

Expert Insights

Narrator [00:00:00] Like a ship self-contained and at sea, your class is a miniature society. What compact will you and your students make to maintain good fellowship on board when the sailing is smooth and when waters get rough? The civility of your class has a direct bearing on how well students meet course objectives and is a lesson in itself as they come to appreciate the respectful exchange of ideas. Now we'd like to believe that by college, they should know how to comport themselves. But many students may be challenged for the first time by work that pushes their abilities or with ideas that test the limits of their comfort. The norms you establish, model, and maintain can help students understand that such challenges are not a struggle for control--you over them--but essential for a rewarding journey. To promote a civil learning environment, first set clear expectations.

Barbara A. Frey, DEd, Instructional Design Manager, University of Pittsburgh [00:00:56] I think it's really important for faculty to communicate their expectations right up front, either in the syllabus or on the first day of class. Students need to know what to expect in this course, and it's also good for the faculty member because he or she clarifies in their own mind what they're going to do. What am I going to do if somebody turns in an assignment five hours late? What am I going to do if somebody comes in halfway through my course and I'm teaching or I have a guest speaker, you know, how am I going to handle that? How am I going to handle a student who challenges me about a grade in front of the rest of the class? You don't want to make those decisions in the spur of the moment when 25 eyes are on you to see what your reaction is. You don't want to do it then; you want to think about all of those things in advance.

Narrator [00:01:45] Every syllabus should include a section about class conduct, on academic honesty, attendance and participation, use of technology, and the respect expected of one another. On the first day of class, review these norms and invite students to suggest and adopt others through discussion and consensus. This way, even before your ship leaves port, your passengers will become a little community.

Barbara A. Frey, DEd [00:02:10] I think if students create the ground rules for your course, they are more likely to follow them. And chances are if you ask your students for ground rules for participation in your class, they will be the same ground rules that you would have developed yourself. It's just that they made the suggestion because they know what, how they, they know how to, they learn and they know how they react best to a conversation in class. And they'll give you some guidelines.

Narrator [00:02:35] Second, lead by example. Start and end on time. Express an interest in your students through eye contact and body language, and keep your destination in sight. Present materials clearly and create openings for student involvement and interaction. Your demeanor will set the tone. It's worth considering how unproductive student behaviors may result from your own actions that you may want to adjust.

Barbara A. Frey, DEd [00:03:00] There are some behaviors that faculty will want to avoid, and those behaviors are: looking unprepared, looking disorganized, lacking confidence and not making eye contact with students, not having a clear syllabus or lesson plan. One very effective strategy that I've seen is faculty who will write on the, on the whiteboard, here's our agenda for today.

Narrator [00:03:24] Third, distinguish between low-, mid- and high-level disruptions and respond accordingly. For example, dropping a student's name into discussion or lecture in a nonjudgmental way can resolve low-level disruptions like talking with a neighbor or surfing the net, as can proximity. Merely moving closer to a student as you speak or monitor group work can get 'em back on track. For mid-level interruptions, such as sleeping during class, being unprepared, and packing up early, try to distract the distractor. Act as if the student is engaged by asking a direct question that you're confident she can answer. The goal is not to embarrass her, rather draw her back into discussion.

Barbara A. Frey, DEd [00:04:08] We find that a lot of students like to pack up their backpacks in the last five minutes, so it's helpful if you can think of a way to engage your students right until the very end. And it might be, maybe you have two or three quiz questions that you give students at the end and get some feedback on. You might have a low-stakes writing assignment where you ask them to quickly write for two minutes, a muddiest point, what are the questions you still have after this lecture?

Narrator [00:04:34] High-level interruptions require more assertive leadership as the social fabric can fray when students ask irrelevant or inappropriate questions, attempt to take class off course, are openly disrespectful, or cheat on their work. In such moments, stay calm. This maintains support from other students who appreciate that you're reestablishing a civil environment for everyone.

Barbara A. Frey, DEd [00:04:57] One of the most important things for an instructor to do in teaching his or her class is to maintain composure, no matter what happens in the class. So you may feel a little irritated with students who talk in the back of the classroom, you may be irritated by students who come in late, but try to find a positive way to deal with that. Don't take it personally. That, that student's not late because of anything that the instructor did, it's probably, you know, something in their schedule.

Narrator [00:05:23] Respond immediately, politely, but firmly, to indicate that the behavior is not in keeping with everyone's expectations. If the student still escalates, it may be necessary to ask the student to leave the room and meet after class.

Barbara A. Frey, DEd [00:05:38] For high-level disruptions, I think everybody in the class is probably going to know it's an uncomfortable situation. So calling a break just gives everybody a chance to take a break. It gives you a chance to talk to the student who's involved and see if any further intervention is necessary.

Narrator [00:05:56] In the meeting, a behavior impact feedback tool like Fica can depersonalize the situation and correct the behavior. Calmly discuss the facts of what happened. Then explain the impact on other students, followed by the context, such as if it's part of a pattern. Finally explain the action you're going to take, such as decreasing the student's participation grade by referring to the policy set in the syllabus, and reiterate that the behavior cannot continue. Once at sea, there's no escaping the fact that it's your ship. You are the captain and students want your leadership. By promoting a civil learning environment, you can navigate the consent of the governed and ensure safe passage for all.

Barbara A. Frey, DEd [00:06:44] Classroom management is much easier to, to handle on a preventative level than it is to handle these high-level disruptions in the heat of the moment. So do everything you possibly can to set up the class to be successful. And that starts with clear ground rules, a very clear syllabus, a very structured lesson plan on the first day of class. So those are things that you want to think about in advance and start on the right foot.