Dealing with challenging students

Aurora Constantin
University Teacher
Questions

• How many of you remember an example when you were naughty as a student?

or

• How many of you remember an example when a colleague was naughty?
Remember!

• few years (or more?) ago you were a student!
Establish a positive relationship with your students

• create a **learning environment that is relaxed** but orderly
• cultivate in students an **excitement** to learn
• encourage **confidence** to participate fully in the learning experience.
Make a good first impression

• Introduce yourself and your material in a positive way

• Get to know your students, their interests and needs
Aurora Constantin

- born in Corabia, Romania
- one sister
- grown up in a small village in Romania
  1986 – BSc in Physics, University of Craiova
  2000 – PhD in Physics, University of Craiova
- over 20 years of teaching experience in high school
  2008 – MSc in IT, University of Glasgow
  2015 – PhD in Informatics, University of Edinburgh
- over 3 years of postdocs
  2008 – University Teacher

Hobbies: painting, literature, music, travelling
“A picture is worth a thousand words”!

My Paintings

Three of the books I have enjoyed

Favourite music

Travelling ...
My Teaching Philosophy

• Everyone in the classroom contributes as a student, teacher, and thinker. I learn from students as much as they learn from me.
Reflect on your own philosophy
Make your academic and behavioral expectations very clear

• Describe the **structure and purpose** of class content.
  • If appropriate, you may have planned to let your students identify key topics they want to discuss late in the semester.

• Explain **attendance policies** and **ground rules** for class interaction (see later example).

• Explain to students that you will frequently offer them **learning strategies** for your content.
  • Remember that we learn best when doing, applying or teaching content.

Ground rules

• Start and end class on time
• One speaker at a time
• Everyone participates
• Keep an open mind
• Focus on "what" and not "who"
• No "zingers" or put downs
• No one dominates discussions
• Share "air time"
• Be an active listener
• Create a safe zone
• Stay on track/topic
• Agree only if it makes sense to do so

(Lisa Rodriguez - Planning for the First Day of Class, Retrieved from http://www.4faculty.org/includes/104r1.jsp)
Get to know your students

**Activity: Introduction of the group members**

- Every student interviews their neighbour for 5 minutes, then switch roles
- Suggest they start with the following questions:
  - What is your name?
  - What is your background (education, employment)?
  - Why did you pick up this MSc and specialism?
  - What is your career plan after this MSc?
- Something silly, like: 'If you could sing one song from your country, what would it be and why?' or "If you were a bird, what type of bird would you want to be? Would you rather be a pet or a wild bird?"
- When done: every student introduces their neighbour to the group.
Other suggestions?

My idea is....
Get students involved

• Ask students what they expect from your tutorial/lab at the beginning
• Ask students if their expectations were met (middle/end) and what their suggestions are for improving your activities
• Follow students’ suggestions!
• Pair/group students to discuss
• Encourage questions and allow frequent opportunities for students to ask them
• Make sure that the students know how to meet you
• Personalise your content to the students’ needs and interests
• ...
However, in spite of your efforts you may have ... “surprises”
Issues & Solutions

• Make three groups.

• Each group picks up one issue to discuss from the following list:
  • The “sleeping” or “bored” student
  • The “jocose” student
  • The “arrogant” student

• Brainstorm for finding solutions.

• Present your solutions with examples from your experience if you have encountered similar issues

• Add to the other group’s solutions
The “sleeping” or “bored” student

• Assume the student is not well
• Come up with ‘exciting’ activities
• Encourage students to actively participate
• Discuss with the student after the class (try to find out what caused this attitude, what would make that student engaged)
The ‘jocose’ student

• Smile unless the joke is completely rude or offensive
• “Thank you for relaxing the class, but now ‘Revenons à nos moutons!’ (Let’s get back to our sheep)”
• If the behaviour becomes repetitive, discuss with the student privately
The “arrogant” student

• Don’t show you are annoyed by their attitude
• Answer the questions as if you don’t observe their attitude
• Take a deep breath if necessary before saying or doing anything you might later regret
• “That’s a great question! Did you try to find the answer yourself?”
• “I think this is a great topic for your homework next time”
• Again, if the attitude becomes irritating, try to have a discussion with your student in private
More tips

• Be confident
• Take two minutes after the class to reflect on your work
• Note down every inappropriate behaviour – think of solutions, ask your colleagues
• Start your class with a joke/quote/exciting question/something novel
  • “less is more”, “Why can’t you trust an atom? (A: They make up everything)
  • Today we’ll apply KISS rule” (Keep It Short and Simple)
• End your class in a pleasant way
• Greet your students when they come in and out – treat them as your guests
• And again: you were students once, too!