



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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DEALING WITH A DOMINATING STUDENT

As I entered the classroom for the start of a new semester this past January, my attention went immediately to a sight I had never seen before: a student vigorously rocking to and fro in his seat. Hardly had I begun class before the student—I'll call him Hank—interrupted to ask questions. He continued to interrupt, not giving me time to get instructions out to the class on first-day activities such as filling out information cards and reviewing the syllabus. It was all I could do to conceal my irritation. As a veteran teacher of 34 years, I was determined not to let one student spoil an otherwise upbeat tone I wished to set on the first day of class, but I came close to speeding up my already fast track to baldness by pulling out the few remaining strands of my hair. With a bit of shame, I must admit my initial reactions to having a possibly autistic student in class were not kind. Selfishly, I complained to my department head, "This is not what I want here in my final years before retirement!" My thoughts definitely were about *my* needs and desires, not those of my new student, Hank. My department head confirmed that she knew Hank only too well: "He nearly drove me crazy last semester when he was in my class. Good luck, Norm!"

Over the weekend, I had a heart-to-heart talk with myself, as well as with my wife (a nurse, therapist, and counselor) and a friend who was a high school teacher who had experienced all manner of disruptive students. We brainstormed about what Hank's problem might be and how I might handle matters. The result was self-talk that went something like this: "Raiford, change your attitude. You need to work on ways to turn this into a win-win situation for yourself, for Hank, and for the class. Otherwise, you're going to stress out like crazy, and the class will become a 15-week-long disaster for everyone!" By Monday, I had embraced a new "we can do this" attitude and had a plan in place for dealing with Hank and his constant questions, which already had his classmates rolling their eyes every time he opened his mouth.

My plan was to address the issue head-on. I explained that students have differing learning styles and needs. "For example, Ms. Nguyen needs to be near the front and tape record my lectures because English is not her first language. Hank makes connections. Connections are good, but Hank tends to make them out loud. So, I'm placing Hank on the front row and, when he's asking so many questions that they are slowing down the lecture a bit too much, I'll walk to his desk and gently tap his desktop to signal 'that's enough for now.' And we'll all be very patient with one another, okay?" Hank and the class responded favorably.

How naive I was! Hank continued to have questions and comments about nearly every point I tried to make in my lectures. His comments, for the most part, were germane to the discussion, sometimes more so than at others. He never picked up on my signals when I walked to his desk and tapped on it gently. I was determined to treat Hank with respect, taking his comments seriously and trying to relate them to the material at hand. However, the constancy of his commentary soon led to snickering, more eye-rolling, and finally to a colleague's stopping by my office to report that she had a friend in that particular class who complained to her about Hank's persistent interruptions.

What was I to do? Hank showed interest in the course material and significant knowledge, but his domination was turning everyone off. Meanwhile, I learned that Hank had a type of autism—fortunately, not an extremely severe form. In my long career, I had never had an autistic student in my college classes and simply was not prepared for this new encounter.

Then a few weeks into the semester, while on my 35-minute commute, a light bulb came on. Try a "quota system." Announce to the class that from now on there would be a quota of three questions permitted per student during any class period. As Hank raised his hand and asked his first question, I said, "That's one, Hank." And later, "That's two, Hank" to which he said, "I know." Hank caught on quickly and respected the fact that, after his third question, I would say, "No more, Hank." Of course, I was willing to answer questions after class when Hank had them, and he frequently did



stay after class to ask a few more. Soon, other students were making comments or asking questions in class, but no one other than Hank ever used his or her full quota! The "quota system" worked well throughout the rest of the term, with Hank always using his entire quota of three questions each class period, and he was never absent! One day near the end of the term, Hank raised his hand and said, "I know I've already used my three questions today, Dr. Raiford, but I've just got to ask this one thing more..." With good humor, I indulged him.

During the course of the semester, Hank exhibited mild agitation only a few times and extreme agitation only once. Some days prior to the start of class, he engaged in teasing behaviors that only once got out of hand. On that occasion, I explained after class that he should apologize to the student who might have taken his comments unfavorably, which he did (or overdid, I should say) at the start of the next class meeting. Academically, Hank performed well, earning a B for the course and turning in the highest score in the class on the multiple-choice part of the final exam. Essays were much more difficult for him, but he did passing work.

What did I learn from this experience? First, my efforts to create a safe environment in the classroom had succeeded. By safe environment, I mean one in which students felt comfortably assured that I would respect each of them. I sensed that Hank calmed down relatively quickly and felt safe and respected. Second, while taking a risk addressing Hank's needs head-on with the class, I felt that I had handled the situation with sensitivity, and avoided identifying Hank's personal situation, instead simply saying, "Hank makes connections, and connecting what one is learning with what one already knows is a good thing." Much to his credit, on more than one occasion, Hank told me after class or in the hallways when we encountered one another, "Mr. Raiford, I'm sorry if my questions annoy you," to which I could truthfully say, "Hank, you're doing well in the class. I'm pleased with how you are raising your hand and abiding by the quota rule." And, finally, I learned that this 59-year-old dog could master a new trick or two and continue to enjoy discovering new dynamics in the challenging arena of classroom teaching.

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Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

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