his own credibility in their eyes.

Denny Gulick also uses gentle public embarrassment, “politely, with levity and with a smile.” A student fell asleep in one of his classes recently. Gulick addressed the class, saying, “Oh my gosh, that person fell asleep! What should we do?” Everyone looked around, the commotion woke the person up, and Gulick went on with his lecture. When students are side talking, Gulick addresses them and asks if they have a question about the material. “I call attention to their behavior in a way that makes it clear I’m not dumping on them as people, but I’m dumping on the fact that they haven’t been conscientious,” says Gulick. “We need to make the environment the best we can for those who want to learn. So controlling student behavior isn’t a negative, it becomes a positive.”

Cheating

Cheating is a concern in any classroom, and for large classes the problem seems to be multiplied. Teachers rely more on multiple-choice tests, and it is difficult to watch the eyes of five hundred students. In addition the sheer number of papers combined with the fact that papers are often graded by several different teaching assistants makes it almost impossible to detect when a paper has been lifted from a past class. There are the classic rules that faculty use to deter cheating during exams: separate students as much as possible, every-other-row seating with different forms of the test, baseball caps must be turned backward (those brims can hide wandering eyes), and no sunglasses. I also came across several ingenious methods faculty are using to deter cheating on both exams and on papers.

Jack Osman has come up with a variation on the idea of different forms of a multiple-choice exam that is much easier and every bit as effective. He uses the same exam for all students but creates two answer keys. On one answer key the question numbers are listed vertically, and on the other they are listed horizontally. It is simple, saves paperwork, and makes it virtually impossible for students to cheat because the answer key next to them is too visually confusing and different from their own.

With fraternities and sororities keeping files of papers for their members to use and now with the Internet offering an extensive array of writing from various classes for students to lift and put their name on, papers are not at all cheatproof. To counteract this, Sharon Hollander (Department of Education, College of Staten Island) uses memoirs—different ones each semester—to inspire original student papers. Students pick one of the two memoirs to read and write about. This semester they had the choice of *Let Me Hear Your Voice* by Catherine Maurice or *The Broken Cord* by Michael Dorris, both about the family lives of disabled children. Next semester there will be two different books to pick from, probably about a slightly different topic in the field of psychology. “I have a myriad of memoirs to choose from,” says Hollander. She says

that when students write their papers, “they can’t copy from another [past] student, they can’t recycle from another class, and they can’t lift it off the Internet or out of some other source.” In addition, Hollander finds that the personal nature of the memoirs themselves inspires students to read them, connect them to their own lives, and write reflective, original papers.

Conclusion: Moral Development

John Zacker (associate director of judicial programs, University of Maryland) sees the students who have taken a giant step across the line of misbehavior. He gets to know the students who, for example, have tried to steal books from the library or have forged a doctor’s note for missed exams. He considers the mission of his office not just that of punishing and sanctioning errant students but of helping these students develop a stronger moral sense. And he invites all faculty to join in this mission. “I think that this discussion of student moral and civil behavior is terribly important for all of us. We all have a great deal of contact with our students, and to be able to understand not only their intellectual development but also understand their human and moral development will only help us to educate our students to be better citizens.”

Think of the time and attention you dedicate to promoting civility in your large classroom as more than housekeeping. Think of it as part of what you are teaching.

References

- Allen, A. “Lecture Size and Its Relationship to Student Performance, Attitudes and Behavior and Faculty Attitudes and Behavior in a College-Level Introductory Nutrition Course.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Nutrition, University of Maryland, 1998.
- Angelo, T. A., and Cross, K. P. *Classroom Assessment Techniques*. (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
- Carbone, E. *Teaching Large Classes: Tools and Strategies*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998.
- Gleason, M. “Better Communication in Large Courses.” *College Teaching*, 1986, 34 (1), 20–24.
- Wulff, D. H., Nyquist, J. D., and Abbott, R. D. “Students’ Perceptions of Large Classes.” In M. G. Weimer (ed.), *Teaching Large Classes Well*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 32. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.

ELISA CARBONE is a lecturer in speech communication at the University of Maryland University College. From 1995 to 1998 she was coordinator of the Large Classes Project for the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Maryland.

Copyright of New Directions for Teaching & Learning is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.