Red Guides address educational and staff development issues within Higher Education and are aimed at colleagues within the University and at other institutions. Some describe current good practice in Higher education, others evaluate and/or comment on curriculum development and many provide ideas for teaching. All are meant to stimulate discussion, initiate action and implement change.

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Introduction

This guide arose from a meeting with a group of Student Union School representatives. Asked for agenda items for a consultative meeting on learning and teaching issues, disruptive classroom behaviour topped the list. In response, a research project was carried out by Pat Gannon-Leary, Learning and Teaching Support Researcher, to determine how important an issue classroom disruption really was for students and staff. Surveys were conducted of both students and staff and a sample from each group were also interviewed. This Red Guide also draws on earlier qualitative research on a group of staff, carried out by David Morning, School of Health, Community & Education Studies. Both researchers noted a relative lack of published research on this topic in UK Higher Education.

The Gannon-Leary study was, in general, welcomed by both students and staff – ‘a very timely questionnaire. Action is urgently needed to address inappropriate student behaviour in HE’ in the words of one staff respondent. However, staff were also keen to stress the other side of the coin, for example – ‘despite occasional lapses of faith, I believe that on the whole I work with a group of serious, motivated students’. The large majority of students want to learn and deeply resent the disruptive behaviour of others – ‘I can’t concentrate on what the lecturer says even though the lecturer uses very clear explanation. It drives me crazy and gives me headaches, and I want to leave the lecture immediately’ in one view.

In response to the Gannon-Leary study and action already being taken in some of the Schools and subject groups, it was agreed by both the University Learning and Teaching Committee and Student Affairs Committee that guidelines on acceptable behaviour be drawn up and communicated to students in order to set expectations at an early stage. These are included as Appendix 1 to this guide.
What is Disruptive Behaviour?

Some definitions provided by respondents to the Gannon-Leary study include, from the staff point of view:

‘Anything that interferes with student learning and the delivery of teaching that enables or facilitates student learning’

‘Anything inappropriate to the class concerned which materially interferes with the student learning activities’

And from the student perspective:

‘Behaviour that stops people learning’

‘A situation where people are paying more attention to the [disruptive] students than to what the lecturer is saying’

When questioned about what types of behaviour they actually experienced, and how serious a disruption it was, three types of behaviour emerged as the major problem:

- **Students arriving late at classes.** Seen to be a frequent occurrence by students and staff and perceived as ‘moderately disruptive’ by both groups because it disrupted the flow of the class, broke the concentration of other students and disturbed the lecturer’s train of argument.

- **Students talking in classes.** This was seen as more of an occasional occurrence but was perceived as a severe disruption by students and as a moderate to severe one by staff. As well as general ‘chit chat’, both groups were annoyed by students perceived to monopolise lessons by asking many inappropriate questions.

- **Use of mobile phones.** Seen as an occasional disruption and as moderately to severely disruptive by
both groups. Phones ringing, answering and making of calls were major annoyances, but sending and receiving of texts could also distract, especially in cases where messages were sent to others in the same class.

Student and staff perceptions of frequency and seriousness were mostly quite close, although the students did appear to be more disturbed by their colleagues talking in class and less concerned than staff about them reading. More serious forms of disruptive behaviour were also noted, but, fortunately, perceived to be relatively uncommon. Physical and verbal abuse, damage to property, threatening behaviour etc were perceived to not be frequent occurrences. Ignoring the lecturer and swearing in class were a little more common.

**Is classroom behaviour getting worse?**

A clear majority of staff respondents to the Gannon-Leary survey considered that disruptive behaviour was more prevalent now than it had been previously (59% agreeing compared to 16% disagreeing). Factors believed by staff to be causing this change include:

- General social changes and a decline in discipline at home and school. *‘It would appear that schools tolerate disruptive behaviour more now than in the past’*
- Widening participation and access by students who might not previously have had the opportunity for higher education. *‘…possibly due to the wider access to university education. Students may not come from families where higher education is the norm so perhaps not sure what is expected of them’*
- Increases in student numbers leading to larger classes and making it impossible to get to know students as individuals.
• Availability of technology – mobile phones, iPods, laptops, electronic translators, mobile means of access to the web and social networking sites etc. These provided opportunity for disruptive behaviour; some also considered that they were having more far reaching effects on student attention spans

• Students as paying customers having different expectations – ‘we are no longer doing them a favour by teaching them, they are doing us a favour by giving us their business, and the customer is always right’

We have no hard evidence on whether behaviour really is changing and on which of these factors might be explanatory. Students, being in HE for a much shorter period of time, are obviously not in a position to spot trends but a couple of points from their perspective are pertinent. Rather than it being a lack of discipline in School which is to blame, it may be the transition between School and University and the different expectations – ‘if they are talking, quite often I have been in lectures and people have paid no attention. In School you would not have that; you would be out straight away’. And if students as paying customers have different expectations, then it is clear that for a large majority the expectation is that the classroom is properly managed by the responsible member of staff so that their learning is not disrupted by others.

**Who disrupts and why?**

Asked for demographic information about disruptive students in the Gannon-Leary study, many students and staff felt that it was not possible to generalise or did not wish to stereotype particular groups. Those who did respond, both staff and students, saw younger male students as most likely to behave badly but far from exclusively so. At the opposite extreme, mature students with work experience who are not willing to take on board the perspective of the lecturer are also sometimes noted as a source of problems. International
students were, in general, less likely to be disruptive in class than UK students, but some international groups could have a tendency to turn up late for lectures.

As for the reasons, two emerge a prominent. Most favoured amongst staff, with 62% of respondents agreeing this was a factor, and also supported by students (59%) was the idea of a group dynamic, that some students believed that they could enhance their status through bad behaviour. ‘Certain courses seem particularly bad. A whole cohort can develop a sense of group identity and feel that the usual rules don’t apply’; those behaving badly may be ‘trying to fit in and have a personality in front of their peers’.

But by far the most common explanation among students, with nearly 80% agreeing, is that students are disruptive when they find the classes boring. Interestingly this was also the second most common explanation among staff (61%). From the student perspective, disruption was more likely where the lecturer appeared unprepared, where they read directly from handouts or PowerPoint slides or showed a lack of enthusiasm for the subject:

‘lecturers who make it apparent they don’t want to be there and who have made no effort in the preparation of the lecture. Why should students bother if the lecturer doesn’t?’

‘shouldn’t all teaching at this level be by someone who is enthusiastic about their topic/job?’

And lecturing staff may not disagree:

‘if you are not giving them quality teaching then we all get bored…if you are giving them what they want and keeping them thinking about it, not being too easy or too hard.’
More will be made of the link between teaching styles and disruption later in this guide, but it is very important to stress at this stage that disruptive behaviour should not be taken to mean that there is anything poor about the lecturer’s presentation. Even the best prepared and most effective presenters can, at times, be subject to disruption. Take note of the frustration felt by a participant in Morning’s research, teaching a session on ‘a topic which I think that I teach well and I hadn’t just taken stuff off the shelf…I felt that I had a good lesson to teach there’, then finding that ‘half of them were fine, they listened and participated as they would, but there were three or four,… well, they were just not willing to take on board anything that I was saying, they didn’t do the exercises, they just chatted to themselves…’

**Who gets disrupted?**

Probably the most important message from the research is that we can all be subject to disruptive behaviour at some time. This might be because we all have off-days, but equally it may be because of things going on in student groups completely outside of our knowledge and ability to control.

There is some suggestion from the research that inexperienced lecturers may be more vulnerable, also that there can be a gender dimension or even one of nationality:

> ‘my perception is that I experience a lot more (as a youngish, inexperienced female lecturer) than some of my male counterparts. This may also be because the majority of students in the School are men’
> ‘not being British I feel I experience it more than British lecturers’

Factors such as class size are obviously important, with larger classes more problematic – interestingly, it is those of 30-50 that are most commonly cited by students. And the material to
be taught is also a factor; sadly not all important material is inherently easy to comprehend or interesting:

‘it can be a problem in some classes students do not particularly enjoy which tend to be core modules rather than options’

‘the subjects I teach are usually quite interesting to students. Other lecturers are less lucky…’

But the key message is that no-one is immune and recognising this is important to developing an effective response. In the words of one respondent to the Gannon-Leary research:

‘we all experience it to some extent. However, some will deny it exists otherwise it may bring into question their own teaching styles/performance etc.’

It is also important to remember that non-academic staff may bear the brunt of student disruptive behaviour. Respondents pointed out that there were pressure points such assessment times when students were likely to exhibit such behaviour in School Offices, the Library etc, and technicians may be in the front line:

‘the technical force sometimes are treated as lesser beings…Things they would not say to academics, not physical but verbal. It can be very upsetting…’

The impact of disruptive behaviour

Obviously the major impact is on the learning of the vast majority of students:

‘I feel my concentration lapses more easily and, because I get annoyed, this also hinders me from learning effectively’

‘Disruptive behaviour is HIGHLY distracting and your concentration seems to shift from the lecture to how annoying someone or something is, sometimes you sit
and keep thinking about whether you should do something or not’

It is important to recognise that some, already disadvantaged, students may be affected more significantly:

‘I have a slight hearing problem and any unnecessary chatter from the back of the class can cause me difficulties’

‘I have dyslexia and my concentration is easily disturbed. However I do understand my own problems and think, even if I was not easily distracted, I would find this disrespectful in others’

As well as the direct impact on learning, disruption is also likely to cause the quality of teaching to suffer; the Gannon-Leary survey found that 40% of staff respondents had lowered their expectations of students as a result of disruption. Disruption can clearly have a serious impact on how staff see their work, with individuals reporting feeling stressed, disappointed, annoyed, angry, upset, offended or frustrated. Some staff report experiences of losing a session because of disruption, the voice going, the calmness going, the delivery being seriously affected. Natural responses to disruption can involve loss of confidence and self-blame, as illustrated by a respondent to Morning’s study:

‘…when you are a fairly new and inexperienced lecturer you tend to reflect the fact upon yourself and tend to blame or you believe it is something to do with the way you like delivering the session…’

Equally harmful can be the opposite response, of starting to see the students as the ‘enemy’ as illustrated by some respondents to the Gannon-Leary study:

‘You begin to see not individual people but an undifferentiated threat…the more you can sort of
demonise, stereotype them then the easier it becomes for you to do that’

‘It really does leave you thinking ‘I would just like to avoid them’ which is a real shame because there are some really talented students…who see the same thing and get really frustrated and want to learn…’

Dealing with disruptive behaviour

Below are some practical tips, based on the research and on the experience of colleagues from around the university. Nothing here is rocket science but then disruptive behaviour can only be dealt with by taking a series of relatively simple steps.

1. Establish the ground rules

• Northumbria University’s guidelines are included as the appendix to this guide. There may be some additional guidelines for your school or subject division, especially if there are special requirements for health and safety or professional recognition

• Make sure that your students know of these ground rules. Make it clear from the first session that you are working by these guidelines and expect them to be followed

• Be reasonable and explain clearly that you as a teacher have a responsibility to ensure that all students in the class have the right to learn without disruption. Also that students should show respect in class for each other and you as the teacher

‘I make my expectations clear to students at the outset – don’t come in late, don’t talk when I’m talking, leave your mobile switched off…’
2. Don’t ignore it (in nearly all cases)

- Occasionally ignoring disruption may be an appropriate strategy, if your response could lead to more disruption, but this will not often be the case. There is a real risk that if you don’t take action then the disruptive behaviour can become ‘contagious’:

  ‘If other people are...talking or giggling it is very distracting...sometimes it can also make you act in a similar way if the lecture is particularly dull or difficult as you lose interest yourself and find it more interesting or less frustrating to ignore the lecture and chat with friends’

- Remember that even if it is not affecting you, the behaviour may well be disturbing other students and that they expect you, as class teacher, to be the person who takes responsibility for providing a suitable learning experience. The Gannon-Leary survey found that students did not consider us to be particularly effective in dealing with disruptive behaviour – on a scale from ‘very effective’ to ‘very ineffective’, students were equally divided between ‘somewhat effective’ and ‘somewhat ineffective’. One student view was that:

  ‘often the lecturer does not appear to have the courage to stand up to the people who are extremely rude and childish’

- The consensus among student respondents was that disruptive behaviour should be stamped out as soon as it happened; staff often let it go on far too long before taking action:

  ‘I think it comes down to how they deal with it on the first occasion it occurs. If they are clear that they will not put up with it then it will stop but, if they let it go, it will worsen’
3. But don’t over-react

- Your key responsibility, as class teacher, is to ensure the continuity of learning; this takes priority over making a point. As one student put it:
  
  ‘in all honesty I think the bigger distraction if somebody comes in late is [the lecturer] spending 5 minutes lecturing us on why we should not be late! It should take 30 seconds to drive it home, not 5 minutes…’

- Over-reaction can make the situation worse:
  
  ‘Those who are too strict will get the most disruption’. ‘Lecturers who complain about student behaviour receive worse behaviours. People tend to play them up to make them annoyed’

- Don’t be confrontational. Don’t get into arguments with students in class. As a rule try to deal with disruption issues outside of class (although ensure that the class knows that action is being taken). Keep calm; remain courteous even if you don’t feel courteous. You will lose respect if you are seen as coming down to the level of the students

  ‘some tempers flared amongst students about the lack of coordination and input…the lecturer came down to their level and very quickly became confrontational…’

4. Don’t suffer alone

- Talk to your colleagues and share experiences. This may be difficult: ‘I fear this is a taboo subject which lecturers may be unwilling to share with others because they feel it may make them appear ineffective or bad at their job’. One aim of this Guide is to facilitate sharing by making it clear that this is a very common problem experienced by all staff at some time. One participant in the Morning study found it ‘very very valuable, very helpful’ to have an informal group of
colleagues to share frustration and put experiences into perspective. She concluded that ‘it can be a very lonely place being a lecturer…’ Another respondent to the Gannon-Leary study effectively summarises it:

‘I was unprepared for it and wasn’t sure how to deal with it. I also felt worried about talking about it to colleagues – but when I did I found that other people were having similar problems. I do think this needs to be discussed more widely so that staff do not feel isolated…’

• While informal colleague support will be very useful, it is also important at times to air these issues in more formal settings such as programme committees or subject group meetings. It is important that these groups discuss the consistent application ground rules and whether any subject-specific additions are needed to university guidelines (see Appendix). If disruptive behaviour is felt to be common then programme and subject leaders need to be aware of it and to be considering options for management action (which could include escalation to School learning and teaching committee level, use of student disciplinary processes, restructuring of groups or of the programme concerned etc).

• If disruptive behaviour is raised by students in programme or liaison committee meetings then it is very important that it is not brushed aside. Note the frustration of one student rep participant in the Gannon-Leary study:

“raised the issue of late comers in programme meeting and they just said, ‘oh yes, all we can do is what we are doing really’. It seems like the fact somebody had left a window open and one of the blinds got broken was more important to be honest!”
5. Be prepared

- Think in advance about how you would react to a range of hypothetical situations. To aid this, a set of video clips of typical ‘incidents’ is available in the ‘What Would You Do?’ organisation on Blackboard [Northumbria’s eLearning Portal] (see References below for detail of how Northumbria University Staff can access). The incidents include ‘Inattentive Students’, ‘Language Problem’, ‘Complaining Student’, ‘Sleeping Student’, ‘Arguing Students’, ‘Laughing Students’. For each potential outcomes of a variety of responses are provided but the main point of these clips is not to provide correct answers but to provide you with an opportunity to consider how you would best react

- Have some stock phrases available: ‘I’d like to continue with the lecture now’; ‘We will be doing an exercise in 5 minutes time and you need to listen carefully to understand what you will have to do’; ‘this topic is vital for the assignment and I will not be repeating it except for those with approved absences’

6. Get the students on your side

- This is not difficult to achieve as most students want to learn, want to see you in control, will support you and agree that having a set of rules in place is a positive thing. Use peer pressure. As one student puts it:

  ‘Peers are going to want to learn. We pay to be there…If we can’t hear what they are saying it is going to be difficult for them to know if we understand the work…it is the responsibility of all. If peers say ‘shut up’, it should put pressure on [disruptive] students to think ‘I am not being very polite here’.’

- The point to remember is that if you act, you are very unlikely to be faced with a hostile crowd, the large
majority will be on your side. But please don’t rely on students to do your dirty work for you; it is your responsibility to maintain order. As another student saw it:

‘You would like to help them but don’t want to make them feel they are not doing their job properly’

7. Try these

- Consider environmental factors. Is the lighting right? Are you standing in the best place in relation to the class? Will a remote mouse or remote microphone help you to position yourself where you can have maximum visibility?

- Can you be heard? Use the microphone to ensure that those at the back can clearly hear you. Check that all can hear you. However, at times you may find it effective to reduce your volume – if there is some chit-chat you may force students to concentrate- or tell others to shut up - if they have to strain to hear you

- Wait for silence – stopping mid-sentence if possible. This may be particularly appropriate if you hear a phone go off

- Appeal to student self-interest. Stress the importance of the material to getting a good mark in the assessment

- Don’t be afraid to ask students to move forward from the back of a large lecture theatre; or organise activities so as to be able to split up potential ‘trouble makers’

- For a student asking too many or inappropriate questions, press the ‘stop button’. Tell them they will have to talk to you after the class

- Try humour if it fits with your personality. ‘When talking I tell people to be quite because I am so vain I like to
hear my own voice. Tends to work fine’. But the advice is to avoid sarcasm; it often goes over the head of the intended recipient and may be seen as you sinking to their level

- Directly confront the disruptive student – politely, for example asking what the problem is. Or ask to see them after the class

- You can use whole class emails after a particularly disruptive session but be careful not to offend those who have been behaving well and who see themselves as the victims of the disruption. Ensure that you spell out what you will be doing to avoid this problem in the next session

8. Ask yourself some difficult questions.

- We have tried to stress in this Guide that there are many factors that cause bad behaviour, that all staff experience it and that self-blame is to be avoided. However it is also important that we all engage in critical reflection of what we do and how we manage the teaching and learning process.

- Are the students bored? (Remember that 61% of the staff respondents to the Gannon-Leary survey thought this was a factor). Are they confused? In lectures do you rely too much on PowerPoint? Do you talk too much? In seminars, do you manage group work effectively? Do some students talk too much and off topic and bore the others? Try to imagine what it would be like to be a student in your own class.

9. Be prepared to change what you do.

- Ask yourself how can you actively engage students more in the learning process? How can you make the session more interesting for students? Could you make use of differentiated tasks? Can you break up a
lecture, for example with some activities, quizzes, use of video clips or even just employing something as simple as asking some well-placed questions throughout the lecture.

10. Last resort

- The Northumbria Guidelines (see Appendix 1) make it clear that a student whose behaviour is unacceptable may be asked to leave the class. Any such request should be made in a calm and polite way. It is best to follow up any such action by asking to see the student later. You may wish to involve the programme leader.

- In case the situation cannot be resolved by asking an individual or several students to leave (or if they refuse to go) then you could leave the class. You should give a warning before doing this ‘if this behaviour does not desist within one minute then I will end the class’.

- The rules and procedures for taking disciplinary action against a student are contained in the Handbook of Student Regulations Section 3 –

  http://northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/section3.pdf

But finally…

Let us give the last word to some of the staff interviewed in the Gannon-Leary study who were at pains to stress that disruptive behaviour was a minor inconvenience of the job and that the vast majority of students are a pleasure to teach:

“Most students are entertaining delight to be with and we face very little beyond nuisance stuff.”

“This questionnaire has made me feel very fortunate because I experience very few of the behaviours you have identified as disruptive. Despite occasional lapses of faith, I believe that on the whole I work with a group of serious, motivated students.”
Appendix 1: Northumbria University Guidelines for acceptable conduct in taught classes and other learning environments

The University is committed to creating an environment conducive to learning that will benefit all students. Feedback received from students has suggested the following points of good practice and courtesy to Tutors and fellow learners:

BE QUIET
  o chatting disturbs the speaker (staff or student) and disrupts the concentration of others
  o noise levels, especially in larger lecture theatres, quickly accumulate to unacceptable levels

SWITCH OFF MOBILE PHONES
  o Making or receiving calls or using the camera facility on your mobile are always unacceptable.
  o Texting in class can annoy other learners.

KEEP TO TIME
  o Coming into lectures late often disrupts the whole class, if you are late please enter the room with the minimum of disruption.
  o The same rule applies if you need to leave early, do so with the minimum of disruption and as a courtesy let your Tutor know that you must leave early.

COME PREPARED AND READY TO WORK
  o This is particularly so in the case of seminars and group work where other learners depend upon your input.

DISPOSE OF YOUR LITTER PROPERLY
  o For the benefit of all users, please ensure that you leave all learning spaces tidy and litter free.

Please note:
  • If staff consider your behaviour to be unacceptable you may be asked to leave.
• If you have concerns about the application of these guidelines, please talk to the Tutor or your course rep or the Students’ Union Advice and Representation Centre.

• There may be other guidance, related to health, safety and professional issues in connection with laboratory, studio and clinical spaces, which should be taken account of in relation to acceptable behaviour. Please check your Programme Handbook for relevant information.

Northumbria University Learning and Teaching Committee
Northumbria University Student Affairs Committee
Northumbria University Students’ Union
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Resources


The Guide also draws on an earlier study by David Morning, School of Health, Community & Education Studies ‘What are nurse lecturers’ experiences of disruptive behaviour when teaching in the classroom? (It can be a very lonely place being a lecturer). This report on this is available from David by email – [david.morning@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:david.morning@northumbria.ac.uk)

The Guide refers to an online resource *What would you do?* This consists of a set of ‘incidents’ designed to aid reflection on your own responses in such cases. This material was originally produced on CD ROM by Tony Claydon and Tony Edwards, Northumbria University. The material has since been updated by the LTech team and made available in a Blackboard Organisation. To access this (restricted to Northumbria University Staff):

- log into the eLearning Portal,
- then select the ‘Organisations’ tab from the top of your screen.
- Towards the bottom of this page you will find a module titled ‘Self enrol on module’, click on the enrol button alongside the organisation ‘What would you do’.
- The resource should then be self-explanatory; there is scope to post your comments and any tips you have for other users.
Further Reading

Baume, D (2004) Managing Classroom Difficulties HEA Resources
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id472_managing_classroom_difficulties.pdf


