

Resource Guide

Pedagogical Strategies to Mitigate Classroom Disruptions: A Quick Guide for First-Time Graduate Instructors

Graduate student teaching for the first time may find it challenging to navigate classroom disruptions in productive ways. This guide is to offer a few pedagogical considerations for graduate and new instructors who are balancing complex course material, diverse student experiences, and an increasingly tense social and political climate.

Building from establishing a foundation transparency and clarity about the goals of your course, the following strategies may help you feel more grounded and prepared so that, when challenges arise, you can protect both the learning environment and the wellbeing of everyone in the room, including yourself. learning environment and everyone's wellbeing, including your own

- **Co-create clear norms and expectations:** During the first day of class, consider discussing with students how you'll work together: how you'll handle disagreement, participation, technology use, and late arrivals. Invite students to help draft a short set of discussion and behavior guidelines, then refer to them regularly. This shared "community agreement" gives the class a shared approach when engaging with one another or with how to address classroom tensions or disruptions.
- **Design activities that channel conflict into learning:** Anticipate where your content might feel controversial, personal, or emotionally charged. Build in structured ways for students to interact in civil constructive ways. For example, assign a brief or reflection before discussion, facilitate a think-pair-share exercise, small-group deliberations, or facilitate role playing exercises. When students have clear roles, prompts, and time to think before speaking, disagreements are more likely to emerge as productive academic conflict instead of personal clashes.
- **Plan how to frame sensitive topics in advance:** For politically or socially charged issues, decide beforehand how you'll introduce the topic, what counts as acceptable evidence, and how you'll distinguish between "open," "tipping," and "closed" questions in your field. Consider offering a short framing statement that emphasizes intellectual curiosity, respect for diverse perspectives, and a focus on course learning goals can prevent conversations from drifting into unproductive territory.
- **Build in reflection and/or "pause" moments:** Incorporating brief reflective pauses during class promote emotional self-regulation resilience, and empathy. Activities like quick writes or silent reflection prompts can give you a ready-made de-escalation tool if things become heated: you can simply say, "Let's take two minutes to write about

what’s happening and what we need to move forward,” without improvising under pressure.

- **Clarify your support structure and boundaries:** Let students know, early on, how and when they can reach you, what kinds of concerns belong in email or office hours, and which issues (e.g., threats, discriminatory behavior, harassment) must be reported or escalated. For yourself, know your department’s policies, student conduct office, and campus teaching center resources. Having a clear sense of your role and your backup allows you to respond calmly and confidently if a disruption occurs.

Resources

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For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.