

Classroom Management Resources

Responding to Student Behavior in the Classroom

In recent months, several concerns related to student behavior in the classroom have been reviewed and supported by the offices of Student Conduct, OSC Committee for Looking at the Code from an Online Perspective, Student Care and Advocacy, Behavior Threat Management Team, and World Campus.

Through the review of these situations and in collaboration with the Office of General Counsel, and the Design, Media, and Technology subcommittee of the PSU Online coordinating Council we have put together guidance and information regarding how you might manage conduct issues in your classes. As background, you may want to review University Policy AC64 (<https://policy.psu.edu/policies/ac64>), which outlines the conditions of academic freedom for faculty members.

The following is excerpted from the Policy Statement:

“Academic freedom is also inherent in faculty members’ roles in the classroom and in related instructional activities. Faculty members are, however, responsible for the maintenance of appropriate standards of scholarship and teaching ability, and for ensuring that there is no insertion or intrusion of material that has no relation to the subject matter of instruction. Faculty members are expected to educate students to think for themselves, and to facilitate access to relevant materials that they need to form their own opinions. Faculty members are expected to present information fairly, and to set forth justly divergent opinions that arise out of scholarly methods and professionalism.

No faculty member may claim as a right the privilege of discussing in the classroom controversial topics outside or unrelated to his/her own field of study. The faculty member is normally bound not to take advantage of his/her position by introducing into the classroom provocative discussions of irrelevant subjects not within the field of his/her study.”

Given these rights and responsibilities, faculty should take the lead in managing behavior in their classes so that the educational environment works for all students. Below are a few recommendations to consider:

1. First, be clear in your expectations for behavior in the class. While a Netiquette statement in the syllabus helps, it wouldn’t hurt to include a discussion of professionalism and how you will model this in your classes, as well as your expectations regarding their professionalism in all student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions. In addition, you may want to let students know that ad hominem attacks unrelated to the subject matter of the course will not be permitted. You may even state that you will remove such material from the discussion boards or edit their post to remove content that contains such attacks. You can do both of these things in Canvas; please contact your learning designer if you’d like to learn how. See sample of Netiquette Discussion at the end of this document.
2. If a student’s conduct is not related to the subject matter of the course or is unreasonably disruptive of the educational experience of others, the instructor should respond. In the event of such behavior by a student during an online discussion or message board, please reach out to the student or students in writing, letting them know why their behavior is of concern, how and why it may be affecting other students and/or the class, and that you expect them to moderate their behavior in future. You may also mention at this juncture (depending on the severity of their posts) that further behavior of this type may be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. See the sample email (attached), which can be modified to send to a student who seems to be disrupting the class.
3. If a student is threatening physical harm to others, please contact the Penn State police immediately and notify the Behavioral Threat Management Team (<http://btmt.psu.edu/>), if appropriate. Notify your supervisor if you have filed the above reports.
4. If a discussion gets out of hand, such as when a student attempts to insert personal grievances into a group discussion, you should speak with the student privately after class, or send a private

email to the student or students involved, and then a public statement/post to class explaining that the discussion moved beyond the relevant subject matter of the course and that you will be deleting it or ending the conversation. For online discussion boards, please make sure you save a copy or screenshots before deleting, so that you have them if they should be needed going forward.

5. If the behavior continues, please contact your supervisor and work together on options for handling the behavior or referring the student involved to other offices or services within the University, if needed.
6. If you have any questions regarding what to do or how to handle a particular situation, please contact the Office of Student Conduct at 814-863-0342. For example, Jen Toof (jlt46@psu.edu) is our World Campus resource for student conduct issues. Jen can also help to craft responses to inappropriate student behavior displayed online.

Sample Email

Dear Student,

I hope this email finds you well. I am contacting you today in regard to a recent discussion posting or communication exchange in class, where you [insert specific wording of post or behavior here]. It's my responsibility to make sure that our online discussion stays focused on material relevant to the course and is a conducive educational environment for all students in the class. I wanted to reach out and let you know that these [comments and or exchanges] are not helpful to an engaged discussion by the class on the relevant material.

If you're confused about this or would like to talk further, please let me know and we can arrange a phone call or Zoom session for a broader discussion of your perspective regarding this.

In future discussions, please be sure to maintain a professional tone and to [insert what you expect them to stop doing]. Failure to do so may result in a referral to the Office of Student Conduct.

Sincerely, [Faculty Name]

Sample Netiquette Statement

This language that can be used in your course. You may choose to use it as is or modify it for your purposes.

Communicating online is an everyday activity for most of us; so much so that the tone and form of our communications oftentimes becomes highly informal and abbreviated. A breezy, informal communication style is fine with our friends or but can become problematic when we're trying to communicate with formal acquaintances (i.e., class instructors) or in situations (such as in online course discussions) where we might be trying to convey or discuss complex ideas with relative strangers.

As online communications are considered part of a college course, your writing style should conform to the rules of Standard English. Accordingly, you should introduce yourself, clearly state your reason for making contact, and use the spell check feature prior to sending or posting. Please refrain from using emoticons, slang, or instant texting terms and never resort to using vulgar language. Don't use all capital letters as it gives the impression you're SHOUTING! Finally- be professional and respectful.

Here are some suggestions for contributing to online discussions:

- **Ask Nicely.** If you are not certain about the meaning of a comment, ask the original poster to elaborate or clarify what they've written.
- **Be respectful.** Recognize and value the experiences, abilities, and knowledge each person brings to class. Acknowledge the diverse perspectives and viewpoints of class members.

- **Disagree with ideas, not classmates.** When disagreeing with the ideas of another, be sure that your comments are directed toward his or her ideas and not the actual person. Never use personal attacks to express your disagreement.
- **Use humor carefully.** Be cautious about injecting humor into your comments and remember that it's easy to misinterpret humor in written language.
- **Be calm.** If you're upset, compose a letter or message and save it for 24 hours before you send it.
- **Reread messages.** Reread any messages before you send them. You'll catch any errors and notice areas for revision.

Netiquette

If you are concerned about the manner in which a student is communicating in your course, adding netiquette to the syllabus can be very helpful. This helps to establish a set of expectations from the instructor to the student in which a student should be conducting themselves in the online classroom and through communications. In the coming months – all students will be required to take New Student Orientation. New Student Orientation reviews netiquette with all participants.

- **Subject lines:** Whenever you post a message in a forum or send an email, use a short yet descriptive subject line.
- **Limit** your comments or questions to one subject per email or discussion post.
- **Stay on topic** when in a discussion forum. Start a new discussion when appropriate.
- **Proofread:** Email and discussion posts are written communication (not spoken) and should contain correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- **CAPS:** Never use all CAPS. Using all CAPS is equivalent to shouting.
- **Language:** Use professional language. Avoid slang and text acronyms, and never use vulgar or inappropriate language.
- **Be courteous and respectful** in all of your course communications.
- **Consider your tone:** A poorly worded note can be easily misunderstood or misconstrued. Remember, recipients can't see your body language or the expression on your face. Nor can they hear the intonation in your voice. If you have a suspicion that something you wrote might be taken the wrong way, it probably will be.
- **Remember your audience:** Your classmates come from all over the country and the world. Remember that language, humor, and idioms are not universal. Be especially careful with sarcasm.
- **Respect others' thoughts and ideas:** Be constructive in challenging different views, and explain where you disagree and why. When reacting to someone else's message, address the ideas, not the person.
- **Voicing concerns:** Electronic communication provides a quick and direct way for you to voice your opinions and concerns. To help ensure that you are not only heard but listened to, have the courtesy to respect the chain of command. Consider the hierarchy and structure of the situation, such as going to your instructor first rather than the academic department chair. Going through channels may get better results than going directly to the top.