Troubleshooting IV. Discussions, Labs, and Lectures: How to teach your discipline

I am new to a complex lab course

It is always a good idea to attend the lab session of more experienced teachers to see how students perform the experiments, what problems they typically encounter, and how teachers deal with them. While you cannot become an expert by watching alone, you can learn a great deal about the kinds of questions and errors that are common. This will help you be more prepared when they arise in your class.

There is conflict between members of student groups

Often the Graduate Student Teacher will play the role of facilitator when groups experience problems. In some courses, you will have the option of letting students work independently or move to other groups. If that is not an option, you may want to meet with students together to help them find common goals, understand their differences, and find compromises or detours to get around major conflicts. It never hurts to emphasize the importance of being a team player in "the real world."

I need to give feedback to students publicly

While a little excitement is necessary to convey enthusiasm for your teaching, be sure to be clear about your comments and temper them with civility. Although you may be trying to improve a student’s work and you have his or her best interests at heart, even small critiques can be taken as harsh criticism, especially if the point is not well understood. Harsh critiques will be perceived as personal attacks and the substantive comments may be readily dismissed by students in anger.

I feel like screaming at all the disruptions

It is not helpful to take classroom disruptions too seriously. Instead of reprimanding someone, it is often enough to make him or her aware that the distracting behavior is not appropriate by simply making eye contact, or standing near the person for a few moments until the behavior stops. If problems persist, feel free to ask a student to see you individually to discuss the problem. It may also be helpful to say something general in class so that other students know you are not avoiding the problem, such as "I get the feeling that the level of background noise can make it hard for me and other people to hear. Feel free to ask me questions about the material, but let’s try to keep the classroom quieter so everyone can concentrate.” Never humiliate a student in front of his or her peers or handle the situation in a way that makes you appear out of control.
I have to wait a long time for responses

Although it can be difficult, it is best to be patient and consider what students are doing during the silence. Sometimes students simply need more time than you expect to recall or look up information. Time is also needed to decide which parts of that information are relevant and which are not. Some students will mentally rehearse their answers to make sure it sounds clear enough. All of this thinking (and waiting) may be needed before a student’s hand goes up. If necessary, consider breaking down your question into simpler, more manageable parts. Also keep in mind the atmosphere in the classroom. Even if students know the answer, if they are not comfortable, they will not speak up in class.

Students have misconceptions about the material

Students’ misconceptions have many origins, including simplifications made in high school courses and naïve observations of everyday experience. If many students have the same problems, it can be very comforting for students to hear that the mistakes they are making are common errors made in your discipline. Students may also benefit from learning that difficult material is often purposely made simpler for younger students, and that being in college necessitates challenging some basic ideas they had before they came to NYU.

Students in required courses seem disinterested

Required courses can appear abstract and unrelated to any perceived goal of a student. For many of these courses, it is helpful to try to make the material more personally relevant, be it as a connection to their lives somehow, or as preparation for later courses. As a teacher, you are in good position to make connections between the basic concepts gone over in lecture and how they relate to the bigger picture. It is no sin to acknowledge that, in the grand scheme of things, a particular course will not make or break a student’s life, but it can serve a building block for the future.

It is easy to be discouraged by some students who are negative, but you do not want to let a few students’ cynicism ruin the entire class. Whatever you do, try to keep up your enthusiasm and let students know that class time is valuable; the more bored and disheartened you become, the harder it will be to get them involved and invested in the course.

You should keep in mind that no matter how hard you try, some students will not “enjoy” the course. This does not mean that you have failed as an instructor, as students do not have to find activities enjoyable to benefit from them. In addition, some topics do not lend themselves to smiles and enjoyment in the classroom, and graduate student teachers need to set appropriate tones when dealing with sensitive or disturbing issues.

You can always make an effort to reach out to disinterested students by
talking with them more, or setting up special meetings with them during office hours. If you get to know their perspective and what their interests are, be conveying that you respect their opinions. In turn, they will be more likely to respect you and pay attention to what you have to say.

**One or two students constantly dominate the discussion**

Students who dominate discussions often do not realize the negative impact they are having on others. While it may be tempting to simply cut them off in class, it is better to meet with students individually to explain what is going on and how you hope to change it. Ask a domineering student to see you during office hours. In that meeting, you can tactfully explain that while it is clear he or she has a lot to offer the class, you feel that students who are less advanced or less comfortable speaking may be intimidated by having any one person speak so frequently. You can then let the student know that you may limit the “floor” time to two minutes per person, that you may ask him or her to wait to offer an opinion until at least one other person has spoken, and/or that you may jump in when he or she is speaking, to encourage participation from other students. If you explain your intentions clearly, you can provide explicit limits for participation and still make the dominating student feel that his or her contributions are worthy. If setting limits does not work, you may wish to turn some of the discussions into debates, where individuals are assigned more rigid rules for speaking.