

Resource Guide

Addressing acute disruptions in the classroom

It is not a scenario all of us have experienced, nor is it one most are prepared for, but students antagonistically arguing or commandeering the time in a classroom is something that is happening in higher education more and more often. What would you do if a student decided to stand up and shout contrary opinions, usurping the learning of others, perhaps even attempting to provoke you in the process? In the event that such a thing should happen in your classroom, the steps in the following paragraphs may serve as assistance to de-escalate the situation enough to regain control of the classroom.

- First and perhaps most importantly, remain calm. It sounds easy, but it isn't. When emotions run high, anyone is susceptible to escalating the situation. Do everything you can to remain calm. Keep a low, steady voice. Try to keep body language neutral with hands at your sides or with your palms showing. Try to avoid pointing at the student or clenching your fists. Give the student space. It is not recommended to try to physically (re)move the student, even if you believe you can.
- To the extent that you can, validate the feelings of the student. You may not agree but communicating that having conflicting feelings and opinions is OK may help moderate the situation in your classroom. Their feelings are real to them regardless of veracity. Try to avoid being defensive or arguing back which could potentially escalate what is happening.
- Listen actively. Try not to interrupt which may also escalate matters. Use the student's name to address him or her in a clam voice while validating feelings. Avoid using sarcasm or mocking the student.
- Attempt to set boundaries speaking slowly in a low voice. Using a calm but firm voice consider pausing the discussion and asking the student what point they need to make or what goal they need to achieve for the class to move forward.
- When possible, try to empathize with the student. Consider how you might communicate that we can all get frustrated or feel that one point or another is being suppressed.

These kinds of interactions are difficult. Rarely does anyone feel good after an incident like this. The goal is to focus on ending the confrontation safely and lessening the impact on the learning of others. Now more than before it may be worth considering if this kind of situation were to happen in your classroom what tools you might be able to use to defuse a situation and reclaim the classroom.

Resources

Dartmouth Trauma Intervention Research Center. (n.d.). *Calming & De-escalation Strategies*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2PSExM-NhU>

University of Wisconsin-Madison. (n.d.). Verbal de-escalation techniques. Office of Student Assistance and Support. <https://osas.wisc.edu/guide/verbal-de-escalation-techniques/>

Vanderbilt University Medical Center. (n.d.). 11 steps of verbal de-escalation. 11 Steps of Verbal De-Escalation | Workplace Violence Prevention-VUH. <https://www.vumc.org/wpvp/11-steps-verbal-de-escalation>

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