

**CHALLENGES IN THE MODERN COLLEGE CLASSROOM:
BALANCING
PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS AND ACADEMIC RIGOR**

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ABSTRACT

Teachers face many challenges in the modern classroom. The typical student in adjunct academic programs is no longer between the ages of 18 and 21. This paper will discuss the challenges that instructors face, as well as different teaching methods that can be used to address some of the problems and challenges.

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Many adjunct academic programs are now catering to a new breed of students. The typical student is no longer the 18 to 21 year old, supported by his or her parents. Many of the students are adults, with careers and families. Coming back to school is a challenge, and often a necessity because of job requirements. Many of the challenges for teachers often discussed in the adjunct campus arenas are related to technological issues, how we need more computers and library services. Little attention is paid to psychological issues related to the students and how teachers can better serve their students' needs. Every classroom is filled with students who are struggling with some issue or problem beyond the academic domain. It is a real challenge for teachers to discover the issues and deal with them effectively so that learning and growth can take place. This paper will discuss some of these issues faced by students and challenges presented to teachers.

**CHALLENGE 1: THE
OVERACHIEVER**

Most teachers would say, "I'd give my eye teeth for a class of overachievers." And indeed, overachievers are usually attentive, enthusiastic, and want to excel. They put

110% into their work. However, overachievers can come with their own set of problems. Many overachievers have problems in dealing with their own imperfections. They think because they put so much time into projects, tests, and papers, that they should receive 100% on everything. Anything else is regarded as a failure. The overachiever may even suffer from low self-esteem. I had a student who became distraught after receiving a 95% on a midterm examination. Instead of laughing at her for being such a perfectionist and dismissing her disappointment as silliness, I sat down and talked about her expectations for herself. We talked about the idea that perfectionism does not exist and that there is always room for learning and growth. The student walked away with a better understanding of herself. She was still an overachiever, but her self-esteem did not suffer as greatly from minor mistakes.

CHALLENGE: **Help the overachiever to realize his or her own potential, and faults. Help the overachiever to deal with disappointments.**

Another problem that can exist for a teacher is that the class may perceive the overachiever as the teacher's pet. When a class discussion takes place, the teacher often falls back on the overachiever when no one else can answer the question. While this may make some students feel good, many overachievers feel embarrassed and

singled out. They don't want to be the center of attention. In one of my classes, I had a student who obviously spent many more hours on his assignments than his fellow classmates. It could have been very easy to direct all questions to him, because he knew all the answers. The problem with this would have been that no other students would have had to think. The overachiever could come up with the answers for everyone. In one class, I was asking students to think about different research methods. One student made a comment that I should just ask the overachiever and the rest of the class wouldn't have to think so hard.

If I had done that, none of the rest of the class would have learned about research design.

Another technique that I use quite often is group projects. I spread the overachievers out, so that one is assigned to a group. I also ensure that the overachiever does not do all the work for the group, by having the group write down the responsibilities of each group member. The overachiever helps to bring up the entire level of the group and the other group members learn more. In many ways the overachievers become peer tutors without them being singled out by the teacher.

CHALLENGE: Try to bring the class to a higher level by forcing them to rely on their own brains and not just on the overachiever. It may take more time, but the learning will be that much richer.

CHALLENGE 2: UNDER-BELIEVER

The under-believer can fall into two different categories: THE QUIET MOUSE and THE CLOWN. Both have a common variable, low self-esteem or low confidence. The quiet mouse tends to sit in the back of the room and tries to hide. This individual may have had difficulty in high school or may have learning disabilities. It has been my experience to have at least one student with learning disabilities in each class, even small classes of five or less. The quiet mouse is often ashamed of his or her problems, and often times the problems don't appear until the first test.

I had one student run out of my class in tears after getting her test back. I called her on the phone the next day and talked to her about her reaction to her grade. After a few minutes, she admitted to having learning disabilities that were not discovered until she was a junior in high school. She felt ashamed and dumb, and did not feel it was my problem. I told her that her learning was my job. We had to work together in order to find the best ways that she could learn. We agreed that she could take future tests after class so that I could read the questions to her. She felt she understood things a lot more when she heard them orally versus just visually. She did much better on the other exams.

CHALLENGE: Be aware that many returning students have experienced some type of academic failure. Be aware of the students who sit meekly, do not talk, and are having difficulty early on in the class. Act as a partner in the learning process.

The class clown is also a challenge. Many clowns hide their fears and insecurities behind humor. The clowns often try to pull the class off the track. When the material becomes difficult, the clown often jumps in and starts to make jokes. The clown's goal is to keep away from academic challenges. I had one student who would start to joke as soon as I started talking about homework from the previous week. He also would put himself down, making light of his abilities to write. As a result, I have made it a rule in my class that no one can put anyone down, including one's self. It is amazing how many individuals do not even realize they are putting down their abilities, even if it is through a joke.

CHALLENGE: Help students to make positive statements about themselves and to avoid putting themselves down, even in jest.

One of the biggest difficulties, after the clown takes over, is getting the class back on track. There is nothing wrong with laughing along with the students. In fact, it helps make the teacher seem more human. After the

class dies down from laughter, I shift the direction back to the task immediately and have another student start to talk. Sometimes redirecting with humor is very effective. The key is to get another student talking. Because the clown lacks confidence, the clown is often sensitive to other students and their feelings. The clown often is not willing to interrupt another student in the learning process. The clown then can be included slowly in the serious discussion.

CHALLENGE: Keep the clown from taking over the class, without killing the clown's initiative and motivation to learn.

CHALLENGE 3: KNOW IT ALL

The Know It All falls into two categories: THE CLASS HOG and the BELLIGERENT STUDENT. The Class Hog stands out very quickly. This is the student who takes over a class discussion and will not relinquish the floor to other students. I had a student who would start to talk and jump from topic to topic. He rarely took a breath, so it was very difficult to interrupt him to get the class back on track. During the break in the second class meeting, several students came up to me and asked if I couldn't get him to, "Shut up." After another long afternoon, I decided that I was going to have to come up with a method for sharing. I decided to use a debate format in which each student was only allotted one minute to share his or her point of view. This also forced the

class hog to better organize what he wanted to say. He had a terrible time at first and was very agitated at not being able to get his point across. After several class meetings, he began to be more organized in his presentation of the material.

When a debate format is not possible, it is essential to cut the individual off, without hurting his or her feelings. Gently interrupt and make a comment about some positive aspect of the hog's statement and how the statement fits into the topic being discussed. Then guide the discussion back to the topic.

CHALLENGE: Keep the class hog from taking over, without making the hog feel like his or her opinion does not matter.

The belligerent student is truly a challenge. This student often does not want to be in the class and lets the faculty member know right away what he or she thinks. I had a student tell me, "This theory stuff is just a bunch of crap. I can't wait until I can take applied classes. For the time being, I guess I just have to waste my time." I told the student that I was going to prove her wrong, and that she might actually learn something. Another endearing attribute of the belligerent student is to make the faculty member look stupid by questioning the teacher's credentials and by constantly picking at what the teacher says.

I had one student tell me that she had decided not to pursue a career in her major of psychology, but was too close to her degree. She was extremely unmotivated and hostile about some of the material. She had done an internship and felt the theory classes were not applicable to the real world and that being a clinical psychologist was a lousy profession after all. I asked her what she wanted to do when she finished her degree and she said that she wanted to go into business. We worked it out so that she could integrate what she really wanted to do with the class subject. I allowed her to do her term paper on something of interest in the area of business, as long as it could be tied to the class in some way. This immediately increased her motivation and decreased her belligerent attitude. This also demonstrated to her that theory could be applied in a variety of career fields.

CHALLENGE: Do not take what the belligerent student says personally. Address each concern with calm and clarity. Find out what is behind the hostility.

CHALLENGE 4: WHINER

Many whiners feel overwhelmed. They are trying to juggle a career, family, and school. They may not even really want to be at school, but may feel pressed to get a degree in order to move forward in their careers. When they first look at the syllabus, they start

complaining about the level of work. After each assignment, they complain about how it took too much time. When they get back their grade, it is never exactly what they think they should get given their highly stressful lives.

These students often have a reason or excuse for not doing as well as they would have liked. It is rarely their fault. I had a student who was not happy with her final grade. She blamed my poor teaching, her boss, her co-workers, her job, and the Director of the Academic Center. No where in her recital of why she received the poor grade did she take responsibility for her own actions and grade outcome. I try to let students know up front how much time a project could take. This helps them to organize and plan ahead.

On the other hand, sometimes the students have legitimate complaints. It is unfair to expect students to do complicated mathematical equations if the teacher is behind schedule and has not covered the material. I have revised due dates on assignments if the time line seems unfair. For example, I have given extra time on final papers so that students would have a chance to incorporate any feedback I had previously given.

CHALLENGE: Be sympathetic with students without compromising ethics or making the class so easy that a four year old could pass.

CHALLENGE 5: GRADE MONGER

There are two categories of grade mongers: NON-THINKER and YOU OWE ME. The non-thinker is very difficult to deal with, because the student's goal is the product and not the process of learning. One of the things that contributes to this attitude is that companies will only reimburse the cost of the class if the student receives an AA@ or a AB.@ I had one student who was constantly asking for reassurance that she was on an AA@ track. She was also very competitive and would question me if she thought other students did not deserve an AA.@ She even stated at the beginning of the class that she did not care if she learned anything; she just did not want to blow her grade point average. She also wanted her money reimbursed from her company.

I use a total point format. Each assignment is worth a certain amount of points. The point totals for each assignment and how the assignment will be graded are on the syllabus. For example, I have set criteria and points associated with each for class presentations. The students know that the presentation will be graded on flow, coverage of topic, grammar, eye contact, use of aids, signs of nervousness, etc. The total points and the grades associated with those points are also listed on my syllabus. If the maximum class points total to 500, the students know that they have to get 450 points

(90% or higher) in order to receive an AA.@ I tell students that they can keep track of their own progress by taking the total and subtract any points lost on exams, papers, etc.

CHALLENGE: Make sure students know that what grade they receive is their responsibility. Be very clear about the grading policy on the syllabus.

The main attribute of most grade mongers is that they do not want to think. They want to be spoon fed. They want to know exactly what will be on the tests. I hand out study guides the week before the test to help students direct their study patterns. Yet, I still get students who feel that I should have handed out the study guide two weeks ahead of time. These students also have difficulty writing papers that require thought or application of other materials.

They do very well when all they have to do is summarize other people's work. Having to think or apply knowledge often angers these students and they feel bewildered by the requirement to apply knowledge. I had one student tell me to tell him exactly what to write and he would. He did not care if he did not agree with it; he would do whatever it took to get the good grade. I told him that I would not tell him what to do, that he would have to think about it and come up with his own solution. He was incredibly frustrated and called me multiple times a day to ask questions.

Many times, I would answer his question with a question. This was much more time consuming for me, but he learned more. At the end of the course, he actually he told that he had learned something, in spite of himself.

CHALLENGE: Get the grade monger to focus on learning and not on the grade. Get the students to realize that learning is an essential part of obtaining good grades.

The last type of grade monger is the most discouraging. These students feel that we owe them a good grade just for attending every class. I had a student tell me that he deserved an AA@ because he attended every class. It did not matter that he got a AC@ on both his midterm and final. I had another student tell me that it was my responsibility to tell her if she was that close to a AC@ so that she could have studied harder for her final. When I refused to change her final grade, she threatened the Director that she would drop out of the program and take her money elsewhere. Luckily the Director backed my point of view.

There are many institutions that have become grade factories to appease students who think they deserve good grades, just because they have paid a large amount of tuition. However, when these students graduate, they have little knowledge or usable skills. It is the teacher's duty to prepare students for the "real world" with marketable knowledge,

skills, and abilities. We are not doing the students any favors by handing out good grades for minimal work. We are also not doing the institution any favors as well. The institution's reputation rests on the quality of the students who graduate.

CHALLENGE: Let students know that grades have to be earned and are not given away. A quality program is not a grade factory.

The teacher-student interaction is the backbone of any academic program. The challenge is to balance academic rigor and the needs of the students. An effective teacher is not only a technological guru in his or her subject domain, but now must be an amateur psychologist as well.