

The Difficult Student – Handout

1. Common types of “difficult student”

The disengaged student:

- Quiet / Silent / Anxious / reticent
- 2nd language issues
- Reluctant group worker / Negative student – *is this their problem or ours?*
- Unprepared / Bored - *ditto*

The disruptive student:

- Monopoliser (1:1)
- High achiever
- Empty vessel / didactic learner / school style learner
- “Bolshie Know-it-all”
- Challenger – challenges your authority or knowledge
- Random Theory Generator – *always says first thing that comes into his/her head*
- The Commentator – *gives a running commentary on the class etc*
- General disruptive, sarcastic, joker– *who may be none or some or all of the above as well*

So, what do we consider when approaching the problem of “difficult students”? This depends on:

- Our expectations – of the students and of the planned class – is the activity aimed at the appropriate level for the majority of students?
- The type of class / learning context – small group learning, e.g. bedside teaching vs. large class tutorials or lectures, didactic vs student-centered. i.e. Self-directed / group learning with peer assessment is very different to a didactic lecture - so what we would consider a ‘difficult’ student in each would be very different.
- Whose view we consider this from- the students’ or the teacher’s. The focus of the activity and the framing of feedback loop is important here. How are you responding to the student and vice versa.
- Different learning styles, different personalities and motivational levels and emotional intelligence affect how students approach learning. For instance, Kolb: some students do not wish to learn through ‘hands-on’, whilst others like this most. To learn more about this, take a look at: ATHERTON J S (2009) Learning and Teaching; Experiential Learning [On-line] UK: Available: <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm> Accessed: 22 June 2009

In summary a difficult student:

- Shows contrary conduct to that of the ‘ideal’ student
- Slows the class down
- Alters your class plan / method/ outcomes
- May re-rail the session
- Is annoying for everyone else

So it is worth doing something about this if it is recurrent ...but again – “Difficult” for whom? If we were brilliant teachers, with unlimited time, we should be able to adapt to all types of learners, to all types of students...

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2. So what can be done?

Firstly- have to work out: WHY is the student acting this way?

Secondly – we have to remember that you can only change the environment of your class – where it takes place, the plan, the teaching methods used, the language, the student interaction, etc. ...as we are unable to alter the students themselves- except by inspiring them, generating enthusiasm for them to overcome their inertia / anxiety etc, nurturing them, and chivvying them. (Scaring rarely works without them losing your respect).

Some tips to help with the following “difficult” students:

Reluctant / Reticent student

- Quiet/Silent student = maybe shy, lack confidence = need to encourage them to talk, be more assertive, have more confidence, interact more, etc.
- Student with 2nd language issues = ditto = but also need to practice and speak more conversational English
- Reluctant group worker / Negative student= ditto – partly may be shy, partly may dislike group work / self-directed learning and prefer spoon feeding. Can get them to work in a group by giving particular tasks / roles, e.g. as leader / as scribe. Ask particular questions that might bring them into the discussion. If they de-rail the class by taking it onto a different topic – check with all the students if the current topic is relevant to the learning outcomes for the session etc
- Unprepared student = similar to reluctant group worker with a similar response –Ask them what they would like to prepare / give choice for the next lesson and reward a good outcome accordingly. Make it a poor showing to be unprepared or send them away (marked as absent) if persistently poorly prepared.

Disruptive student

- Monopoliser (1:1) (Dominant student) = tend to be selfish / attention seeking, but can also be needy and uncertain = it helps to break their dependence on the teacher – a question comes in from them, you throw it back to them or out to the other students, “re-directing” the flow = a good teaching technique.
- Empty vessel / didactic learner = ‘takers’. So - make them work for it. Don’t give them simple answers to the questions they ask / demand of you, draw them out, ask them to take it further.
- High achiever and the Bolshie Know-it-all = keen, over-achieving. Make them wait their turn, use their knowledge to help teach the others – give them a peer-teaching role, “re-direct” the flow if they keep interrupting.
- Challenger – may be some or all of the above as well. Deflect their challenges, challenge him/her back.
- Random Theory Generator = often rather anxious to please and does not take time to think carefully of answers etc before answering. Get them to take more time by pausing before they answer, show them better ways of clinical thinking – e.g. decision trees, lists, risk /likelihood calculation etc – give them tips: e.g. “OK, Jason, can you explain this...?, now before you say anything, have you considered XXXX...?”
- The Commentator = an internal monologue – maybe they want to show you what they know? This is a hard one to deal with = Ask them more questions or get them to ask the questions. Ask them to keep quiet if desperate.

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The bottom line → ENGAGEMENT AND STRUCTURE

- If you can, be aware of what your students expect, how they learn, what their level of learning is etc.
- Content – can alter this to increase student interest – make it more relevant – hold their attention longer
- Increasing the structure of the class can help – tell them what the outcomes should be – what you expect of them - raise their own expectations of themselves (unless they are too high already!)
- Methods – use simple teaching methods that stimulate the reluctant, shy, quiet or bored student and keep the high achievers happy too – e.g. set questions, taking turns, redirect the flow, use role play, ‘think-pair-square’
- Language – explain new terms and how to pronounce them carefully
- Location – where teaching takes place is important in clinical teaching – starting away from the bedside, and finishing away from the bedside gives you time to summarise the topic and outcomes for the session

Further Resources:

Tips for “Difficult Classroom Situations” from the University of Queensland Tutors website:

<http://www.uq.edu.au/tutors/index.html?page=66234>

Small group teaching :

<http://teaching.unsw.edu.au/small-group-teaching>

ATHERTON J S (2009) Learning and Teaching; Angles on learning, particularly after the schooling years [On-line] UK:

Available: <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/index.htm>