Handling Difficult Tutoring Situations & Difficult Students

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CRLA Certification Tutor Training
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Dr. Rebekah McCloud, Director
Handling Difficult Tutoring Situations & Difficult Students

Working with high school students presents its own challenges, many that are different than those you encounter while working with college students. One of the first things you should do is set an agenda.

Set an Agenda for Each Session

So why set an agenda?
- An agenda helps you to break down a task into manageable pieces for the tutee. Smaller tasks are less likely to overwhelm the tutee, and are much easier to accomplish and learn.
- An agenda helps the tutor and tutee determine what will be covered, and how, in a logical rather than random progression.
- An agenda models good student behavior. This is important because, in addition to direct learning, your tutee will also learn from your actions and vocabulary. And with any luck, your tutee will pick up a few good habits from you.
- An agenda lets you be honest with the tutee. Without an agenda, both tutor and tutee may have unreal expectations and feel discouraged after a session.

Establish Relationships

For students, the tutorial learning environment is a place where they can apply theory, practice skills, interact with and learn from other students, develop relationships with peers that support learning outside tutorials and receive individual attention in relation to their progress. In subjects with large numbers of students, the tutorial learning environment is often relied upon to counter a sense of anonymity that can exist in lectures. It’s therefore very important for you to treat your students as individuals and for students to get to know each other.

Stronge (2002) states an effective tutor knows the personal interests of students and sees them as individuals as well as students attending a tutorial. Your tutorials will benefit if you have an understanding of the level of skills the students are bringing to these learning experiences. Acknowledging students as individuals engenders a sense of belonging. Tutorials depend on the connecting of the diverse personalities of each of the people in the group – you and the students. Encourage the students to form both social and working relationships within the group as this peer support is an important element in developing their skills and understanding of subject content. Students may value drawing up a contact list of the members of the tutorial.

Using ice breakers and remembering names are two ways of creating a supportive, friendly learning environment.
• **Ice Breakers**
  - Ice breakers can be useful to reduce tension, to immediately create a climate of student participation and to help students and the tutor get to know each other. Chapple (1998) states that: “time taken with various ice-breakers is invaluable in producing a more-lively, co-operative and self-motivated group where students feel comfortable to enthusiastically contribute”.
  - Ice-breakers need to be simple to carry out and require little preparation and use of materials. When selecting an ice-breaker try to think through whether the activity has the potential to alienate or embarrass any of the participants. You may wish to incorporate an ice-breaker that connects with your subject material. Note that some ice breakers can be quite time consuming, so your choice of ice breaker will depend on what else you’ve planned to cover in the first tutorial.

• **Remembering and pronouncing names**
  - Getting to know your students by name can be challenging, especially for those who teach many students. However the effort is worthwhile, as you will then be able to call students by name when giving feedback or asking questions. Your students will feel valued and respected by you. There are many strategies for remembering names:
    - asking students to sit in the same place for the first few sessions and make a named plan of this seating
    - memorize a row or two tables of students each tutorial
    - asking students to say their name before speaking to the group
    - asking students to place nametags on the desk in front of them
    - having small photos of each student
    - Let students understand that you are trying to remember their names and ask for their co-operation and patience.

**Challenges**

No two tutorials will operate in the same way and there may be things that go wrong. Although most tutoring sessions will probably go smoothly, there will be times when it seems little progress is made. Tutors should be familiar with different types of obstacles that often hinder the progress of tutoring sessions.

One of these common challenges can be the behavior of students – some may be dominating, some may appear disinterested and do not contribute. Having ground rules, providing explicit instructions and monitoring group dynamics, will help you identify potential problems early on and take steps to manage and defuse these. Some
students may bring their troubles to you. Listen to their problems and deal with academic matters which fall within your expertise, but encourage students to seek further appropriate professional counseling if this is needed.

The following are a few possible difficulties and possible approaches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive/Academic</th>
<th>Difficulty:</th>
<th>Approach:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Blocking</strong></td>
<td>Low frustration tolerance</td>
<td>• Determine what the student does know – show him/her that he/she has some foundation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Immobilization/hopelessness</td>
<td>• Begin from what he/she knows and build in simple steps</td>
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<td>Freezing up/blocking</td>
<td>• Offer continual support</td>
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<td>Procrastination</td>
<td>• Reinforce successes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It’s beyond me.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I’ll never get it.”</td>
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<td>“I’m stuck.”</td>
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<td><strong>2. Confusion</strong></td>
<td>Bafflement/disorientation</td>
<td>• All the suggestions to Blocking apply</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disorganization</td>
<td>• Give structure and order to the tutee’s material (notes, worksheets, papers, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I just don’t know what to do.”</td>
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<td>“I don’t know what the instructor wants.”</td>
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<td>“I studied for the test and got a ‘D.’”</td>
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<td>“I’m not sure where we are.”</td>
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<td><strong>3. Miracle Seeking</strong></td>
<td>General and vague goals</td>
<td>• Downplay your role (“Look, I’ve simply had more exposure to the stuff, that’s all.”)</td>
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<td>Enthusiasm about being with tutor, but being fairly passive in actual learning process</td>
<td>• Focus on specific task at hand</td>
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<td>High level of expectation (often inappropriate)</td>
<td>• Involve student continually with questions on the material</td>
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<td>Evasion or inability to concentrate on concrete tasks</td>
<td>• Explain significance of active participation in learning process</td>
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<td><strong>4. Over-Enthusiasm</strong></td>
<td>Demands on self are too high</td>
<td>• All the suggestions to Miracle Seeking apply</td>
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<td>Tasks of limited time, long range goals versus immediate tasks</td>
<td>• Explain the counter-productive nature of this eagerness</td>
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<td>Global interest</td>
<td>• Be understanding, yet assure the student that she/he has the time</td>
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<td>Often in older students (“Look, I’m over thirty, I don’t have the time these kids have.”)</td>
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5. **Resisting**  
Passivity/boredom/hostility/sullenness  
Disinterest in class work  
Defensive posture  
Easily triggered anger  

- Be pragmatic, yet understanding (“Look, I know you don’t like this class, but your program requires it, so let’s make the best of it.”)  
- Establish your credibility  
- Indicate past successes in similar situations  

| 6. **Passivity** |  
| --- | --- |  
| Noninvolvement |  
| Inattention |  
| Boredom |  
| Little discussion |  
| Few questions asked |  

- Empathize (“You’re not crazy about asking a lot of questions in class, are you?”)  
- Attempt to build a relationship and mobilize the student  
- Use as many mobilizing techniques as possible – questions, establish mini-tasks for the student to do next week, reinforce successes  

| 7. **Evasion** |  
| --- | --- |  
| Manipulation |  
| Verbal ability |  
| Glibness versus focused writing or problem solving skills |  
| Global/nonspecific praise of tutor, instructor, and/or course |  

- Focus the student on the specific tasks  
- Involve student continually with questions  
- If evasion continues, ask, in a nonthreatening way, why the student has come for tutoring and what he expects to get out of the tutoring session (“My biggest concern is your success in this class. How can I help you with that?”)  

| 8. **Fragmentation** (another variant of resisting) |  
| --- | --- |  
| Inability to concentrate or adhere to task, easily distracted |  
| Overwhelmed by academic/athletic/social demands |  
| Uncertain about having college-level skills, declaring a major, etc |  

- Provide lecture/class calendar and other time-management tips.  
- Suggest structure in his/her schedule such as making appointments to get to the library.  
- Give subject-specific study tips on note-taking, listening, reading text, professor expectations, etc.  
- Give and review with them any appropriate study tips.  
- Advise regular lecture/class attendance (where they are having trouble).  

Typical student responses:  
"My teacher did not prepare me for this."  
"I'm lost in Dr Blank's class."
## Affective/Behavioral

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<th>Difficulty:</th>
<th>Approach:</th>
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| **9. Silence**<br> If the group is silent or unresponsive: If individual students are silent: | • Use **buzz groups, pyramiding sequences**. Ask what’s going on – why are they silent? Make a clear statement about what you want from the group.  
• Use more ‘whole-group’ methods such as think-pair-share to get discussion going  
• Try to draw the student out by picking up on something relevant to them and the topic for discussion e.g., “You’ve had experience as a nurse, Jane, haven’t you – so how do you think psychological illness is perceived by nurses in general?” |

| **10. Non-listening**<br> If students are not listening to you and/or each other, are not building discussion but are point scoring: | • Ask student to paraphrase directions.  
• Use a listening exercise e.g., where one student has to paraphrase what another student said. |

| **11. Passive Students**<br> Inevitably you will encounter at least one or perhaps a group of students who sit quietly, never answer or ask questions, don’t participate in group discussions, and don’t ‘seem’ to be engaged in learning at all. It is important to consider why the students are not interacting – is the task beyond their capabilities, are they experiencing personal problems, do you need to consider more engaging activities? to them later or start with a low risk question. Some ‘quiet’ students are not necessarily uninvolved but listening and absorbing the discussion. | • Ask that student to check out a point in the discussion and report on it next session.  
• Try to engage them in activities within a group situation.  
• An awareness of which students have not contributed to discussions enables you to draw them into discussions early in the tutorials.  
• If a student is called on by name, it becomes harder for them to avoid participation |
### 12. Derailing

If a student tries to take a discussion off track include irrelevant information:

- Set a clear topic at the start
- Draw the groups attention to the situation, e.g., “I’m wondering how this is related to our topic of discussion?”
- Ask a clear question or make a clear statement to direct discussion back to the topic

### 13. Dominance

Occasionally you may have a student who exhibits dominating behavior, for example excessive questioning, speaking more often than others, interrupting other students. As with many of these behavioral challenges it’s important to recognize that there is no single motivation. Domination may be genuine belligerence or it could be the frustration of a high-achieving student about the lack of their peers preparation. As much as possible you want to acknowledge their willingness to participate but also to allow for contribution from other students. If the student persists, after you have tried interventions, state your intention to include other students so that there is greater diversity in opinions as everyone benefits from this range of ideas. You may need to speak to the student outside of the class and re-iterate that you value the student’s comments but that you must insist on ensuring others are offered the opportunity to enter discussions.

- Invite other students by name to enter the discussion
- Ask the dominating student to hold comments for a while, for example say ‘Trevor, hold that thought and I’ll come back to you’
- Ask the dominating student to listen to all points of view of other students and then offer a synopsis of the discussion
- Incorporate an activity where all students write out a response to a question and then choose some students to read these
- State that time is running out and limit each student to a minute/thirty seconds
- You might consider the use of tokens, allotting three/five to each student for each discussion topic. When the students have ‘used’ these, they are not able to enter the discussion until the next topic of discussion begins.
- Use hand signals and verbally ask them to let others speak
- Assign roles for the group discussion, e.g., timekeeper, scribe, summarizer, reporter
14. Dependent Students
Some students will find the level of independent study that is expected of them at university to be quite different from their prior educational experiences and may need support to achieve independence. Students may require carefully structured and specific steps to complete a set task. As the student becomes more independent in the learning process, the scaffolding – or level of support – is gradually withdrawn. If you feel students are heavily reliant on you to provide the structure for their learning, you must work at establishing self-confidence in how the student will understand, and meet, the expectations of the task.

- Discuss their work with them and compliment them on their accomplishments and steer them to considering how they might approach the next stage of the task.
- Gradually lessen your involvement in setting the steps of how the students will operate.
- Guide students to where they will be able to find material and if you feel it may be helpful, discuss with students what they will be endeavoring to research. Clarifying objectives may be a starting point for these students.
- Making time for students to discuss in small groups how they are approaching a task may help students draw support from their peers and improve their understanding of the parameters of the task.

15. Anger
If a student is angry remember most of the time it is not about you. As a general rule, whenever you are dealing with students, remember to your “I” voice, but don’t go into the “parent” voice. Keep calm and remember the anger resolution process:

- Listen - Give full attention, stay silent
- Paraphrase - Wait three seconds, summarize your understanding of what was said
- Empathize - Acknowledge their feelings and point of view, “I do want to help”
- Apologize - If applicable
- Ask questions - “What would you like me to do?”
- Explain - Explain what you can and can’t do
- Take action - Get their understanding and agreement on a plan of action, and follow up on this!
| 16. Exclusion                      | • Don’t use sarcasm, but confront the students.  
|                                 | • Invite them to share their discussion with the group. |
| If you get the sense of a clique among some students, or a private joke | |
| 17. The expert student            | • In class discussion times, allow them to respond, but use techniques such as ‘redirecting’ to encourage other students to have a go.  
| Sometimes some students may seem to have a comment or opinion about just about everything. Sometimes, people who appear to be ‘experts’ are over-compensating for an actual lack of self-esteem. While you will probably find these students frustrating and disruptive, don’t openly show your frustration. | • If you can’t work around the person using subtle directing and redirecting then talk with her/him before or after class. |
| 18. The negative student          | • Try methods such as those above  
| You may also experience different kinds of negativity, either overt (such as challenging the class discussion or activity in a negative manner) or covert (such as remaining silent and not participating). | • (‘the expert’) for dealing with the overtly negative student, and try bringing the covertly negative student into the group activity by methods such as asking them directly to give their opinion, etc. |
| 19. The ‘disruptive’ student       | • Try using silence to direct the student’s attention to you and to the situation, politely ask for his/her co-operation, and use the ground-rules set up by you and the class as a way to direct your request.  
<p>| Sometimes student are disruptive to the learning process. Most of the time, the student is seeking attention; even negative attention is better than no attention is usually sufficient for these students. | • Otherwise, ask the student to stay after class and talk to them about how disruptive their behavior is to you and to other students. |</p>
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<th>20. Confrontational Students</th>
<th>21. The Chatterbox</th>
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<tr>
<td>Most students will act in an appropriate manner during tutorials. However, there are occasions when some students will test the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Deal with the behavior calmly and professionally; do not embarrass students in front of their peers as this can escalate the problem.</td>
<td>You may encounter a student who is constantly talking; especially off topic.</td>
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</table>
| • Listen to the student and address concerns but be firm in stating that you cannot continue discussing aspects with one student when others are waiting for the tutorial work to progress.  
• Do not get involved in arguments within the tutorial.  
• It is best to deal with the student privately on a one-to-one basis rather than speaking across the class.  
• Explain why you are finding their behavior disruptive and the negative effect it is having on other students’ learning and tutorial time.  
• Be factual and objective.  
• Try to find out why the student is behaving in this manner.  
• Reiterate your expectations of behavior and ask the student why they are not able to meet these standards.  
• Make a direct appeal to the student’s sense of fairness to the other students and to yourself.  
• If consistent inappropriate behavior continues, you may need to consult with Dr. McCloud and/or Mrs. Soriano. | • Ask the student to stop talking; redirect the student’s talk.  
• Speak with the student after class. |
### 22. Unprepared Students
Lack of preparation by students is a continual problem in tutorials. Students are often committed to part-time jobs to support paying for their fees, or have personal problems which impinge on their preparation, or may be under pressure from commitment to other subjects. If you establish the level of preparation you expect for each tutorial, it is more likely that students will respond to this expectation. Participation marks can be a useful source of motivation for students.

- It can be helpful to make an oral check of what stage students are at with any set tasks.
- Provide students with advice on how to approach out-of-class work.
- Ask students to report at least one solution or even a question relating to the pre-work.
- When a student(s) hasn’t done the work, show that you expect a contribution regardless, for example, have that student restate the question, have them start solving the problem.
- If a large number of students haven’t attempted the work, you may quickly divide up the problems or question and allocate to small groups.
- As much as possible avoid the temptation to simply provide the answers or solutions, far better to have students attempt the tutorial work.

### 23. Coping with late arrivals and early leavers
The extent to which an individual tutor accommodates late arrivals or early departures varies from tutor to tutor. One thing which is important is that it’s incumbent on you to start and finish the tutorial on time out of respect for those students who arrive on time. Late arrival or early departure from tutorial groups may become a problem if it happens regularly and becomes disruptive.

- You need to develop strategies for dealing with this issue before it happens.
- Clarifying expectations and setting and reminding students of the ground rules can be very helpful.
- With late arrivers it is important to be courteous but not to indulge the late arrivers by going over material that you’ve just gone through with the group.
Tutor doesn’t know the answer
Many new tutors or tutors new to subject worry that they will not know enough to be able to teach their students adequately. Adequate preparation for the tutorial is the clearest way to boost your confidence prior to the tutorial. If you have done the preparation and have discussed any problems you may have with the material with either the lecturer or your fellow tutors it is unlikely that you will have a problem.

However, you cannot plan for every eventuality. There will always be a time when you do not know the answer and need to acknowledge this. It is best not to try to bluff your way out of a mistake or hide that you don’t know the answer. If a student asks a question that you cannot answer you can do one of several things:

- Throw the question to other students. This helps to establish that learning is a partnership between the lecturers, tutors and students.
- Tell the students that you don’t the answer and will get back to them either by email or at the next tutorial. Start the following tutorial with the answer to the question, reminding students first what the question was.
- Depending on the nature of the question you could try to work the solution through with the help of the group.
- If the question is not central but is of interest you could ask the student who posed the question to do some research and report back to the class at the next tutorial. Reward the student for the extra work by thanking them or taking this into account if there is a participation mark for the subject.

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