DISRUPTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM
LEARNING YOU ARE NOT ALONE – AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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Introduction:

Every instructor at the United States Military Academy has dealt with some form of disruptive student behavior during their time teaching. For a rotational member of the faculty this can be challenging. The idea that a student, and future military officer would fall asleep or attempt to carry on a sidebar conversation during a class may be nearly unthinkable. As many rotational faculty are recent implants to West Point just back from combat action on battlefields far away it is not common to have to deal with a subordinate who is not focused on your every word. This paper will look at recent research into classroom misbehavior, some of the common types of classroom misconduct at the United States Military Academy and what it is that we as instructors may choose to do about it.

What does the literature say?

A disturbing trend revealed in a review of recent literature on the topic of classroom misconduct is that many teachers are unprepared or unwilling to deal with misconduct. Many teachers today are experts in their fields yet have never received any formal training on how to actually manage their classrooms (Seidman, 2005). If there is no formal training on how it is that a classroom should be managed than how will instructors, who may be an absolute genius in a given field, impart knowledge into students when disruptive misconduct occurs in the classroom.

There are many pieces of literature that have been written recently about how to handle students in the classroom. It appears as though this material has appeared as a result of a general lack of information circulating about dealing with classroom misconduct. The literature recently published describes many techniques to deal with misconduct. These solutions range from range more disruptive and direct manners of intervention, like belittling a student, to calm and more productive methods like speaking to them about an incident in your office after an incident. For example, halting class to belittle a student who is sleeping is often seen by other students in the class as just as disruptive as the student originally sleeping in the first place. Conversely, most students would prefer that a sleeping student be dealt with in a manner that has little impact on their continued learning while still ensuring that the offending student is dealt with properly (Carter, 2006). From the instructor perspective there is a risk that an over reaction by an instructor will actually backfire and instead of making the rest of the students in the class more alert, will actually distance students from your topic or course material.
Many of the articles referenced for this paper offer useful guides to how to deal with many of the common problems in the classroom today. This is as a result of an underlying theme of the literature that instructors are seldom properly prepared to deal with misconduct in the classroom. For instance, the proliferation of cellular phones in the classroom has become a nuisance for many instructors, yet most instructors will never be given a guideline as to how to handle the issue of constant phone ringing in class. Common issues are laid out and then suggestions are made about how to deal with these issues in many articles surveyed (California State University - Fullerton, 2011; Carbone, 1999; Rodriguez, 2009). There is a fear that seems to permeate in this literature that instructors are afraid to make a correction or get involved more deeply within their classes than their academic areas of expertise. This fear seems to be founded and these guides can be very useful.

Some schools have made strides to create standards for dealing with classroom misconduct; the University of Texas has produced a guide as to how many problems should be handled (University of Texas, 2006). With the large enrollment at the school there are certain to be teachers facing issues from disinterested students like poor attendance, early departures and chatty behavior to say nothing of power struggles with students, so they are reaching out to help. The University of Texas’ suggested solution to handling a sleeping student involves waking the student and taking them outside into the hallway to privately chat. This assists in minimizing a negative impact on the rest of the class. It is suggested that the conversation include positive reinforcement in an effort to get the student to return to class as a more active participant in the session (Rodriguez, 2009). This technique differs starkly from the simple “throw the student out of class” technique, which is essentially a knee jerk reaction to the problem. This also is significantly different than the technique taught in my department’s “New Instructor Training” which stressed the impact of a well placed eraser throw. When taking a more devious route to correct the problem, you are not doing the student any favors and the student is not learning what it is that they are there to learn – When the instructors professionalism slips in reaction to misconduct, both the instructor and the teacher are now wrong.

Finally an underlying theme that runs through the literature is that student misbehavior is seldom related only to the student. There are issues of “dry” presentations, a lack of two-way involvement in class, and unclear expectations that all compound classroom misconduct. Carbone, (1999), makes clear that a more involved and better prepared instructor has fewer issues in the classroom with their students. Open communication and clear understanding of expectations up front go a long way in eliminating issues in class and creating a more effecting learning environment. It is also important to note that numerous sources cited the need for expectations to be laid down in the first few lessons of a given course (Amada, 1999). This is something that makes perfect sense. If a students are informed early on of the impact to the learning environment resulting from a cell phone ringing continuously or the impact on the learning of others when a student continuously departs the class early shuffling past other students they will be less likely to partake in the discussed behavior.

Misbehavior at West Point:
While blessed to have the opportunity to serve at the United States Military Academy, teaching first and second year students does come with some challenges. As a military officer I am not used to having to respond to some of the common misconduct observed at West Point. There are significant differences between commanding soldiers in a line unit and teaching students in an academic setting, yet there are similarities. Some of the misconduct observed can include sleeping in class, chit chatting during lectures and misuse of computers (facebooking) during class. These are all challenges that are highly infrequent, at least in the units I have been a part of.

It is important to understand whom it is we are dealing with when we look at classroom misconduct at West Point. While many instructors are just back from leading soldiers in line units, we are here now and no longer dealing with actual soldiers. We are now dealing with cadets – essentially college students. To instantly place the expectation on these young people that they behave in a manner fully indicative of years of officer-ship is absurd, we need to understand that these young people are 18-22 year old college students who do not yet have the benefit of a formal military education. In essence these students are little different from the young privates we had in our previous units but without a basic training or actual unit experience. As such we need to understand that when they leave this place the expectations will be high, but in the interim we should work to teach them just how it is that a college student and United States Military Academy Cadet should act. This will not just happen overnight and when considering the vastly different backgrounds of the corps of cadets, expectations should be laid out right away in any new class. The diversity in students alone is so vast that what may be acceptable to one student based on his cultural upbringing may be vastly different to another student and at the same time disruptive, this is to say nothing of the cultural clash that occurs when these college students are placed with an instructor who has had the influence of military cultural for the better part of a decade. As such we are left to wonder what to do about student misconduct.

One of the most common issues facing instructors at West Point is the issue of students falling asleep in class. As the students are often heavily worked and placed into a crucible of academics many students have issues with time and sleep management. It is important to remember, when dealing with this issue, that there are seventeen other students in the classroom who are going to be affected by your response to the misconduct. If the issue is treated incorrectly then you run the risk of turning-off the rest of the class to the material and also turning them off to yourself as an instructor as many students will likely sympathize with the sleepy student. The literature demonstrates that the best way to deal with this issue is in private, outside the classroom (Rodriguez, 2009). At West Point it may be common for a teacher to have a desire to make an example of the student and to immediately relate their nap with issues that may be faced on a future battlefield in some far away land. However, the instructor needs to remember that they are dealing with college students and not soldiers or lieutenants yet. This is especially true of younger cadets. While there certainly is a difference between a senior and a freshman sleeping in class, the issues should be handled similarly although there is a lot more at stake for the senior cadet.

Conversely to student misconduct there is a growing field that shows that professors have issues as well. If a professor is ill prepared for class or not making a connection with students
the propensity for misconduct grows considerably (Boice, 1996). As such if misconduct is a constant issue in a given classroom one may need to look inward to see if a problem resides with the instructor. While professionally embarrassing, it is still true that sometimes instructors are not completely prepared to teach their classes as well as they should be taught. If this is the case, it may be a mitigating factor as to why students are not performing at their best. This may mean that coming down hard on a student who is disinterested in your material is hypocritical at best as you are doing nothing to maintain that students interest. While it is certainly not the instructor’s job to entertain, it is the instructor’s job to bring material to the front of a students mind and make them think about the material and grow.

What can be done?

State Expectations Up Front and Underwrite Mistakes: Students will make mistakes in class if they do not know what is expected. Students are there to learn after all and learning from mistakes is one of the best forms of learning there is. It should be made clear up front what is and is not tolerable classroom behavior. Based on the diversity of the student body at West Point it is entirely possible that a student just does not know exactly what is expected of them at any given time. Helping your students learn to be college students and young adults may be one of the best things a college instructor could offer. Additionally, after a student has a lapse in conduct, remember that the student is a young person and may be prone to making mistakes. After the point is made about the misconduct, it is time to move beyond the issue. Holding an incident against a student and giving a negative perception about your opinion of the student is senseless. Help the student grow and learn and move on with the course.

Invest in Each Session: Remember that the students are your responsibility and that if you do not put in the requisite work to prepare a lesson you are failing. Research of this topic has shown that instructors who put in the appropriate amount of effort to prepare a class deal with less misconduct in the classroom. It is critical that an instructor comes to class with good material prepared and that the instructor is ready to present it in a way that will make the material resonate with students, this alone can alleviate some of the issues of misconduct in the classroom.

Have a Plan: Most important to dealing with classroom misconduct is that the teacher has a plan. Every teacher will, at some point in time, be facing misconduct issues with in their classroom. Despite the best most interesting course materials out there instructors tend to forget that each student is dealing with four to seven other classes that are all “the most important” in the eyes of each instructor and as such students may take one class more lightly than another. No matter how good an instructor’s class is, it is likely that there is will be an outlying student in the class who partakes in some form of classroom misconduct. It is wise to occasionally look into the current methods for correcting misconduct. Finally, be prepared to deal with issues as they arise. This will save many students from being turned off by an unprepared knee jerk reaction.

Remember Cadets Are Both Students and Future Military Officers: It is important to note that cadets, especially younger cadets, are closer to being high school students than they are military officers. The lack of military experience can often make behavioral corrections coming
from someone who has been in the military for decades seem extreme. While these cadets will eventually turn into military officers it is important to note that right now they are college students who are gradually adjusting to military culture. Opportunities do exist to relate classroom experiences to military life and these lessons can be extremely valuable developmentally as these students transition from cadet to officer but know that this transition will not happen overnight.
Annotated Bibliography


This book examines misconduct in the classroom. It is written to be teacher friendly and includes sections like “Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About Classroom Misconduct and Were Afraid to Ask Your Dean.” It is a decent read. It talks about common issues in the classroom, strategies to deal with these issues and most importantly non-disciplinary responses to classroom misconduct. The book is useful as a more detailed source than many of the articles and sections listed.


Many of the sources looked into for this review cited this article and some referred to it as a “classic work” on this topic. Boice ran a five-year study of classroom incivility at a larger university. His results display faults not only with students but also with teachers. Issues cited include poor teaching, lack of two-way communication, students’ noise, tardiness and early departures, and poor behavior by students. Conclusions are made about how a poor environment overall leads to lesser quality learning and how a better environment led to a much better learning environment. Most importantly there is a belief that teachers need to lay out expectations up front in the course, as that seems to be the starting point for keeping control and interest in a class.


This article focuses on larger classroom settings. While not directly related to everyday USMA teaching it can relate to some of the larger combined classes we occasionally teach. The article talks initially about the importance of setting expectaitons early. It then goes on to talk about opinions of students on large classes and how teachers can perform more effectively in large settings.


This study focuses on dealing with misbehavior in class. As a result of the study it is learned that students have differing opinions of how an instructor should handle disruptive behavior in the classroom. The best method for correcting a disruptive student was deemed to be a private conversation with the individual in an area outside the classroom where everyone can hear the conversation. This makes sense, as no student would want to be embarrassed. Other suitable
methods, in order, were to ask a peer of the student to wake them up – in the case of sleeping, and 3rd to make a loud noise to disrupt the student’s disruptive behavior. While not producing a clear answer as to what to do about the problem or how to prevent it, the article points out student perception of the teacher, which is important.


McKeachie looks at many of the same issues that other authors do. The section offers ideas to cope with classroom situations. The ten page excerpt is brief yet contains a fair amount of information to assist an instructor with trouble situations in the classroom. Compared with other articles this information is easy to read and digestible making it convenient as a short read for anyone in a time pinch looking for possible ideas as to a classroom problem.


This article discusses the different issues an instructor may face in the classroom. It is written from a point of view that offers insight to the instructor who may not be comfortable making a correction in a classroom. Rodriguez creates a list of common classroom issues and offers insight as to what can be done to help solve the problem. This article is particularly helpful in looking for ideas as to what one can to do deal with classroom issues.


Increasingly, college faculties are complaining about unacceptable and disruptive student behavior in the classroom. Scholars are publishing articles on the problem and institutions are offering workshops to help faculty cope. Blame is placed on a crisis of authority in American society. Some find the trend is not new, but the behavior has worsened.


There is no question that a disruptive learning environment creates problems. Faculties are more often than not ill prepared to deal with issues in the classroom. This article discusses survey results as well as disruptive behavior in general. The types of disruptive behavior that are discussed are some of the most common ones found in college classes today. A distinction is made between types of disruptive behavior and solutions are offered to deal with them.

Dealing with troublesome behavior in the classroom is one of the most challenging aspects of being a professor. Although instructors have expertise in their content areas, they often have little training in dealing with the interpersonal dynamics involved in working with students. And yet instructors want to create an environment of mutual respect, not one rife with adversarial relationships. The solutions available to instructors include establishing a positive environment in the classroom to deter disruptive behavior and intervening directly to deal with inappropriate conduct. Instructors need to consider their own behavior as well as that of their students. (Abstract)


A short section of this book is dedicated to dealing with misbehavior in the classroom. The underlying theme is that upfront communication with students lays out expectations that can later be referred back to in dealing with misbehavior in the classroom. This may not be the most useful tool for those looking for tips on how to deal with issues in the classroom.
Additional Resources


