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Basic Course Forum

'I Have A Student Who ...': Systematically Addressing Student Misbehaviors in the Basic Course

John Hooker, Illinois State University

This Basic Course Forum highlights authors' responses to the following topics: What curricular programs present the best opportunity for curricular connections to the basic course? Building upon conversations from the July 2018 Basic Course Institute (hosted by University of Dayton), what administrative successes and challenges do basic course directors face?

Student misbehaviors have been previously defined as actions that interfere with students' own or others' learning (Plax & Kearney, 1990) and are a challenge to overcome in the basic course. This phenomenon has been previously studied (Bingham, Carlson, Dwyer, & Prisbell, 2009; Simonds, 1997) along with behavior modification techniques to successfully deal with issues that arise (Kearney & Plax, 1987; Paulsel, 2004; Plax, Kearney, & Tucker, 1986). However, as noted by Johnson, Claus, Goldman, and Sollitto (2017), the millennial generation poses new challenges due to different technology use patterns, expectations, and social characteristics than previous generations. These new challenges require a new approach to successfully dealing with today's student. The author, who directs the basic course, has noted this need anecdotally through specific situations recently. First, examples of these will be detailed; second, the procedure developed and used to cope with all instances of misbehavior regardless of category will be described; and third, the successful resolution of the specific situations will be discussed.

Millennial Misbehaviors

Emma (pseudonym) had a student who was constantly using a cellphone. Since being attentive is one of the course policies, she asked the student to put the phone away during class. After class, the student angrily confronted her, at which time she said she would be happy to meet in office hours but had to leave for another class. The student then began to yell at Emma that the treatment was unfair and they needed to talk about it immediately. Emma was able to extricate herself from the situation but was taken aback about the encounter and reported it to her course director.

Jack (pseudonym) had a student that made everyone in the class uncomfortable. This student would respond during class discussion by using classmates as examples and would rush to aggressively play devil's advocate on almost any topic being discussed, challenging and intimidating both the instructor and fellow students. Jack felt unable to pinpoint exactly which course policy was being violated and was not sure what he could do to remedy the situation; therefore, he approached his course director for advice.

Establishing Behavioral Expectations

Fortunately, in conjunction with the Dean of Students office, a standard procedure had been created for the basic course to deal with these nonstandard misbehaviors. When new situations like these began to arise in the preceding few years, a policy and documentation method was created in line with the university's student code of conduct to address any disruptive behaviors that were not covered specifically in syllabi. A behavioral expectation policy was added to the standard syllabus in language to be malleable enough to apply to situations like the ones previously described. In addition, a behavioral modification plan form was developed to give instructors the ability to report categories of misbehavior such as being verbally aggressive toward others, being verbally or nonverbally unsupportive of others, challenging a grade in class, or disrupting the learning for others in class.

To use the form, the instructor selects the misbehavior, documents the incident(s), and then schedules a meeting with the student to reiterate the behavioral expectation policy and go over the form. The student and the instructor then discuss the behaviors and, in writing, agree on what behaviors will be modified and how. Both then sign the form as a contract. Usually, this is enough to get the behavior to cease. Occasionally, such as in the situations above, the director will meet with the student to go over the form and come to a resolution.

Procedure in Practice

When Emma's student, the cellphone abuser, met with the director, the primary concern was being singled out and treated differently than other students. When the director showed the student the policy and assured that it was standard to everyone, the student softened. The student felt unable to look away from the phone in fear of "missing something" and admitted that not having access to the phone during class would be best for all. For the remainder of the semester, the phone was placed on Emma's desk at the beginning of class and retrieved afterwards; no further issues occurred.

Jack's student did not understand how the conduct in class was making other students uncomfortable. The director then shifted the focus of the conversation to pinpoint specific behaviors to change. These behaviors were detailed on the form, and the student agreed to refrain from them. There were no further problems with this student either.

Literal challenges from student misbehaviors led to the behavioral modification procedure. The plan has been effective in addressing new issues with technology, expectations, and social characteristics in the current generation of students. In de-escalating potentially large and recurring behavior issues and being broad enough to apply to unique, unanticipated situations, the procedure is considered an administrative success.

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