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Taking Control of the Classroom

Faculty members devise strategies to keep rude students in order

By THOMAS BARTLETT

It was the class from hell.

Some students slept, others chatted. They showed up late and left early. The few who tried to pay attention were distracted by the majority who didn't. All of which made Delaney J. Kirk, a professor of management at Drake University, feel frustrated and depressed. "I got to the point where I hated going to the classroom," she says.

Rather than shrug it off, Ms. Kirk started looking for answers. "How can I be a professor of management if I can't manage my own class?" she asked herself.

That was three years ago. Now Ms. Kirk, who continues to teach at Drake, travels as a paid consultant to other campuses teaching professors how to take control of their classes. The sessions are part workshop, part support group. Professors trade stories about chiming cellphones and rustling newspapers during lectures. They nod sympathetically at tales of freshmen snoring in the front row.

What Ms. Kirk hears again and again in these workshops -- even from longtime faculty members -- is that students have become more difficult in the past few years. And many professors are worried that such rude behavior, which may sound trivial to outsiders, threatens to undermine their teaching.

"They're seeing that this new generation is less respectful and more demanding," says Ms. Kirk, who is at work on a book called *Classroom Management: Tips to Help You Teach Like a Pro*, scheduled to be published in the spring.

Sometimes students themselves complain about classroom disruptions (*The Chronicle*, August 8, 2003). But now more faculty members, like Ms. Kirk, are taking action before problems begin. "Once I laid down the rules in my class, I thought, 'These evaluations are going to be horrible,'" she says. "But they weren't. I found that students wanted someone to be in charge."

Laying down the rules can be done in a variety of ways. Like Ms. Kirk, John Drea noticed more behavior problems in his classes in recent years. It's not as if students were setting fire to the room or taking him hostage. But they seemed to be talking more and caring less. And it bothered him.

"You reach a point where you can't ignore it," says Mr. Drea, a professor of marketing at Western Illinois University.

Related materials

Document: View the text of a "[Contract on Classroom Behavior](#)" that three professors at Western Illinois University ask their students to sign on the first day of class (requires [Adobe Reader](#), available free)

List: [Tips](#) for managing a classroom

Colloquy Live: Join a [live, online discussion](#) with Delaney J. Kirk, a professor of management at Drake University, about how faculty members can deal with the rising problem of rude and disruptive students, on Wednesday, September 15, at 2 p.m., U.S. Eastern time.

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He mentioned his concern to a couple of colleagues in the business school, and together they arrived at a very businesslike solution: Why not ask students to sign a contract in which they promised to behave themselves?

The Contract

Mr. Drea wrote a draft of the 1,100-word document and gave it to the two other professors, who made additions and revisions. The contract says, among other things, that students should turn off their cellphones, and that it's a good idea to turn in assignments on time and to wait until class is over before walking out the door. Students who fail to abide by the contract will have points knocked off their grades. Professors, for their part, promise to be on time for class -- and to turn off their own cellphones.

Mr. Drea and his colleagues, who wondered if students would find it offensive to be reminded of such basic niceties, decided to try it anyway.

Last spring they handed out the contracts in their classes at Western Illinois and asked the students to sign. Nearly all did so; those who didn't were asked to observe its rules anyway.

The professors say they noticed a difference right away. Class sessions were more civil. And when a problem did arise, they could simply refer to the contract.

"We don't want to bark at students, because that creates tension," says Mr. Drea. "This gets all the expectations upfront on the first day of class."

Still, they wanted some proof that the contract deserved the credit. At the end of the semester they surveyed their students and found that 57 percent of them had found it helpful. Among them was Marcy Thomasson, a senior marketing major, who finds it annoying when her fellow students talk instead of listen. "I think it's kind of sad that it needs to be stated," she says, "but in the classes I've been in, it has made a difference."

Interestingly, according to the survey, most students felt that the contract had improved the behavior of their fellow students but had had no effect on their own behavior. "It's the Lake Wobegon effect," says Mr. Drea. "Everyone else is misbehaving. I'm the angel."

Not all of Christine S. Schwartzott's students have been angels. In fact, the instructor of visual and performing arts at Monroe Community College has even called security guards to escort a student from the room. (He had refused to meet with an administrator about his behavior problems.)

"People think we exaggerate, but it happens," she says.

After one class she confronted a student who had been fast asleep during her lecture. She informed him that sleeping in class was equal to an absence. The sleepy student's response: "F you."

To help cope with such encounters, Ms. Schwartzott started a support group at the Rochester, N.Y., college to let instructors commiserate about unpleasant student behavior. Among them she discovered what she calls "an undercurrent of frustration." And from those discussions emerged a slogan: Take Back the Classroom.

She advocates a take-no-prisoners pedagogical approach, including never bending your own rules. She insists that student come to class on time, pay attention, and not talk to each other during lectures. "Do you have to be a dictator?" she says. "Well, that depends on the climate of your class."

Ms. Schwartzott is among those who assert that students in recent years have become less attentive and more combative.

Laurie Richlin, for one, doesn't buy it. Ms. Richlin, director of the Preparing Future Faculty program at Claremont Graduate University, says professors have always complained about students. "I'm not saying there aren't difficult students," she argues, "but it's not like this is a bad generation."

As for students nodding off midlecture, she wonders if it's really their fault. "Maybe there's nothing going on," she says.

Ms. Richlin tells professors that they must have "clear and observable learning objectives" -- in other words, they must make plain what students need to know.

"What happens is that courses aren't well designed," she says. "Maybe that's why people lose interest."

She is writing a book on course design that is scheduled to be published by Stylus next year.

'A Disaster'

Shari Laprise's students lost interest in her biology course last fall. It was her first semester teaching at Babson College, and she hoped that undergraduates would care -- at least a little -- about the subject. They didn't.

Each day she would ask the class several times to quiet down before giving up. Only a handful of the 36 students showed the slightest interest in what she had to say. "Every time I walked into that classroom I had to take a deep breath," she says. "I couldn't wait to get out of there."

Returning to her office after class, she "wanted to scream," she recalls. Ms. Laprise, an assistant professor, told friends she wasn't sure she would make it through the first year. "It was a disaster," she says.

Not wanting to repeat the experience, she signed up for Delaney Kirk's three-day workshop. The Drake professor preaches the importance of establishing your credibility on the first day of class. She also encourages professors to get tough if necessary. She recalls awakening one napping student and telling him to go to the health center. "He said 'No, I'm fine,' and I said 'No, you need to go,'" she remembers. "He never slept in my class again."

Ms. Laprise says the workshop gave her some ideas that she hopes will make this semester more tolerable.

As for Mr. Drea, who wrote the contract on classroom behavior, he says he is planning to use it in all of his classes from now on. He thinks it might catch on elsewhere, too. "When I'm at a conference, sitting around having a beer, this is the one thing we all have in common," he says. "We may not understand each other's research, but we all understand this."

TIPS FOR MANAGING A CLASSROOM

In the workshops she teaches, Delaney J. Kirk, a professor of management at Drake University, offers professors advice on how to make a class run smoothly. Here are her top suggestions:

- Establish credibility on the first day of class. Let students know why

you're the best person to teach this course.

- Show students you care about them as people. Learn their names and where they're from.
- Be consistent. If you tell the class that late papers won't be accepted, then don't accept them.
- Deal with discipline problems as soon as they occur.
- Demonstrate that your knowledge of the material is up to date and will benefit them in the long run.

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