Taming the Unruly Elephant in the Room
TOOLS and ATTITUDES FOR
SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

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one experienced faculty developer believes there are
TWO WAYS TO DEAL WITH BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

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→ **Prevent** **problems from happening**

The best strategies are proactive: prevent behavior issues from arising at all.
That involves creating a good classroom climate right at the beginning
and setting up a good personal relationship with students.

→ **Resolve** **or manage problems that are happening**

Why There's No Single Fix

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to all problems,
because the perception of trouble forms through the intersection of two
behaving personalities.

What appears a minor irritation to one faculty member may
feel like a major disruption to another.
Both are correct.

A Problem I'd Like to Solve
or one I've tried and failed to solve
(it can belong to you or to someone else)

Prevent--Principle 1: React to a challenge
only if it's a real emergency.
When non-emergency: **Think & respond instead.**

Rationale: *Reacting often feeds more objectionable behavior,*
and invites conflict and negativity. Instead:

-- Document-think-plan first. Take action only when you are ready.

-- Don't decline, but do *defer* talk with an angry student.
Buy time to cool your own head, cool an upset student,
listen, think, plan, bring in a third party.

Might-Fit Language

Your concern is important to me.

We need to have this discussion, but I won't be able to
continue it now on class time.

Would you like to talk after class, or in
office hours, or before (tomorrow's) class?

Language – Your Own Ideas

Prevent/Principle 2:
Develop positive relationships and trust
in every way possible. *Many strategies*
build trust and empathy, and doing so makes problems less likely.

Rationale: *The majority of small conflicts evaporate when you do this.*

Some Relationship- and Trust-Building Strategies

n   Learn names, meet students early, find out about them.

n   Make coming for office-hours help a routine and expectation.

n   Know your non-negotiable bottom lines, but: *discuss* expectations
with students. Be clear, but don't just list in syllabus! *When they
talk about it, they own it.*

n   Translate vague terms into behavior. and ask students to do this:
*What does "prepared" or "respectful" mean in student behavior
terms?*

Language Possibilities

What can I reasonably expect of you?
   (Note: while asking these questions gives you a great opportunity to
hear what students think, it does not prevent you from inserting your own
bottom line behaviors.)

What can you reasonably expect of me?

What is reasonable to expect of your classmates?

Respond--Principle 3:
Don't Ignore, Do Respond to Boundary Violations

Recurring anger or irritation usually signals that a boundary has been crossed.

Don't react, but don't ignore.
Don't try to make rules that cover everything.
Consider, plan, and respond.

Rationale: *When you ignore inappropriate behavior (in the hope it will go away) you grant explicit permission for that same behavior to continue or escalate.*

Action Steps

• *Most important:* **Know what you want to achieve.** When you are clear, a good action plan can develop.

• State, re-state or re-set the boundary; plan wording carefully. Choose a best time for approach that will least distract and upset others. ***Do this in private when possible.***

• Consult with peers as part of your planning, if their experience can help. *Silence is your enemy.*

• Script and rehearse if necessary.

• Plan and explain boundary-cross consequences—what you will do next.

• Avoid threatening language or posture.

Another Tale of Boundary-Setting
with a student who humiliates a teacher
publicly

A young female instructor complained to me about a male student in one of her classes, who made a big point of exclaiming, in a manner that engaged his classmates, in a near-term-end class, how delighted he was that the term, and the class, was ending.

I didn't say anything, she told me. I agreed with her that challenging him would probably have been pointless. But silence can be your enemy, and ignoring this comment could have been seen as tacit approval for repetition.

If something like this has happened not at term's end, I would have invited the student into a private conversation, in the hall or elsewhere. In these or similar words, I would have said, privately but in person:

What you said in class, and its public nature and tone, seemed intended to humiliate me. It was in my opinion rude, hurtful, negative and mean. Perhaps you did not so intend it. I do feel you should know that such behavior in a workplace would likely not be well-tolerated.

I think it's likely such a message would have generated an apology and that the student would very likely never have done that again in that class or any other. It would not likely be taken as punishing if it was delivered in private. I have colleagues who would argue that this student *should have been punished* by a comment delivered in public. I don't agree; and her purpose was not to punish, or to make an enemy, but to teach more effective interpersonal behavior.

It's too bad that basic civility and the consequences of incivility are so often overlooked.

Prevention--Principle 4:
Get Regular Feedback about Your Teaching

Rationale: *Self-assessment of teaching is the single most important builder of trust and source of practice-improving feedback; it defuses anger about issues you can't control, and brings those you can control to your attention. Few faculty do it; be an exception.*

Getting Feedback Builds Trust, Helps Improve Practice and
Ends End-of-Term Evaluation Bombs

n   <u>Collect data regularly so it becomes an expected routine.</u> Never wait until the last week of class. *Ask colleagues or faculty developers about their recommended ways of doing this. Consult print and web resources for possible strategies.*

n   <u>Feed the data, good and bad, back to students</u>. *Acknowledge and affirm all feedback, whether you can act on it or not.*

n   <u>Act to change things you reasonably can</u> and that are in the best interest of the class. *Action demonstrates learner-centered intention.*

Prevent & Respond--Principle 5:
Develop an Emergency Toolbox

Parts of a Toolbox

n Know what to do/have a plan for when you are threatened or may be in real danger. *This varies by campus and should align with your university's student handbook/discipline/emergency protocols. Know and keep handy emergency numbers; carry your cell phone with those numbers programmed in; get to know the responders.*

n Document, to keep facts straight and to avoid blind-siding a supervisor.
Have a supervisor backup with whom you file reports as needed. Recording significant incidents in writing helps keep memory intact, should back-reference ever be made.

n Develop peer relationships for counsel with more experienced faculty you trust.
Silence is an enemy; asking for help is a strength.

n Develop consulting and referral relationships with student support personnel.
This should include counselors and advisors to whom students can be referred.

n There are times that the mood or buzz in a class tells you something is wrong. When you read this signal, whether the background crisis is real or imagined, there's something more important than teaching content. Stop to ask students: *What's happening? Then, listen to them.*

n What can you add?

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