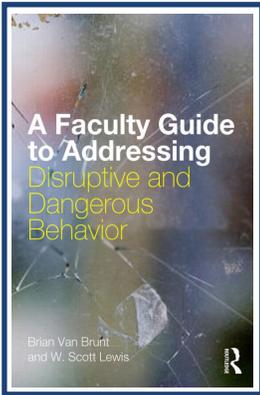


DISRUPTIVE & DANGEROUS CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

10 Traits to Cultivate for Better Classroom Management

WITH BRIAN VAN BRUNT, ED.D., & W. SCOTT LEWIS, J.D.

DISRUPTIVE AND DANGEROUS CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR: 10 TRAITS TO CULTIVATE FOR BETTER CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT



Van Brunt's and Lewis' book is available through the Routledge website, and on Amazon.com.

INTRODUCTION

Disruptive students can detract from others' ability to learn, and make it more difficult for you to teach. They can generate annoyance, frustration, and hostility. What's more, disruptive behavior can escalate into downright dangerous behavior.

Most of the bad classroom behavior you'll likely ever see will never pose a threat of physical harm to you or others. Regardless, the threat of harm is a real concern. And even minor but common classroom disruptions – from needless interruptions to emotional outbursts – harm the learning process.

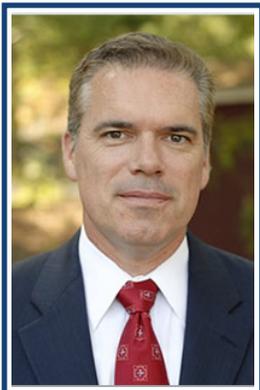
Brian Van Brunt and W. Scott Lewis are the authors of *A Faculty Guide to Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Behavior*, published by Routledge. They provide a framework, tried and proven by their own years in the classroom and careful analysis of others' teaching practices, for managing disruptions as they occur and heading off bigger problems.

THE EXPERTS



Van Brunt serves as the senior vice president for professional program development at The NCHERM Group, LLC., a law and consulting firm that offers systems-level solutions for safer schools and campuses. He is also a past-president of the American College Counseling Association, president-elect of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association, and managing editor of *Student Affairs eNews*.

He taught at the college level for many years and now focuses on writing; conducting training seminars and conference presentations; and consulting with institutions through NCHERM. In addition, he is the author of *Harm to Others: The Assessment and Treatment of Dangerousness*, and *Ending Campus Violence: New Approaches in Prevention*.



Lewis is a partner at The NCHERM Group, LLC., and the 2015-16 president of the Student Affairs Community College Association. He is also a co-founder and advisory board member of the Association of Title IX Administrators, the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association, and the School and College Organization for Prevention Education.

He has served in various college administrative roles, including as vice provost at the University of South Carolina. With a background in student conduct and extensive teaching experience, he is now one of the most in-demand higher education risk management consultants in the country and a frequent conference keynote and plenary speaker. He also served as the author of *The NCHERM Model Code of Student Conduct*, *Second Generation Behavioral Intervention Best Practices*, and *The Faculty Mentor Series*.

Van Brunt and Lewis developed a list of the 10 most useful qualities you can cultivate in yourself for effective classroom management. Having a good understanding of what they are and how they can be applied can help you become a better professor.

THE 10 TRAITS



The better you know your material, the less intimidating the classroom will seem and the more confidence you'll exude.

1. Confidence

As a faculty member, you must exude confidence, not just in your knowledge of the materials you are teaching, but also in your ability to manage your classroom. Students pick up on instructors' confidence levels, and that in turn helps them see you as a competent (or incompetent) classroom leader. Exuding confidence requires that you:

- » **Know your content inside and out**, so that you don't have to put all of your class-time energy into focusing on that.
- » **Consider the value of entertainment.** "We're not suggesting that you should be just entertaining, like a clown juggling balls, for your students to behave well. What we are suggesting is that you know your classroom material so well that you can share it in a creative and interesting manner with students, so that their focus will be on that content," Van Brunt said.
- » **Avoid treating your classroom like your personal stage.** "Winging" everything you do in class can lead to missed opportunities to set your classroom up for success, like explaining your institution's and your expectations for classroom behavior.



Demonstrating humility will help foster a feeling of trust between you and your students.

2. Humility

Exercising humility creates a sense of likability and trust between instructors and their students. Some humble practices that lead to better classrooms include:

- » **Letting students know you're not infallible, but that your intent is never to be harmful.** That provides a good entry into talking about what behaviors you see as harmful to your classroom and to learning.
- » **Being as transparent as possible.** When going over class expectations, Lewis likes to point out that while his rules may be a necessary evil and students are expected to adhere to them, he will do his best to make sure the class is a positive experience for everyone.
- » **Avoid a hard-liner stance.** Looking back on your own college experience, you can probably recall at least one professor who started his course with some variation of "This is my classroom and these are my rules." You probably had at least one instructor who let everyone walk all over him too. Strive to achieve a midpoint between those two.
- » **Communicate with and treat your students as you would like to be treated if you were in their shoes.** This may seem like very obvious advice, but it can be forgotten when frustration over some students' behavior set in.



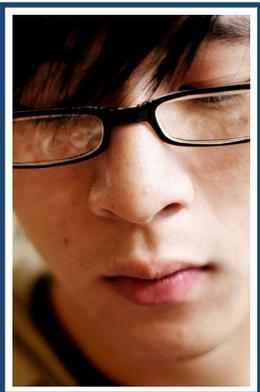
The time at which a disruption happens may not be the best moment to address it.

3. Timing

You may be saying the right things, but when you say them may be all wrong. For instance, stopping mid-lecture to say, “Here’s Brian, who is late to class again,” may provoke that student and do nothing to keep him from tardiness in the future. Second, the student may not be in the right frame of mind to hear what you have to say at that moment, however constructive it may be. The best strategy may be just enduring the mild disruption and addressing it after class. Consider statements like this:

- » “I want to talk to you more about this after class or at the next free time we both have available.”
- » “What you have to say is important, and I want to make sure I understand it. But right now, I feel distracted and not focused on getting through my lecture. I would prefer to talk later when I can give you my full attention in a private setting.”
- » “I can see you are upset and I’m starting to feel upset as well. Lets hold onto this until after class, when we can both talk about your concerns.”

While scripts may be useful for very new faculty members, be sure that you word such statements in a way that sounds like you. The idea is to acknowledge the disruptive students and whatever they are trying to express, while also expressing that you do not approve of the behavior in which they are engaging. Aim for a mix of empathy, authority and authenticity.



When students ask for special considerations or courtesies, be willing to listen and consider how you would like to be treated under similar circumstances, but don’t let yourself be taken advantage of.

4. Grace and Mercy

This is about recognizing that you may be dealing with students who may be going through a difficult point in their lives, whether they dug themselves into difficult situations or ended up there through no fault of their own. Try to:

- » **Listen to students and what they are going through.** Consider how you would appreciate being treated under the circumstances they’ve just described to you.
- » **Be willing to extend undeserved courtesies.** Those in teaching positions tend to have an inherent respect for fairness, but sometimes, exercising grace and mercy means giving certain students something they may not deserve. For instance, a student who missed an assignment deadline because a family member passed away could certainly use an extension, and it would be merciful to provide it, even if your policy is never to give extensions.
- » **Act with a sense of equity.** A lot of other students may be dealing with personal difficulty. Are you prepared to respond when another student says to you, “Why can’t I get an extension on an assignment if you gave that student one?” A good alternative may be to give everyone a couple more days to finish an assignment if you are considering doing that for one based on that student’s extenuating circumstances. And always treat similarly situated students similarly.
- » **Do not become an enabler.** A student can’t possibly keep getting into car accidents on his way to class, for instance.

- » **Make courtesies “real-world” courtesies.** Your boss isn’t going to let you get away with sloppy work or missed deadlines because you were distracted by the loss of your favorite football team. He may cut you a break if a loved one just died.



Keep a watchful eye for signs of potential trouble, and don’t be afraid to report concerning behavior to the appropriate campus officials.

5. Awareness

Exercising awareness of your surroundings, your students, and even yourself can go a long way toward heading off behavioral problems. Here’s how to do that:

- » **Look for signs of potential dangerousness.** Slamming doors, storming out of class, and shoving others are behaviors to be very concerned about. Speech can be an indicator of dangerousness as well. Conversations that are designed only to upset others, such as direct threats and descriptions of weapons or killing; delusional or rambling speech; and objective language that depersonalizes you or others in class are all reasons for concern.
- » **Alert your campus care team about any concerning behavior or speech in your classroom.** That way, if the concerning behavior or speech is manifesting itself in other areas, a pattern can be seen and more effectively addressed.
- » **Look for potential motivating factors behind behavior.** For example, is a student always getting argumentative? Sure, it may be that he doesn’t like you or is just a difficult individual. But he may also just come from a family that communicates loudly, so that may be his normal way of expressing views. Question what you see without jumping to conclusions.
- » **Know how far you can push your students.** This is particularly important if you teach a class where sensitive or graphic issues or materials are discussed.
- » **Understand what pushes your own buttons,** so that you can prevent such behaviors early in the class by discussing that along with other expectations for classroom conduct.



When students behave disruptively, very often they’re just trying to broadcast what they are feeling, so listen carefully to what they’re really saying.

6. Active Listening

We expect our students to be active listeners, but do we model that behavior? Consider:

- » **Encouraging students to share why they are upset.** Remain quiet and attentive while they do so. This is one of the most effective ways to de-escalate disruptive behavior. Students who feel that they are being truly heard will not feel an urge to raise their voices or escalate their behavior to be heard.
- » **Remaining calm in the face of disruption.** If you raise your voice to be heard over a student who is yelling, that student will just yell louder to be heard.
- » **Trying to understand the source of students’ frustrations.** Students may not be mad at you personally, but you could represent what they’re upset with, like the institution. Or consider that a bad grade on a test for a first-generation student may be perceived as a failure of his entire collegiate career and family. In that scenario, you may represent the shame that may be brought upon him and his family. It’s not the grade that’s the huge deal, but rather the thought of the impending loss from that grade.

» **Implementing a tactful delivery.** If your response to a student's angry tirade begins by telling him why he's in the wrong, you're not going to get the response you're looking for. The message may be right, but the delivery may be wrong.



Take time during first class meetings to answer students' questions and clarify your rules and expectations for their behavior.

7. Willingness to Clarify

It's not enough to place a statement explaining the kind of behavior you expect from students in your class syllabi. It would additionally be wise for you to:

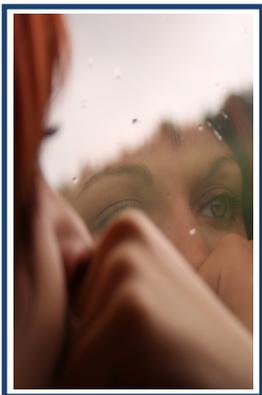
» **Use the first class meeting to go over those expectations.** Take the time to explain everything you want students to understand. This is also the time to let students know, as Van Brunt puts it, "your personal crazies," or the things that drive you nuts but that other professors may be OK with, like chewing gum in class, discretely checking cell phones, and wearing baseball caps.

» **Take time to address questions about classroom expectations.** These may include your rules on attendance and punctuality, academic issues, and how students with questions or comments are recognized.

» **Provide a rationale for each rule outlined in your syllabus.** So if you're telling students that food is not allowed in class, you might consider explaining that the odor is distracting to you and others, as is the noise from the packaging. Students may still not like a rule, but they're more likely to abide by it if they know why it's there.

» **Tell students the potential consequences of their actions if they fail to abide by the rules.** When students know what could happen for failing to meet your classroom expectations, they're less likely to break your rules.

» **Ask students what they want to get out of you and your class.** Why are they taking the class? Is it for a major and future career, or just an elective they have to take? What standard would they use to measure whether the class was a good one at the end of the term? The answers to questions like those will help you make the class a better learning experience for your students, and likely result in better evaluations for you.



Know how past experiences influence your teaching.

8. Self-Knowledge

No one is immune from reactiveness. Something happens and you instinctively react. But when it comes to managing your classroom, you need to learn how to choose how you respond. That comes through self-reflection. Take time to:

» **Consider how past experiences have effected your current expectations.** What pushes your buttons and why? Are you particularly sensitive today because of something that happened earlier? Take time to evaluate and recognize where you are, both mentally and emotionally, so that you can then center yourself and be the kind of instructor you want to be.

» **Think about your own college experiences.** Who were your favorite professors and what did they do that you liked? What approaches to teaching and classroom

management did you learn from them and have adopted in your own classroom? Likewise, think back to your least favorite professors. What did they do that you disliked? How did those experiences as a student shape your teaching practices?



Turn to those around you for insight and help.

9. Willingness to Consult

In your own classroom, you may be the expert, but when surrounded by other professors with equal or more teaching experience and different strategies and perspectives, there is always more for you to learn. Here's how:

- » **Talk to colleagues about how they approach different situations you've encountered in class.** Just as you may lean on what you learned from those teachers you loved or hated as a student in college, learn to lean on those around you.
- » **Use faculty meetings as opportunities for informal training.** Throw out different scenarios and ask for discussion around the best way to deal with them.
- » **Be willing to help others learn from you.** Share what has worked for you, as well as what hasn't.



Don't be afraid to hit the "pause" button and dismiss class for the day if things are getting out of hand.

10. Ability to Exert Control

At some point, you may find yourself in a power grab with a student. Don't be afraid to pull out what Lewis calls "the big nuke." Dismiss the class if managing it has become impossible. To do so:

- » **Say something like, "Unfortunately, the class can't continue today, so I'll see you next class period."** And avoid statements of blame, like, "Brian's so disruptive that I can't teach today."
- » **Call your conduct folks, or campus safety, immediately afterward if the situation demands it.** That way, the behavior can be appropriately addressed and conditions for the student's return to class established.
- » **Stick to your role.** Don't feel pressured to play the role of mental health counselor, judicial affairs, or campus safety officer. You are there to teach, so turn to colleagues in those roles when a student's behavior prevents you from doing so.

CONCLUSION

Professors who cultivate and exercise these qualities tend to be happier with their careers and with their interactions with students. And they tend to receive higher marks on evaluations. You won't be seen as that "hard-liner" professor whose class no one wants to take. Your students will be more engaged with the content you're teaching, and as a result absorb more of the materials. You won't find yourself saying, "I didn't go into teaching to yell at millennials for using their phones in class." Students will be focused on the material being taught, not on things that could prove distracting for you and others in the class. Finally, you will decrease the likelihood of distractions that can escalate into dangerous behavior. ♦

FOR MORE INFORMATION

An online training on the 10 essential traits for good classroom management, titled “Addressing Disruptive and Dangerous Student Behavior in the Classroom,” is also available for purchase through The NCHERM Group, at www.ncher.org.

ABOUT THE AUDIO ESSENTIALS SERIES

The Audio Essentials series is produced and published by NCHERM. New episodes will become available for purchase at www.ncher.org/store as they are created, so check back regularly for new episodes on the most pressing issues facing college faculty, staff and administrators.



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