

How to manage 'difficult' students online

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There are a variety of definitions of what makes a 'difficult' student, regardless of the delivery medium, and there are no infallible ways of avoiding or dealing with incidents of bad or disruptive behaviour. In the context of online learning, I would give the following as examples of students who could be considered 'difficult'. A student who:

- Doesn't keep in contact regularly
- Consistently doesn't do what they say they will
- Doesn't achieve set goals or maintain their commitment to study
- Doesn't respond to specific requests and questions
- Ignores advice
- Contributes inappropriately to group tasks
- Doesn't work as an active and supportive group member
- Disrupts other students through their behaviour
- Makes offensive remarks
- Challenges the teacher's authority, either publicly or privately
- Submits work that is plagiarised or not their own

There are no foolproof ways of preventing difficult behaviour online and, like with other delivery methods, the key is that you need to:

- Be aware of what might happen
- Make sure you are as aware and informed as possible
- Make sure students are as aware and informed as possible
- Know what procedure is expected of you
- React objectively and supportively
- Seek support from colleagues when necessary

It is also possible that some challenging experiences might prove to be a positive learning experience for you.

As you will see, some behaviour is deemed so simply because it makes the job of the teacher harder whilst other behaviour is more consciously disruptive and detrimental to the learning experience of other students. These definitions could apply to students in any delivery medium but it can help the online teacher to look more specifically at ways to prevent them and respond to them in the online environment.

A qualification I would make here is that the following is based on my experience of online teaching, primarily with adult students, over the past few years and the case studies cited at the end are all situations I have in some way been involved in.

Prevention

Make sure the student knows what to expect when embarking on online study.

Irregular contact, failure to achieve goals or respond to requests may be caused by the student's ignorance of what is expected. Have a thorough pre-course assessment or guide to ensure students know what they are getting themselves in to. Make sure this includes guidelines on appropriate behaviour and detail as to the expected time commitment and technological requirements.

Model the behaviour you expect

The way you relate to students will have an impact on their understanding of how to behave in an online environment and can be the best way to demonstrate what is expected. Establish a good relationship with students where you stay open to ideas and problems, respond promptly and always communicate in a considered and considerate way.

Strategies for common problems

Lack of response or expected activity

- Have a process for monitoring student input and progress so that you can intervene quickly
- Respond quickly and clearly if work is unsatisfactory or if a student is not meeting course requirements.
- Regularly remind the student as to what you expect
- Use back up communication such as the telephone for persistent non-response
- Have a procedure to deal with consistent non-participation such as guidelines for withdrawing a student from a course

Disruptive behaviour or offence to other students

- Know your institution's or employer's policy for dealing with inappropriate behaviour, especially for behaviour that contravenes equal opportunity guidelines.
- Intervene quickly and supportively so that other student's know you are involved and they are being protected
- Contact the offending student privately to try and ascertain what the reason for their behaviour is. This may be best done face to face or by telephone so that they have to engage with you.
- Keep showing support to the other students
- Withdraw the offending student from the discussion forum if necessary

Cheating

There are various strategies for trying to prevent and detect cheating such as giving clear information on what is unacceptable, building a relationship with students so you get to know their skill levels, varying assessment formats so you learn how they respond in different scenarios, basing assignments around personal experience, requesting declarations for every assignment that work is original and having some face to face summative assessment.

If cheating is suspected, it can help to have an ethics policy in place with guidelines for procedures that are supported by your institution or employer. Elements of this policy may include:

- Giving the student the opportunity to explain themselves
- Giving the student the chance to resubmit work
- Having a person other than the teacher involved investigate allegations so that the teacher can continue working with the student
- Having an 'ethics committee' to decide on outcomes

Case Studies

The following are all examples of situations I have had some involvement with, either first hand or through a colleague.

1. Student who doesn't contribute, makes many promises to improve but doesn't act until threatened with withdrawal from the programme.

A student I worked with contributed fairly well initially to individual and group tasks but then was consistently late with work and gradually missed major deadlines, putting him well behind his peers. I sent emails to him asking for explanations and improvements and he responded with promises to change, which didn't eventuate. His inaction meant extra work for me, as I had to continually remind him of deadlines and also disrupted his work group who tried to accommodate his lateness in-group activities. Finally, after several weeks of non-activity, I informed him that he was being withdrawn from the course (whereupon he suddenly expressed a keen intention to mend his ways).

Suggestions:

- Keep in regular contact with the student and make it clear what you expect and how he or she needs to improve in order to have the best chance of success.
- Have a clear policy of minimum required participation so a student can be withdrawn after a certain point if they consistently fall behind.
- Don't wear yourself out if it becomes clear the student is not going to participate, as they should. Ultimately it is their choice and responsibility to manage their own progress.

2. Student whose work is variable in quality and is suspected of being inauthentic.

A student that a colleague worked with (Student A) contributed work of widely varying quality with discussion contributions showing a poor level of understanding but written reports that were of a high standard. On investigation, it turned out the Student A cohabited with another student on the course (Student B), whose own contributions were consistently of a high standard. The teacher suspected that Student B was contributing substantially to some of the work of Student A. This was a difficult situation as it was very hard to prove collusion and Student A proved reluctant to give any explanation or response. The student also, when challenged, lodged a complaint against the teacher. Suggestions:

- Ask students during enrolment if they are likely to be working with anyone.
- Have an ethics policy and make this clear to students at the start of the course.
- Build various assessment formats into the course to get a better sense of each student's

- understanding and way of communicating.
- Build assignments around student's personal experiences to ensure work is not copied.
- Use synchronous chat or a face-to-face meeting to question the student on particular issues to ascertain their level of understanding.
- Have a third party intervene and investigate if there is a strong suspicion of unethical behaviour.

3. Student who posts a first contribution to a discussion that answers all the questions

A student I worked with, who had contributed well in the past but had a certain lack of confidence about online group work, had to lead a group discussion for the first time. She began the process with an extremely lengthy contribution that answered all of the topic questions and proved very difficult for others to reply to. Responses from other students were equally as lengthy as they attempted to react to all points and the discussion as a whole stagnated. This affected the experience of all the students in the group and meant extra work from me. Suggestions:

- Give early information on the best ways to lead a discussion.
- Contact the student privately and supportively to voice your concerns.
- Intervene quickly by briefly summarising the key points made and asking follow on questions or ask the student to do this.
- Turn this into a learning experience by having a follow up discussion on the best way to lead and participate in online group work.

4. Student who ignores requests for amendments to work

A student I taught consistently submitted work that didn't meet the assignment brief and was below standard. In my feedback I would give follow up questions and request additions and amendments. The student seemed to ignore these and would continue sending in subsequent assignments. This meant a certain amount of extra work for me but also indicated the student might reach the end of the course without having met all the assessment criteria. Suggestions:

- Be very clear when giving feedback as to what needs to be redone or amended and state overtly if the assignment has not been successfully completed.
- Send regular reminders
- Follow up by phone to ensure the student is actually receiving your emails
- Be clear if the student is reaching a point where they might fail the course
- Like the first case study, there is only so much you can do as a teacher and it is ultimately the student's responsibility to ensure their own progress.

5. Student who challenges authority

One of the best learning experiences I have had as an online teacher was when a very confident and forthright student sent me an email that openly denigrated a particular aspect of the course and the general validity of the programme. I was lucky that she did this by private email as it allowed me to also respond privately. My first reaction was to be defensive and somewhat angry but I wrote and rewrote my response several times and sought feedback from colleagues. In the end I was able to separate the valid comments the student had made from the misunderstandings and respond in a positive way that acknowledged the validity of her opinions. Suggestions:

- Give students the opportunity to give feedback on the course or the teacher to a third party to try and prevent challenges that arise from frustration.
- If this happens in a public forum, it may be beneficial to respond publicly in a general way but to also follow up privately to discuss in more depth the various issues the student may have.
- Consider your response carefully and seek other opinions before sending.
- Stay open minded as the student may have a point.
- Acknowledge their opinion and be positive about their input and their desire to improve the course or their learning experience.
- State your own opinion clearly and add context that the student may not be aware of.

As with other delivery methods, there are no fail-safe ways of preventing or resolving difficult behaviour online. It is essential to be as prepared and informed as possible and you may find you can turn a challenging situation into a positive experience for both teacher and student.