

## **DEALING WITH DIFFICULTIES IN THE CLASSROOM**

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### **Prevention**

The brain-storming session in Ottawa produced a number of thoughtful and helpful suggestions. The most important point is the old saw about “an ounce of prevention”. To achieve this you should:

- pay attention to unintended messages conveyed during orientation
- articulate ground rules for classroom discussion and behaviour
- initiate students into civil discourse by modelling this with other profs.
- outline how intellectual debate attacks ideas not individuals
- show students the difference between passion and belligerence
- make it clear your concerns are for all students, not just a few
- write a contract between you and the students to codify expectations
- establish ground rules, or “netiquette”, when students use technology.

### **Classroom climate and teaching behaviours**

Sharing ideas in small groups, the participants generated the following suggestions about how instructors can be responsive and effective and avoid difficulties:

- celebrate diversity and respect for others
- have students engage in self and peer-monitoring
- encourage interactivity and personal contact
- eliminate anonymity by learning names of students
- be explicit and proactive about expectations
- avoid the use of sarcasm or cynicism,
- do not appear to be bored, tired, jaded or world-weary
- set standards high and show students how to meet them
- be fair and consistent in your evaluation methods
- demystify the grading process by providing criteria and benchmarks
- ask for feedback from the class as a whole and make adjustments
- give formative feedback on a regular basis
- share controversy and passion for the subject matter
- “cover less; uncover more”.

### **When things go wrong**

Start with prevention then and continue to monitor classroom climate and your own attitude and behaviours. But what do you do when things do go wrong and the classroom climate turns chilly, sour, or downright ugly? For the sake of the students and your own sense of integrity, avoid public displays of peevishness, irritation,

anger or rage. Your students need to see you as someone with solid communication and negotiation skills with the large group and with individuals.

Remember the unwritten “2 challenge rule”: if an issue has not been resolved after two queries, then the issue is probably best resolved at a later time outside the classroom. A comment like “I would like to discuss this with you (and perhaps others who feel the same way) immediately after class” will go a long way to prevent a disagreement with one individual degenerating into a “me versus them” power struggle with the whole class. You may then be able to redirect the discussion for the rest of the period and re-establish the norms of discourse. This immediately puts the controversy or disagreement into a broader perspective.

## **Conclusion**

“Teaching democratically is not to be confused with creating a laissez-faire atmosphere of intellectual relativism, where anything goes. Neither does it mean an abdication of a teacher’s responsibility to judge the merits of what students do. What it does mean is that we make an effort to create conditions under which all voices can speak and be heard (including our own), and in which educational processes are seen to be open to genuine negotiation”