

Resource Guide

Classroom Provocations: Steps to Prevent and Ways to Prepare for Emotional Moments

Students may disrupt classes through agitated reactions to course content or through planned, seemingly benign behavior intended to provoke emotional reactions. These disruptions may happen in any class context or learning environment (fact-to-face, online, large enrollment, etc.). If you are faced with a moment of disruption, there are steps you can take to de-escalate while maintaining continuity in the classroom ([detailed in this resource guide on acute disruptions](#)).

The best-case scenario for educators and learners is to foster a learning environment that avoids these distracting and emotion-laden events completely. Avoiding moments of disruption does not mean dialogue, debate, questioning, disagreement, and conflicting viewpoints are unwelcome. In fact, many of these forms of interaction can help students recognize their assumptions, imagine varied applications of course content, and deepen their understanding of peers' points of view.

Setting expectations and encouraging reflection can go a long way to prevent uncomfortable moments (see [this resource guide, framed for graduate students but with useful tips for all](#)). You can further increase the chances of avoiding classroom disruptions, while supporting student learning and healthy dialogue, by following the suggestions below:

Establish an inclusive classroom culture

- In intergroup underpinnings of "gotcha" moments of planned course disruption can also serve as a source of inspiration when it comes to cultivating a learning environment that avoids such moments. Many disruptions are rooted in group-based (e.g., political) motives in which the instructor or other classmates may be perceived as members of an "other" outgroup. Establishing a common ingroup identity in the classroom can help reduce feeling of intergroup competition (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2008). Further, establishing norms of respect and acknowledgment of existing group memberships within the classroom community can help reduce negative attitudes toward those who have different group memberships (Guan et al., 2011).
- When seeking to establish classroom community, you can consider the themes undergraduates identify as at the core of their experience of community in the classroom: shared space, expectations of openness and acceptance, common interests, and cultivation of a sense of belonging (Elliot et al., 2016). The expectations you set might include some of these shared interests, such as an expectation of curiosity to learn from one another when there are

disagreements. You might also develop superordinate goals, or shared goals for all students, in which their cooperation will benefit the whole group (e.g., low-stakes in-class cooperative activities, collaboration opportunities, etc.).

- **Prepare responses for emotional moments of disruption**
 - To reduce the stress of impromptu responses when faced with disruption, you might benefit from preparing a few responses for these situations. For instance, if a student asks a question that seems potentially disruptive, you can return to your expectations with a prepared response like “how would a scholar in our discipline approach answering this question?” This reframes the question in a way that emphasizes process (i.e., how to approach the problem) and encourages drawing on shared knowledge of course content.
 - You can also rely on the classroom community by prompting a different student to answer the disrupting question, or a reframed question related to the original comment. By bringing in additional voices with an emphasis on cooperation, you reinforce the shared classroom community, reducing the chances of further disruption. To reduce the ad-libbed nature of these questions, you can prepare responses that give you time to think. For instance, “Thank you for that contribution. We’re going to work together to explore this further so we can learn from one another.” You might also invite students to reflect briefly on a learning-based question, giving time to reduce any feelings of tension. For instance, “This is an interesting topic in which people may have differing opinions. Take a minute to write down thoughts about how this relates to a course learning outcome and then we will explore this topic further.”

Resources

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Elliott, D., Gamino, M., & Jenkins, J. J. (2016). Creating community in the college classroom: Best practices for increased student success. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 3(6), 29-41.

Guan, Y., Verkuyten, M., Fung, H. H. L., Bond, M. H., Chen, S. X., & Chan, C. C. H. (2011). Out-group value incongruence and intergroup attitude: The roles of common identity and multiculturalism. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(3), 377-385.

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For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by [email](#).