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Ill-Mannered Students Can Wreck More Than Your Lecture

By Joan Flaherty

Discourteous. Inattentive. Brazen. There's an old-fashioned cast to those terms, as if they've been lifted from the handwritten report card of some reprobate fourth grader. In fact, I feel like a fussy schoolmarm just typing the words, betraying myself as someone concerned with an irrelevant matter: good manners in the postsecondary classroom.

We all prefer students to behave well in the classroom—meaning, at a minimum, that they show up and show respect. But discourtesy is often perceived as a remedial concern that should have been taken care of during elementary and high school. Many professors rankle at the notion that they should have to worry about it now. Surely, the argument goes, our advanced degrees and highly specialized knowledge exempt us from having to deal with basic breaches of classroom courtesy. Any student whose attention is pointedly and persistently engaged elsewhere throughout our class doesn't belong in our class. We have loftier goals to pursue than trying to instill basic manners in a handful of ill-mannered students.

Anyone who has taught in the postsecondary system has heard, expressed, or commiserated with those sentiments.

But those sentiments hark back to a pre-digital age, when only a handful of students fell into the category of "ill mannered." Ten years ago, distractions that could cause poor behavior in the classroom were confined to the classroom itself: an interesting seatmate to chat with, a window to gaze out of, an overheated room to slumber in. Now, the entire world via the Internet is a potential distraction—and with a cellphone, mp3 player, and laptop in almost every student's possession, the temptation to become distracted (and thus to engage in discourteous classroom behavior) is overwhelming. The problem, in other words, is now more intense. Ignoring it is no longer a reasonable option.

In fact, it's a counterproductive option because it overlooks the possibility that our success in pursuing the loftier goals—our own scholarly work—may be linked to our students' good classroom manners. This possibility involves three factors:

- *"Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm"—Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Enthusiasm for teaching is hard to sustain when students seldom make eye contact because their heads are bent over their iPhones, believe they can follow the class discussion while updating their Facebook pages, and habitually arrive late, leave early, or don't show up at all, confident that the day's material will be posted online and available "on demand." If the six million results yielded by a quick Google search of "digital

distractions in the postsecondary classroom" is anything to go by, these are common occurrences. And they can undermine the enthusiasm of any professor.

After all, relatively few faculty members are "born" teachers who intuitively know how to refocus a distracted audience. Those faculty willing to learn how to do so get few institutional incentives. Despite the pro-teaching rhetoric, tenure and promotion decisions often relay the same message: There's little professional glory to be gained from great efforts spent on classroom matters. Consequently, for many of us, the distracted students remain, their rapid-fire texting and tapping communicating the same message every time we step into the classroom: You don't merit my undivided attention.

- *"You've got stuck in a moment, and you can't get out of it"—U2*

If we lack the innate ability or the incentive to prove U2's message wrong, we can respond by becoming demoralized candidates for early retirement or by joining the ranks of the perpetually offended. Being demoralized and offended, however, never propelled anyone further along the path of creative productivity. Instead, it digs us deeper and deeper into a rut of self-fulfilling prophecy. By berating ourselves for being poor classroom teachers, we become poor teachers. By criticizing our students' classroom behavior, we constantly find evidence to substantiate our claims. It becomes perversely gratifying to be proved right over and over again.

But it also becomes stale and self-defeating because the negative emotions associated with this state—indignation, self pity, cynicism, and apathy—block our ability to assume a consistently logical, objective perspective. And insofar as the best scholarly work is logical and objective, our ability to produce sound scholarly work is undermined. We become "stuck in a moment" of a limited, disheartening perspective. And there's no traction to be had there.

There's also no joy. Thus we lose an additional element necessary for a productive scholarly output: the self direction—and confidence—that comes from liking what we do. The different aspects of our jobs can't be neatly compartmentalized. An aversion to teaching (which constitutes a significant part of most faculty workloads) because we perceive our students to be disrespectful is bound to leach into, and undermine, other areas of work, including our research.

Suggestions to improve this situation often revolve around transfiguring the source of the problem into the solution: using technology to engage students in the classroom.

But as worthy as they are, suggestions to incorporate blogging, tweeting, and texting into the lesson plan assume that an irritated instructor, who traces the dark cloud hovering over his or her professional life to student disrespect, will be motivated by a call to embrace the cause of that disrespect: technology. That may be an overly optimistic assumption. For many instructors, the shift from railing against students' use of technology in the classroom to requiring its use is too great a leap to make.

- *"Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water"—Zen saying*

Sometimes, then, a small step is called for. Professors might, for example, discuss in their introductory classes the impact of digital distraction on everyone's learning, including their own. Students can be enlisted to create written guidelines on respectful classroom behavior, particularly technology etiquette. A quick survey of my own students yielded suggestions that ranged from hard-line (an outright ban on the use of digital devices; a requirement that all cellphones be deposited at the front of the classroom upon entry) to moderate (a ban of digital devices only during guest-speaker presentations; a request at the start of every class for cellphones to be turned off) to accommodating (a five-minute "digital break" for classes longer than two hours).

Admittedly, these small steps take up class time, leading us away from our specialized course content into the mundane, elementary details of good classroom manners. But as much as we may chafe at associations with fussy schoolmarm, those mundane, elementary details have their role. They ground us with respect, morale, and confidence—and we need that grounding in order to achieve *all* of our goals.

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