



ADVICE TO STAFF: Student Disruptive Behaviours and Incivilities

The following guidance has been produced jointly by the College of Learning & Teaching and the Office of the Dean of Students. We would also and always recommend discussing and sharing practice with colleagues and, as necessary, alerting colleagues to any emerging problems for early intervention.

The guidance is aimed primarily at classroom disruptive behaviours; however, the information provided in Sections 1, 3 and 4 can be adapted for use in other situations (e.g. within the Learning Centres, Social Learning, and Social Spaces, etc.).

1. Understanding and Appreciating the Causes

Most lecturers will experience some form of disruptive behaviour or incivilities from students, such as: arriving late; leaving early; talking during a class; using mobile devices to send emails or texts. Even though these behaviours do not always create a severe disturbance for the lecturer, they can be disruptive and annoying to other students.

Before considering how to deal with these incivilities, it is worth considering why some students are exhibiting these behaviours. For example:

Student behaviour/ incivilities	Students could be ...	Or students could be ...
Arriving late	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unpunctual • arriving late after oversleeping owing to a late night out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • arriving late following childcare or caring responsibilities (e.g. dropping a child off at school) • experiencing delays on the journey (e.g. in a car or on public transport)
Using a mobile phone, tablet or laptop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • texting or tweeting • sending emails • surfing the Internet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • looking at online information (e.g. PowerPoint slides, module guides) • following-up on points of interest, for clarity or additional interest.
Talking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bored and disengaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confused about the topic and looking for clarification • interpreting what has been said and checking understanding (e.g. if the students' first language is not English)

Given the University's diverse student population, it is highly likely that some students will arrive late, or have to leave early, owing to other responsibilities and commitments. It may also be necessary for some students – perhaps for medical reasons – to leave a class during the session in order to eat or drink or use the toilet facilities. This guidance does not condone these behaviours and it is recognised that students should be acting in a professional manner, particularly on vocational courses (e.g. nursing, teaching, law, engineering, etc.) – see Section 2; however, it should be considered whether there may be other causes to the behaviour.

Persistent repeated disruptive behaviours should be addressed with the student concerned to determine the reason for the behaviour and to evaluate whether an appropriate solution can be implemented.

Whilst acknowledging that there may be genuine reasons behind some of these behaviours, it is also important that to note that these behaviours should not cause a disruption to lecturers or other students.

The rise in mobile technologies has meant that an increasing number of students are now bringing a variety of mobile devices into the classroom (e.g. smart phones, laptops, tablets). In the past, when mobile phones were primarily for making calls and texting, it may have been appropriate to say that these devices should be switched off; however, given the advances in smart phone technology and mobile-enabled Internet sites, many students now use their phones as an aid to study, either using them to make notes or to access relevant University resources. Although it is not acceptable for students to answer calls during a classroom session, it may be important for a student to be able to receive an important call and leave the room in order to answer the call and address the situation.

As a final point regarding the use of technology in a class, it is worth reflecting on the way in which this technology has had an impact on our own experiences at academic conferences and other similar events. Many conference delegates use mobile devices to: send tweets highlighting points of interest; photograph interesting presentations and posters; and look up additional information around the topic. How does this behaviour relate to the way that students use technology in our classes?

2. Effective Learning and Teaching Strategies to Reduce Incivilities

It should be stressed that the occurrence of disruptive behaviour does not equate to poor teaching practice: even the most experienced lecturers are likely to encounter some form of disruptive behaviour at times. The introduction of effective learning and teaching strategies may be able to reduce, although not eliminate, some forms of student disruptive behaviour or incivilities.

As a starting point, consider the following questions in relation to your teaching practice. (The term 'session' is used in the questions to cover a variety of learning and teaching scenarios, including lectures, seminars, practicals, workshops, etc.):

Have you established appropriate expectations from the outset?

Get off to a good start by establishing expectations of appropriate behaviours in the session setting – by being prepared and punctual yourself this conveys expectations of commitment, preparedness and engagement.

Use the first sessions with any new group of students to establish expectations of “professional behaviour”. This might involve discussions about professionalism in respect of future employment terms, and also with regard to social responsibility and global citizenship. In some settings (for example in the laboratory) these professional behaviours might be mandated expectations. In other settings you might consider an exercise with students in which they establish their own expectations of group behaviour / ground rules – based on relevant professional or workplace norms. Wherever practical, these “ground rules” should be shared across a course team to ensure a consistent approach.

Larger class sizes may influence behaviour where students perceive they are anonymous. Learning students' names and encouraging students to learn about each other can effectively engender a sense of collective behaviours and good relationships, although it is recognised that this can be difficult if members of staff are involved in team teaching activities and may only see groups of students on a few occasions.

Providing clear guidance for students on the logistical arrangements can also support effective learning: timing and locations (*next week we will be ...*); office hours and appointments (*you can contact me via SAMS*); any required reading or tasks and the availability of session materials.

Are students clear about the structure of the session?

It can be reassuring to students to know the structure of the session. What topics are going to be covered? If the session is longer than one hour, will there be a break?

How much variety is there in your sessions? How do you actively encourage interaction with students?

An hour listening to someone talking is a long time for anyone to concentrate. How do you introduce variety into your session? Variety could include the addition of: activities with plenary sessions; videos; quizzes, etc. It should be noted that although tiered lecture theatres may not be appropriate for all types of interactive activities, it is possible to introduce appropriate forms of engagement into lecture sessions. The College of Learning & Teaching (colt@wlv.ac.uk) can provide advice regarding student engagement activities.

Do you act in a consistent way to all students?

It is important to act in a consistent way with all students. Without knowing it, we can sometimes act differently when talking or responding to different groups of students. Try recording one of your sessions, or ask a colleague to observe your teaching, and focus on the way that you interact with different groups of students. Do you make eye contact with all students? Do you respond to questions from all students in a consistent way? Do you praise some students more than others? (For example, you may deter some students from actively participating in future sessions if you consistently praise other students for their 'excellent' questions or responses.)

How do you act when you are teaching a subject that is not your area of interest?

There are times when every lecturer has to teach a topic that may not be their primary area of research or expertise. As far as the students are concerned, however, you are an expert in this area. Do you prepare the session in the same way? Do you display the same level of enthusiasm for all topics? Do you mention to the students that this is not your area of research or interest? (This is likely to undermine the confidence that some students will have in the session.)

Is the learning and teaching methodology the most appropriate one for the students to learn the topic?

Lectures can be a very efficient way of discussing a topic with a large number of students, but there are many instances where a lecture is not the most effective way to use our face-to-face time with students. Other techniques (e.g. seminars, debates, blended learning, 'flipped' classroom approaches, practicals) may be more effective in supporting our students' learning.

The College of Learning & Teaching (colt@wlv.ac.uk) can provide advice on the use of different activities to support students' learning. See also the College of Learning & Teaching's webpages: <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/about-us/internal-departments/the-college-of-learning-and-teaching-colt/>.

3. Dealing with minor incivilities

Minor infringements might initially be ignored – but these can be contagious if not addressed. Whether it is lateness, talking or texting – don't over-react, do remain calm and courteous. A first infringement might be better handled with humour (and never humiliation) but be clear about expectations, consequences and reference to any agreed ground-rules. Don't be confrontational and it may be appropriate to deal with the infringement on a one-to-one basis at the end of a session (anger or sarcasm is never helpful). Peer pressure can be helpful, but we should not expect or encourage students to manage the classroom environment themselves: that is your job.

4. In the rare event of sustained disruption ...

- Ask the student(s) concerned, politely and calmly to desist from the inappropriate behaviour.
- If the disruption continues warn the student(s) that if they continue they will be asked to leave the session.
- If the disruption continues, ask the student(s) to leave the session.
- If this does not work, or in the event of a more serious incident, you should instruct the entire class that they should take a short break and return in 20 minutes.
- You should never put yourself at risk of harm by confronting a disruptive individual or attempting to remove individuals from the classroom.
- You should never lock doors to classrooms while occupied (to deter late arrivals) as this will restrict access in an emergency.
- **Call Security** and ask the security responders to remove the disruptive individuals or prevent them from returning. Ask the Security Responders to identify the students concerned by name and student number. **CALL SECURITY ALL CAMPUSES x5555 (for urgent responses) or x2106 for a non-urgent/non-immediate response.**
- Report the student details with a statement of the incident to your line manager and discuss whether action might be taken formally or informally. Informal action, for example, might take the form of an informal warning from a senior course/faculty colleague. Whereas formal action might be considered as a breach of the student code of conduct: [Student Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure](#) (PDF Downloads) Where any formal action is considered the **Conduct & Appeals Unit must be notified** in the first instance.
- Behaviour that disrupts learning and teaching – in or out of a classroom environment – will not be tolerated and the University will support colleagues to take action where required.
- You have a responsibility to complete a teaching session and should only consider terminating a session in the most extreme circumstances. If you feel that you, or others, are at risk of intimidation or harm then you should immediately terminate the session and contact security. You should always be prepared to make a full and detailed statement of the incident, including any known student names, witnesses, date, time and location – that may be utilised later as part of any disciplinary proceedings.