Tackling Disruptive Behaviour in the Classroom: A Guide for Staff

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As an institution of higher learning, it is in our interest to teach and promote responsible and civil behaviour. Our Mission Statement endorses a culture of respect and respectful exchanges, which themselves facilitate outstanding teaching and learning. Because disruptive behaviour can impact everyone’s satisfaction, it must be taken seriously and tackled straight away. This guide is therefore intended to support you in your efforts to deliver excellent education and to work in a dignified and agreeable environment.

**Contents**

- Definitions and descriptions of disruptive and uncivil behaviour
- Strategies to avoid, manage, and respond to problems in the classroom
- Post-disruption considerations and implications.
- Dealing with Extreme Disruption: A Referral Guide for Academic Staff (‘Referral Guide’).
- Ongoing support and guidance.

**Defining disruptive and uncivil behaviour**

Wright State University (Carmona, 2006) defines disruptive behaviour as “an action or combination of actions by an individual that unreasonably interferes with, hinders, obstructs, or prevents the right of others to freely participate in its activity, program, or service, including behaviour that may prevent faculty and staff members from carrying out their professional (sic) responsibilities.” In other words, proper teaching cannot take place. The following are generally cited as the most common and noteworthy examples of classroom disruptions:

- Chatting to other students / talking on phone.
- Arriving late/leaving early.
- Wasting time (asking irrelevant, repetitive, baiting questions/not coming to class prepared).
- Dominating class discussions and/or constantly challenging the lecturer.
- Irregularly attending or not attending at all.
• Misusing technology in the classroom (watching videos, playing games, etc).
• For more extreme examples, see the ‘Referral Guide for Academic Staff’.

Strategies to avoid, manage, and respond

From the start

Most disruptions can be prevented by forward planning.

• Pre-teach and agree the expectations.
  o Use ‘Appendix 1, Common Sense Guide to Student Conduct’ (the ‘Student Guide’) systematically to explain and reinforce appropriate behaviour.
  o Create a bespoke quiz, emphasising your priorities, messages, and consequences.
  o Stress the communal nature of learning.
• If you are a personal tutor, use the ‘Student Guide’ early on with students to discuss the implications of disruptive or uncivil behaviour.
  o At each meeting, specifically address the topic.
  o Ask how effectively disruptions have been managed.
• Use Anglia Ruskin Graduate Attributes and other professional certifications, where relevant, to underscore the role and long-term implications of responsible conduct.
• Before full-scale disruptions occur, caution students who are nearing the line.
  o Remind them of the expectations set out in the Student Guide.
  o Document details of the behaviour and the students’ reactions for yourself.
• Early on and repeatedly, reinforce the message.
  o Use examples from research or experience, highlighting the frustration experienced by other students as a result of disruptions.
  o Regularly poll students about the atmosphere and conduct of the class.
• Employ a variety of strategies to foster more engaged and active learners.

It won’t happen overnight and the message must exist at all levels of our university, but we can foster a culture of civil behaviour.

In the moment

By far the most commonly listed disruptions by students and staff may be classified as low-level.

Chatting students/students talking on the phone:

• Interrupt them immediately and ascertain any problems. If none, ask them to stop and continue with the class.
• If the talking continues or recurs, repeat and remind them of the rules.
• Ask them to talk to you after class.
• Instruct them to move seats or leave.
• Document details of the incident.

Arriving late/leaving early

• Explain that it always interrupts the flow of the class, showing disrespect for others.
• Remind students that if they tap in after ten minutes, they will not be registered.
• If you’re happy to admit students who are more than ten minutes late, reserve space for them and have them sign your own log afterwards.
• Start and finish classes with essential information (assessment material, vital research, brief in-class quizzes but take account of students who need extra time to ensure that they are not adversely affected or penalised).
• Remind students of the ARU Graduate Attributes and the professional qualities they require.
Time wasting/coming to class unprepared/dominating and challenging:

- Remind the entire classroom of the priorities of the session, emphasising that they can contact you afterwards with their questions.
- Alternatively, give ‘questioners’ the opportunity to answer their own questions in a report that they can later present to the class in person or online.
- Ask probing questions to ascertain the motives behind their time-wasting:
  - If your concerns lead you to suspect academic weakness, consult with colleagues in Study Skills Plus;
  - If you suspect mental ill health, consult with Student Services.
- If consistently unprepared, document the problems, listing what you note to show the student and discuss.
- Link, if appropriate, their behaviour issues to module/course performance.

Misusing technology in the classroom:

- May include students openly or secretly watching videos, playing games, etc.
- Don’t ignore because their watching/playing will distract other students.
- Policing technology is difficult if not impossible, but if you suspect its misuse, remind everyone of the agreed expectations on technology.
- Speak specifically at the students in question, asking them to put away their devices.
- If they protest or refuse, ask them to leave.
- For persistent misuse or refusals, see the Referral Guide for help.

One UK university guide (Dordoy, et al., 2008) recommends, “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.”
Post-disruption

Immediate considerations

If the disruption or uncivil behaviour has escalated, continued, or recurred and it has had an impact on the teaching-learning process, you will need to take further action. Everyone will have been marked by the incident, so consider the effects on you, the other students, and the person in question.

Reporting

- Do not meet alone with the student.
- If you have not done so already, inform your Course Leader and the appropriate senior manager in your faculty.
- Liaise with Student Services, alerting them to the situation.

Teaching

- Has the disruption adversely delayed teaching/learning progress?
  - If so, are there ways to make up for lost time?
- Are students more or less engaged in their learning after the disruption?
- Has this incident affected the way you teach and your approach to student relationships?

Longer term implications:

- Future dynamics in class.
- Your effectiveness and confidence to teach.
- The student’s desire and ability to reintegrate into the class.
- Support offered by your Faculty (mentoring, practical guidance, workshops, etc).
Long-term support

Faculty support

Your Director of Learning and Teaching can offer support with classroom management. If you are experiencing difficulties, please let them know.

Anglia Learning & Teaching

Anglia Learning & Teaching regularly holds workshops that focus on effective classroom management. See our Event pages for more information.

Classroom Management VLE

The Managing Classroom Disruptions VLE contains a variety of resources to support you in classroom management. In addition to listing relevant workshops, staff development sessions, and webinars, it also contains case studies and videos from ARU colleagues and other experts in the field. Designed to be an interactive space, the VLE similarly solicits ongoing suggestions from its participants.
# Dealing with Extreme Disruption: A Referral Guide for Academic Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extreme Disruption</th>
<th>How it may play out</th>
<th>Immediate action to take</th>
<th>Next step</th>
<th>Referral action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Displaying consistently rude behaviour to you or others despite your interventions to address the behaviour</td>
<td>Argumentative and/or aggressive language and posturing which minimises your authority and/or disparages others</td>
<td>Don’t hesitate or prevaricate. Explain what has happened without mentioning names to avoid general confusion. Indicate the severity of this conduct. Explain that the student must stop or leave.</td>
<td>If the student persists/refuses, • End the class • call a break OR • ring security x6444 Later contact students about arrangements to recoup lost learning.</td>
<td>Document what has happened. If appropriate ask other students to do the same. Forward everything to your Course Leader and the appropriate senior manager in your faculty.</td>
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<td>Coming to class drunk or high</td>
<td>Altered look: appearing to be under the influence of drink or drugs.⁴</td>
<td>It may be other students who call your attention to the problem. So don’t ignore it.</td>
<td>Ask the student to talk to you outside the classroom. If concerned, ring Security x6444.</td>
<td>Document and forward details as above. Include Student Services in your messages or ring x6700.</td>
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<td>Threatening you or others</td>
<td>The student may verbalise or physically exhibit the threat.</td>
<td>Ring Security x6444; clear the classroom if necessary.</td>
<td>Give Security a description of what took place. Forward information as above</td>
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<td>Threatening/harassing online behaviour</td>
<td>Email, discussion boards, social media</td>
<td>Guard yourself online: privacy/security settings; good practice regarding student ‘friends’; nature of posts/photos, etc. ⁵</td>
<td>Forward any messages, posts, photos immediately to your Course Leader and the appropriate senior manager in your faculty.</td>
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<td>Attacking you or others physically</td>
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<td>Ring Security and clear the classroom if possible. Ask a student to ring 999.</td>
<td>Ask students to write up what they witnessed. Document and forward as above to make them aware of likely police involvement.</td>
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Reference List


Code of Conduct: A Guide for Students

We’re all part of a single learning community at Anglia Ruskin which requires us to respect each other and help our community to thrive.

Be Engaged

- Attend lectures, tutorials, support learning sessions, and labs to maximise your potential.
- Come prepared for class to gain from and positively contribute to the learning process.
- Be active and play a productive role in group work.

Be Punctual

- Arrive on time, coming in late can be disruptive for everyone.
- Manage your workload and time, so that you meet your deadlines.

Be Professional

- Take responsibility for your actions.
- Learn from the feedback and experiences that come your way.
- Display dignity, integrity, and respect in your dealings with staff and other students.
- Work inclusively with people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures.
Be **Honest**
- Submit work that you have created, and reference others’ contributions as required.
- Tap into class only for yourself, otherwise this is a form of deception.

Be **Respectful**
- Recognise that we are all here to learn and being disruptive has a damaging impact on our learning community.
- Don’t chat, watch videos, text in class; give your brain the best opportunities to learn without such distractions and let others do the same.

Be **Considerate**
- Participate in positive and meaningful ways: if you interrupt or rudely challenge, you ruin the learning experience for everyone.
- Contribute sensibly: if you monopolise discussions in class, you limit the rights of others.
- Demonstrate empathy: if you belittle, mock, or disrespect, you create a negative impression of yourself while causing hurt to others.
Common Sense Considerations and Consequences

- **Not engaged?** If you fail to attend class regularly, the negatives will affect you.
  - Poor attendance impacts on your performance, academic record, student status and/or professional certification/accreditation.
  - Not being prepared for class has a domino effect upon your learning. The less you prepare, the more you jeopardise your studies, learning, and achievement.
  - Lost learning opportunities are difficult to replace.

- **Not punctual?** If less than ten minutes late, enter quietly with as little disruption as possible.
  - If you are more than ten minutes late, do not enter class and
    - contact your lecturer as soon as possible to discuss your lateness/absence.
    - contact classmates to ask for notes.

- **Not professional?** If you do not take responsibility for your actions as a student, your time and opportunities will be wasted.
  - Abusive, threatening or otherwise offensive language or actions will be reported, leading to serious penalties including suspension and exclusion.
  - If you are having problems on your course, seek help from staff, Students’ Union Advice, or your course representative.
• Not honest? If you engage in dishonest behaviour (plagiarism, collusion, cheating or fraud), you risk serious penalties, escalating from 0% marks to expulsion.
  o Do not tap in for other students.
  o Dishonesty reflects badly upon you as a student and a future professional.

• Not respectful? If you cause disruption in class, you will be asked to leave the room and it will be documented.
  o If further disruption occurs, it will be reported to your Director of Studies and could lead to disciplinary action against you.

• Not considerate? If you interrupt the lecture, challenge others rudely, monopolise discussions, or mock others, your lecturer will ask you to stop or leave.
  o Academic learning does and should provoke us to think and disagree. It does not however permit anyone to insult, disrespect or threaten others.
  o If the incident is of a serious or sustained/repeated nature, it will be reported to your Director of Studies who will engage in a formal procedure to determine whether you will face disciplinary proceedings.

For additional guidance, please see the Rules, Regulations and Procedures for Students and the full Student Charter.
Endnotes

1 A good place to start is the Anglia Learning & Teaching website with useful guidance regarding inclusive teaching, team based learning, technology-enhance learning, and other relevant teaching resources.
2 For managing higher levels, see the Referral Grid for Academic Staff.
3 This referral system should be customised by individual faculties to represent their own practices.
4 See however the Counselling and Wellbeing pages to read more about the symptoms of mental ill health.
5 Induction Training (Agresso) in ‘Supporting You’ notes, ‘Personal accounts with social networking sites should not be used for any work related activity or formal communication with staff or students.’