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Minimizing Undergraduate Classroom Misbehaviors

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Abstract

For the past two decades, there have been increasing problems concerning student misbehaviors in undergraduate classrooms. An interactive teaching approach is proposed to improve classroom behavior. This method enables students to be actively engaged during instruction. Two instructor-designed surveys were developed to evaluate the quality of instruction, assessment, and enforcement of classroom behavior codes. An interactive learning environment has the potential to minimize student misbehaviors.

Introduction

How can undergraduate instructors apply their teaching skills to improve student behavior? Students who disrupt instruction, prevent other students from learning. Since teacher-student conflict is an ongoing problem and many teachers lack adequate pedagogical training, it is necessary for instructors to find effective ways to prevent or minimize student misconduct (Nordstrom, Bartels, & Bucy, 2009). The literature finds that violations of classroom behavior codes occur in various forms. Nineteenth century instructors experienced problems with students who used foul language, lied about academic work, or stole school property (Handlin & Handlin, 1970). In the 1960s, student activists were hostile to the Vietnam War and the Draft System and responded physically by taking over classroom buildings and setting fires to campus libraries (Lee 1970). Although most students comply with classroom behavioral codes, there are increasing numbers of students who defy classroom authority (Seidman 2005). Students are disrupting classroom instruction by texting, using cell phones, conversing with peers, leaving class early, cheating on exams, and aggressively disputing grades (Murphy 2010). In addition students come late to class, sleep in class, play video games, and speak out inappropriately during instruction (Ali & Gracey, 2013).

Why do these misbehaviors occur? There are two reasons frequently cited in the literature. During the past decade, many students believed their individual needs were far more important than those of the schools they attended. Stark & Hartley (2009) find that students have a "sense of entitlement" and want professors to value their opinions and expect to be given high grades for minimal effort. A second reason is a growing number of students who see themselves as customers of the school. Nordstrom, Bartels, & Bucy (2009) state the belief that the customer "is always right" influences students to think that it is the college degree is more important than any knowledge learned since it leads to a career. The authors argue that this point of view diminishes the role of the teacher.

The literature also finds that instructors who have poor classroom management skills affect the ways students behave. Goodboy & Bolkan (2009) contend that professors who fail to clearly discuss classroom policies or do not return tests and research papers on a timely basis, can frustrate and anger students. Furthermore, the authors state that instructors who use sarcasm when responding to students' comments and questions, negatively impact teacher-student relationships. When instructors encounter classroom behavioral problems, there are those who take a reactive rather than a proactive approach. Deering (2011) relates that instructors tend to ignore student misconduct in the hope that it will "disappear." The author also finds that teachers fail to confront negative behavior because students may give them poor evaluations for their teaching. Moreover, Hernandez & Fister (2001) find that instructors avoid reporting misconduct to administrators because they may be judged incompetent. Finally, Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn, & Gokee (2002) contend that when instructors accommodate these students, it can harm the learning of other students who feel the teacher lacks the necessary skills to control the classroom.

There are recommendations in the literature for professors on how to handle classroom disruptions. Bjorklund & Rehling (2010) state that instructors must include specific expectations for student conduct in the syllabus. Murphy (2010) also suggests that it is necessary for instructors to discuss consequences when students violate behavioral codes. In addition, Holton (1999) maintains that conflicts between instructors and students must be resolved in a timely and cooperative manner in order to have a productive learning environment. Although these recommendations are relevant, they lack in-depth descriptions and analysis needed to help instructors further understand the role they must play in preventing classroom misconduct.

One way to improve student conduct is for instructors to apply teaching approaches that actively engage students in the learning process. This interactive strategy may motivate students to have ongoing dialogue with teachers and peers during the instructional and assessment processes. First, students are asked to use their texts, teacher-designed worksheets, and interact with peers in collaborative settings during instruction. Second, instructors discuss how to enhance the quality of student work on exams and written assignments during the assessment process. Finally, the inquiry statements on the Classroom Management Survey Form (Appendix A-AEQ issue website. URL <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/win2016.htm>) and the Instructor Management Survey Form (Appendix B-AEQ issue website. URL <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/win2016.htm>) provide systematic feedback to teachers from both their students and their own reflections on how well the classroom is managed. Therefore, it is proposed that student misconduct can be minimized when interactive teaching practices are combined with the two Classroom Management Evaluation Surveys.

Conceptual Framework for Interactive Teaching

The literature of the past two decades reveals that in order to establish an interactive learning environment, the traditional lecture or teacher-centered model should be transformed to a learner or student-centered model of instruction. In teacher-centered classrooms, Barr & Tagg (1995) find that instructors present course material while students take notes with minimal teacher-student interactions. The authors also argue that when teachers and students work independently from one another, it discourages students from active involvement in the learning process. Student-based instruction, however, promotes interactions between teachers and students. Huba & Freed (2000) report that students benefit academically by becoming involved in discussions, problem-solving exercises, and role-playing activities. These classroom interactions enable teachers and students to know how much of the curriculum is mastered. Furthermore, APA (1997) finds that these interactive processes, motivate students to set their own learning goals as they construct their individual ways of understanding subject material.

These interactive strategies help students to become self-directed since they are taking responsibility for their own work.

Interactive teaching also enhances cognitive and affective development. Hattie & Timperley (2007) contend that teacher-student interactions improve reasoning and communication skills because students are stimulated to apply critical thinking and verbally express their thoughts during instruction. Additionally, Ganah (2012) suggests that when students become the central focus of instruction, they perceive that instructors are taking a personal interest in their learning development. Moreover, Carless (2006) finds that teacher communication helps students gain confidence to achieve their professional and personal goals. Finally, Sullivan & Rosin (2008) advocate that this century's educational agenda needs to include opportunities for promoting shared inquiry, discussions, and reflections to develop an interactive learning environment.

This former associate professor of education in a northeastern private four-year college experienced incidents of student misbehavior. These students were mainly African-American, Hispanic and Asian who took remedial classes in writing and mathematics. Several students would text, have conversations with peers, and aggressively challenge their grades. In order to address these classroom behavioral problems, specific interactive instructional and assessment approaches were implemented for two years. Two surveys were also designed by this instructor to evaluate the effectiveness of pedagogical practices in order to understand how to minimize student misconduct during the learning process.

Interactive Strategies to Prevent Classroom Misbehaviors

A. Classroom Instruction Practices

In Literacy courses, an interactive environment was established. Through the use of the class textbook and teacher-designed worksheets, students were guided through each lesson in cooperative group settings. When students learn in cooperative settings, Petersen & Miller (2004) find they have opportunities to learn from one another by sharing ideas, justifying their views, and enhancing listening and speaking skills. In addition, the worksheets were learning instruments requiring students to write responses to teacher-designed questions by explaining and providing examples of key concepts and terms found in their textbooks. For example, a worksheet (Appendix C-AEQ issue website. URL <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/win2016.htm>) had conceptual questions on one side, such as "How do students acquire vocabulary?" On the other side, students were asked to write how they would "Explain the ways teachers could help students acquire vocabulary."

Although textbooks can help students learn course material, Shibley, Dunbar, Mysliwiec, & Dunbar (2008) find that many students resist using them because of their complex terminology and excessive content. Anecdotal evidence found that a number of students questioned the practice of using not only the textbook but also the worksheets. They complained that using both learning instruments required too much time and energy to do the assigned work. The teacher allowed students to express their opposition to using the textbook and worksheets. During these discussions, students became aware that a challenging textbook improves their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. These interactions also enabled them to understand that the instructor's intention was to help them better understand course concepts and material. The teacher further pointed out that the textbook and worksheets can serve as references for class discussions, examinations, and the research paper. By enabling students to voice their concerns about course requirements, they became motivated to work cooperatively with the instructor and their peers. As the students were doing their group tasks, the instructor circulated to each group and spoke individually to those students who were either texting or speaking to others. The instructor spoke to them individually about their

responsibility to work cooperatively so that they could share their ideas and experiences in order to better understand course material. The instructor also stated that developing peer collaboration skills benefit them professionally in the future when they work with other teachers and supervisors. These teacher-students interactions minimized texting and talk between students enabling them to focus on their work. As Murphy (2007) contends, student behavior improves when they are actively engaged in the learning process.

B. Assessment Practices

1. *Examinations.* The instructor discussed the syllabus requirements for the midterm and final exams. Students were informed that the tests consisted of multiple choice and essay questions, how each question was scored, and the time frame for completion. The instructor showed sample questions and explained the best ways to answer them. However anecdotal evidence found that a number of students resisted the teacher's instruction. They stated that it was too difficult for them to prepare effectively for these tests due to heavy course loads, outside work schedules, and the vast amount of course material. The instructor addressed these issues by explaining specific ways for them to organize their time on how to use their class text and worksheets effectively. Ali & Gracey (2013) find when teachers listen empathetically and respond constructively to students' academic problems, it promotes "mutually-respectful interactions" leading to positive teacher-student relationships. As a result of these interactions, students became more receptive to instructor recommendations because they realized that the teacher was taking time to help them to prepare for their exams.

2. *Written Assignment.* A Term Paper Guidelines sheet (Appendix D-AEQ issue website. URL <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/win2016.htm>) provided an outline showing how students should structure their research assignments. The teacher explained how these guidelines are used to apply primary and secondary sources, cite these sources in the text, and paraphrase appropriately. Furthermore, these guidelines listed the grading criteria for each section of the paper. According to Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn, & Gokee (2002), many undergraduates express feelings of frustration when they believe teachers are grading them unfairly. The authors further state that teacher-student conflict increases when instructors react defensively by denying the problem exists or failing to explain incorrect answers when students question their grades. Anecdotal evidence found that when the grades for the papers were given, several students believed they deserved higher grades. This instructor responded proactively to students' comments and questions on an individual basis by explaining how each score was determined by the grading criteria listed in the guidelines. For example, students were required to describe two significant principles of literacy. The instructor showed students by using the guidelines how this section of the paper was scored based on their organization, development, accuracy of information, and referencing. The instructor also described the strengths and weakness of their writing by giving them constructive criticism that can help them improve their academic skills. Tantleff-Dunn et al. (2002) find that building teacher-student relationships through feedback reduces conflict and facilitates learning. The instructor-student dialogue enabled many of these students to become more motivated in their classroom assignments.

C. Survey Instruments

Two management survey instruments to evaluate classroom teaching practices and student behavior were created but not used as a result of the anecdotal outcomes of student behavior in the literacy courses. These surveys were designed to guide future professors of education to create an interactive environment. The first survey, the Classroom Management Evaluation Form (Appendix A-AEQ issue website. URL <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/win2016.htm>), is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. At the end of the semester, a Likert Rating Scale is used for students to

evaluate how their instructors taught, assessed their work, and how they believed instructors enforced classroom behavior. The second part of the survey consists of two questions asking students to write their perceptions on how their teachers managed the classroom. The second survey, the Instructor Management Survey Evaluation Form (Appendix B-AEQ issue website. URL <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/win2016.htm>), is for instructors to evaluate how well they taught, graded their students, and addressed behavioral problems.

These two instruments may benefit both students and teachers to evaluate classroom learning. For example, both surveys ask students and instructors to determine how well the behavioral rule “not allowing students to interrupt others during class” was enforced. The responses to these two questions enable students and teachers to apply their self-reflection skills on the quality of classroom instruction. Zimmerman (2008) finds that students who reflect on their classroom experiences become more self-directed, enabling them to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, Licklider, Schelker, & Fulton (1997) find that professors are self-directed learners who can decide what strategies are necessary to become more effective in the classroom. When instructors reflect on the responses from both surveys, they can see the relative strengths and weaknesses of their instructional practices and are in a better position to know how their teaching impacts their classroom management.

Conclusion

The anecdotal evidence found that when students are actively engaged in the learning process, misbehaviors were minimized. However, it is necessary to have empirical investigation of these instructional and assessment practices that when that impact classroom behavior. This research is necessary for all students and professors are adversely affected when behavioral codes are not enforced. Students lose respect for those professors who ineffectively manage their classrooms because it prevents them from obtaining a quality education. Additionally, students who violate behavioral rules may experience difficulty in their future careers because they lack essential communication and collaboration skills to interact professionally with peers and supervisors. Furthermore, it is necessary for instructors to be receptive to make the necessary changes in their instructional approaches in order to help students not only to improve their academic work but to meet the behavioral standards of the course. An interactive classroom has the potential for students to achieve these academic and behavioral standards.

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