

Difficult Students: What Do I Do?

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There you are again. Another late afternoon Communications for the Technologies class at the high school where you teach. Your charge: Engage these juniors in a thoughtful discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* while giving them the scaffolding they need to pen an entry in their response journals tonight. You enter the classroom and quickly scan the room to find several “Generation E” folks who may present problems during your lesson. Wakeshia, Kaya, and Nikki are critiquing the latest designs showcased on the red carpet at last night’s Grammy awards. Gerald slouches in his chair appearing nearly comatose. Allie, on the other hand, already has her book open to review today’s assignment and is excitedly waving her raised hand for your attention. Meanwhile, Patty and CJ are rolling their eyes at her and looking at you with disgust. The bell rings as Jake and Lee cross the threshold of the classroom screaming, “We’re not late! We’re not late!” Keith plops down in his chair and sucks his teeth to protest the beginning of class.

If you are a teacher in one of today’s middle or high schools, you will from time to time encounter “difficult students.” Managing difficult students in a positive and proactive manner is pivotal in developing high achievers in the classroom. One of the best practices in instruction includes “winning them over” rather than “winning over them.” Proactive management may enable a student to become less difficult and may even empower a once difficult student to become a positive contributor to class discussions and activities. Accomplishing these desirable results is sometimes not easy. Yet, transforming difficult students into productive members of the classroom community may become an easier task with appropriate strategies and techniques that may be implemented in any lesson. The following sections of this article showcase proactive strategies for teachers to use to manage and transform difficult students into positive participants in learning.

Small Group Activities

Most material can be organized quickly and efficiently into small group activities for any student of any age, and these activities work especially well with adolescents. Small groups allow the teacher to place a larger part of responsibility for authentic engagement and active learning upon the students (Pike & Arch, 1997). Small groups also allow more acceptable student interactions and more rehearsal for appropriate choice-making than other more traditional, didactic styles of pedagogy. In addition, small groups are known to promote collaborative and cooperative skills (Salend, 2005) which are more realistic and fit for the current requirements in the workforce of today (Newman, 2002).

Varying levels of learning and experience inevitably emerge in all groups. This may afford an acceptable and delightful learning haven for students with disabilities, for students with low achievement, or for students with English difficulties. Small groups are also excellent resources for students who are confused or for students who are shy or introverted. A teacher may arrange groups according to various levels to promote optimal learning and engagement for all group members.

Small groups, unfortunately, may also quickly become an avenue for gossip and other off task behaviors. Implementing timed activities or requiring a written or visual product of the group may prevent off task behaviors. Small groups also fall prey to domineering or know-it-all students. These students can unknowingly malign active learning and authentic engagement in a typical show off or take over mode. One way to soften a domineering student is to administer a pre-test to the entire class before group assignments are actually made. A domineering or know-it-all student may become aware that he/she doesn't currently know enough to dominate a group and, therefore, may become a more desirable group member. A domineering group member may also be assigned a non-speaking, but important, duty such as note taker for the group, or evaluator of the group. These duties may effectively neutralize the domineering student while simultaneously boosting self esteem.

If a student still insists upon dominating the group, an equal number of tokens may be distributed to group members. A group member must spend a token each time he/she contributes to the group. Once the student has spent the supply of tokens, he/she may make no more contributions to the discussion (Stanton, 1992). This promotes equality for group contributions. Video or audio tapes may be made as an evaluation tool for group interactions or for group participation. Hopefully, the domineering group member may view himself/herself and curb behaviors. In the event that none of these strategies are effective with the domineering or know-it-all student, a private, yet positive, confrontation by the teacher is recommended.

Incorporating Novelty into Daily Lesson Plans

Using novelty, ironically, is certainly not a new technique; however, it is a technique that is difficult to incorporate on a daily basis. Most teachers, at some point, are forced to use novelty to ensure that a concept is mastered. But, few teachers are able to implement it each and every day. Novelty is further complicated by the fact that it differs for most individuals. What is novel for one student may not be novel for another. And so, teachers may limit the use in daily planning as it does not seem to be such a wonderful means for authentic engagement or active learning as once thought. Novelty, although not a universal magic potion, does nevertheless, manage to offer much more success than failure (Salend, 2005).

Novelty can capture those bored students who so often are low achievers; it can reduce off task behaviors and soften those domineering or know-it-all traits. Most importantly, it makes learning fun, and fun is certainly one of the best tools for authentic engagement and active learning that teachers possess!

Novelty can be incorporated on a daily basis in numerous ways. Hands on activities or demonstrations with manipulatives provide novelty and are definitely known as techniques that increase learning and conceptualization (Burden, 2003). Likewise, a lack of manipulatives can be as novel a technique as can be the use of

manipulatives. Drama techniques such as improvisation activities without the use of props or manipulatives can be a novel approach to interpretations of poetry and literature, or even science concepts.

Of course, it may not be feasible to use drama techniques or manipulatives on a daily basis, but it is feasible to use technology on a daily basis. Power point presentations are powerful pieces of novelty with color, animation, and sound. Realistic pictures and clip art may be imported to further make each presentation different, novel, and interesting. On line text books are novel and alternative approaches to homework and class work assignments. Most major textbook companies now have on line textbooks available with strong visual and auditory cues embedded in material. Students may use the internet for a variety of research projects, may be allowed to make power point presentations, or may use or design various software. Technology itself relies upon visual and auditory novelty as an effective substitute for the lack of a real person (McKeachie, 2022). Technology has also been documented as an effective tool for the inclusion of diverse populations (Mehlinger & Powers, 2002; Salend, 2005).

The use of incentives and reinforcement also provide elements of desire and novelty for any student. Incentives may be varied on a daily basis increasing motivation and providing an element of positive expectation for students. The use of incentives has a long standing success rate as an effective technique for audiences of all levels and all ages. Incentives can take an endless number of tangible and intangible forms creating a reliable and reasonable source of novelty for any teacher.

Incorporating Student Choices

Allowing students to make choices is an effective way to enable students to actively engage in the learning process. Even wrong choices have been documented as effective learning tools (Charles, 2005). Yet, most teachers associate student choices with a lack of management or a lack of classroom control. In addition, some teachers may feel intimidated by student choices. Others may view student choices as merely immature, undesirable, or inappropriate. However, no one would argue that making appropriate choices is a natural and expected life skill that reflects levels of self determination and personal independence. With this in mind, teachers should find opportunities to incorporate the use of student choices in their daily lesson plans.

Allowing students to make choices does not have to be an event that undermines classroom control. Most discussions of literature encourage more than one correct interpretation from students. Certainly, Mr. Johnson's historic material has had more than one influence upon modern thought. So student choice is naturally desirable on many levels of academic work. If a teacher feels a lack of control with student choice, a solution may be to set a low number of possible choices for the students to make. For instance, a teacher may ask for the two most common interpretations of a literature passage or for the three most common historic influences. However, as students become more proficient making choices, teachers will seemingly relinquish what they view as control. Co-teaching is recommended for teachers struggling to master this strategy.

Another way to incorporate student choice is to allow a choice for response modes on various assignments and tests. Some students may prefer to submit a written report, while another student may prefer to make an oral report. To avoid students choosing the same preferred response mode for all assignments, teachers may require

that students function proficiently in at least three response modes. Teachers may also incorporate some assignments that do not allow a choice of response mode. Tests may also vary response modes. Test material may be presented as a multiple choice test, an essay test, or as an oral test. Students may choose the response mode that best suits them. Likewise, students may choose differing response modes for homework assignments. A homework assignment may be a written assignment, an oral assignment, or a group assignment.

The suitability of student choices may be governed through the use of incentives or through the existence of ever-present peer pressure. Promoting student choices provides novelty in itself, and targets most members of a difficult audience.

The student who is introverted or exhibits a modality limitation may particularly benefit by choosing response modes.

Make Learning Fun

Making learning fun is a time-honored technique that most teachers accept and, maybe, even take for granted as a successful technique. However, the use of fun is also difficult to implement each and every day. As fun is based, at least partly, upon individual interests, teachers must identify what students are interested in, yet simultaneously promote opportunities for them to develop new interests. This is not difficult as fun is naturally interactive, and students tend to share interests in similar age cohorts.

Games have been used for decades as a primary source of fun. Traditional games such as Scrabble and Payday are popular games for teaching language arts and math skills. Bingo is also a well seasoned game for letter recognition, math facts, or other academic skills. E-games are equally popular, and much software has been generated promoting E- games. Leapfrog, madlibs, and rabbit are not uncommon topics of conversation among elementary level students. The History Channel (<http://www.historychannel.com>) has recently promoted several games that make history alive and fun for students.

Allowing children to actively engage in creative activities that *require* imagination provide much fun for everyone. All members of difficult audiences may be targeted by promoting activities that allow children to imagine situations or events. Bored children, introverted children, domineering children, social and unsocial children, and children with diverse needs can engage in activities that rely upon imagination.

Although computers are generally thought of as non-creative, non-imaginative tools, software is available that allows children to create individual programs or games. Computers may also be used to create classroom newspapers or classroom brochures for parents. The creations of newspapers or brochures are assignments that many introverted or extraverted students may enjoy. Making learning fun, while certainly not a new idea, retains strong ties to successful learning. Teachers are urged not to forget to incorporate fun in daily activities. Often, fun may begin with a positive, proactive teacher attitude.

Conclusion

Teachers who face difficult students every day may feel that planning is unappreciated and disrespected by the students. Therefore, they may be tempted to respond in a monotonous and humdrum instructional fashion. However, in order to teach effectively, teachers have always been responsible for stimulating the student. Students no longer respond to humdrum and monotonous methods of teaching. Novelty, fun, and personally-interesting learning situations are, in fact, demanded by current learners. Implementing group activities, while also making learning fun, interesting, and novel, are ways to empower students as well as teachers in the learning process. Student choice-making is a major component of developing a self-determined learner, and, therefore, becomes a major component for developing a reliable and crucial life-long learning style. Although none of the techniques discussed here are earth shaking, they are techniques which can have a momentous effect upon learning.

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