

## **“ASK THE ACADEMIC ADVISOR” about ... ENGAGING THE MULTICULTURAL CLASS**

**Pātai:** (Question)

*What is the best way to deal with behaviours  
that seem to signal nervousness or 'not coping'?*

**Matiu Ratima replies:**

This question came from a foundation studies tutor. I asked her to describe the specific behaviour she had encountered. She told me about a small group of Pacifica students in her class who often laughed hysterically at what she considered to be inappropriate times or times when they ought to have been on task.

I asked the tutor to consider the following questions. First, is the behaviour really disruptive or inappropriate? Second, does the behaviour really signal ‘not coping’? And third, what would you normally do for students whom you think are not coping but are still committed enough to keep coming to class?

The first question is important because when you engage with people who are different from yourself (in age, gender, culture or background) you can expect there will be awkward times when you will not fully ‘get them’. You may struggle to understand or appreciate things they say and do because the meanings of their words or actions are grounded in their own culture or background and seem strange or foreign to you. This is by no means a bad thing. Quite the opposite, when you perceive these awkward moments you have an opportunity to learn and grow as a teacher by thoughtfully observing, reflecting on, discussing and trying to understand what just happened (from the students’ point of view).

So the issue then is not so much *your* level of comfort with the behaviour of students, the question is ‘was the behaviour disruptive to the learning’? Were others disrupted or offended by the behaviour? If not then what’s the big deal? On the one hand laughter, whether you get the joke or not, can enhance learning. On the other hand if the behaviour clearly upsets someone or derails the learning experience for the class then it is your responsibility as the leader to remind students what is acceptable behaviour in your class. Be clear about your reasons, be open to discussing them with the students, be clear about the consequences for students who do not comply, and be consistent in applying the mutually negotiated rules of classroom etiquette. Preparing a short list of ground rules in the first class (with student input) can be a very effective strategy for classroom management so long as you apply the rules consistently and you are always open to revising them with class consultation and consent.

The second question was: does the behaviour really signal not coping? This question is important because until you know your students in terms of their personalities, their abilities and their progress with the material, it is not so easy to determine if they are coping with the learning requirements judged solely on their superficial classroom demeanour. How do you know if your students are coping moment to moment and task to task in the classroom? Good teachers are constantly ‘assessing’ their students – not in a formal sense, but by maintaining high levels of classroom engagement. By asking questions (more open, less leading), by

setting up short in-class tasks and problem based learning activities, by carefully monitoring how the students perform and by interacting with them as they work. If this is already your classroom practice, then you have in place an early warning system to give a very good idea of who is not coping and more importantly where they are going wrong so you can provide support as required.

The final important question to consider is: what would you normally do for students whom you think are not coping but are still committed enough to keep coming to class? Once you have satisfied yourself that a student is not coping, yet you know they are committed because they are still turning up to class, what now? You are now facing a teacher's greatest challenge (also your greatest opportunity). How will you make a difference where it matters most? Teaching A-level students is a joy. But leading struggling students into the B or even A grade range takes skill and a student-centred approach.

Take baby steps. You must be prepared to take the complex and unfamiliar aspects of your discipline and to communicate them in ways that are meaningful to students. Here is an example used by Dr. Kim Dirks (University of Auckland) for her stage one physics class. It begins with a focus on the standard textbook definition of 'torque':

*Torque is the product of the distance from the fulcrum at which a force is applied and the perpendicular component of the applied force.*

Since the above definition can be difficult for many, Dr. Dirks provides an explanation that might be more illustrative and meaningful to a first-year university student:

*To keep your big brother out of your room, you need to push on the door at the knob end (not at the hinge), you need to push hard, and you need to push flat on.*

Both explanations convey the same conceptual basis and give meaning. The first is framed in language meaningful to those knowledgeable in the field. The second is framed in language meaningful to almost anybody! Notice that neither passage represents a concept or principle any more or less complex than the other. The skilled teacher crafts the learning exercise to make it more meaningful to the learner. This is not an argument for dispensing with jargon. If a student wishes to pass first-year physics they must still be familiar with the language of the discipline. The skilled teacher, however, will begin with the familiar and lead learners towards the unfamiliar.

Occasionally, I hear teachers say they would never 'dumb down' their subject. This is simply wrong-headed. Communicating the complexities of your subject in simple terms requires great skill and sympathetic intelligence. In effect the good teacher does not 'dumb down' their subject, they 'up skill' their own ability to communicate. Looking at the problem from this point of view reveals that any teacher reluctant to 'dumb down' is a teacher who has little interest in up skilling.

For further reading on better university teaching refer to Biggs (1999) or Brookfield (2006). In the meantime, if you would like to post any comment on the present workshop item or offer any prior comments on the next work item, please use MAI Forum in this journal.

## **Bibliography**

Biggs, J. B. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does*. Society for Research into Higher Education. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Brookfield, S. (2006). *The skillful teacher: On technique, trust, and responsiveness in the Classroom* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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