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Resource: The Torch or the Firehose
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Problem Students and Students with Problems

Let's talk about a few special kinds of students who pose a problem one way or another. You may not have any in your class, but if you do, they can be a concern.

The loud-mouth

This is the student who sits up front, has an answer (right or wrong) for every question almost before it is out of your mouth, calls out without being recognized, asks complicated questions off the subject, and offers comments at great length, relevant or not. Any one of these things, done often enough, can seriously disrupt the class. Your first recourse is to phrases like:

"Please don't call out; let's give everyone a minute to think."

"Why don't we wait with that question until we reach that topic?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt; could you summarize your point in one more minute, so we can hear from some of the others?"

Many students will take these hints, and become a valued member of the class. If not, the best thing to do is to talk to the student privately. Express as much appreciation for the class contributions as you feel is warranted, but say that one of the goals of the recitation is to get everyone to participate. Explain it's difficult to achieve this if one student dominates, so you're asking for help and cooperation on this. Back in class, a reminding look ought to be enough if the student forgets and starts in again.

The silent student

At the other extreme, the student who never volunteers anything in class isn't any active problem for you or the class, but deserves attention anyway. (In a humanities section, of course, everyone should be speaking, and it devolves upon you to see that they do.) Many such silent students have plenty to say, but need some encouragement. Try to find some reason to establish personal contact with them (a good problem solution or interesting remark in a paper, for example), then in class call on them when you're calling on others.



Or try, in a casual tone of voice, “How about an answer from some of you that we don’t hear so much from? (*looking around the room*) Mark? Sally? Jim?” Don’t browbeat anyone; keep it light. Once you can get silent students to speak, you can often afterwards read from their faces when they have something to say, and then call on them without fear of embarrassing them.

The dependent student

It may be flattering to have a student continually asking questions after class, filling your office hours, perhaps seeking extensive personal advice. It can also be a pain in the neck. If so, you have to decide where the problem is and act.

- If the student has too weak a background because of missing prerequisites, it’s not your job to supply these by personal tutoring. Recommend extra tutoring, delaying the subject a semester, or transferring to an easier version of the course if one is available.
- If the prerequisites are all there, but the student is just very weak in the subject, you do have some responsibility to help. However, it should be shared with the other tutoring services available. Set firm bounds on the amount of time you can spend and let the student know.
- Some students are “dependent types”—they like to be taken care of or are used to leaning on some one. But this doesn’t have to be you. Anyway, it’s not good for them. Encourage them to stand on their own feet. “I could help you with this,” you could say, “but I think you’ll learn more doing it by yourself.”
- The student may be personally attracted to you—may want to be friends, or just enjoy spending time with you, possibly without realizing this explicitly. There’s nothing wrong with this, but if you’re unhappy about it, or cannot afford the time, there are many subtle ways to show that personal attention is unwelcome. Be businesslike, but tactful.



The possible date

Many stories could illustrate TA - student attraction, but to choose one of the most common, let’s suppose you’re a male instructor who can’t help noticing that cute woman who sits in the second row, asks good questions, and sometimes stays after class to make a comment. You think she may be trying to tell you something, and wonder if you should continue the discussion over coffee, and maybe ask her out.



The answer is: as long as she's in your class, don't. You may be misinterpreting things: she might not be attracted at all or she might be looking for a mentor, but not a date. If you ask her out, she may feel uncomfortable or pressured. Even if you've read things correctly, other students in your class can be upset by any relationship (it won't take long for them to hear about it). You cannot go out with someone whom you are giving a grade to, and who might want a letter of recommendation some day. The possibility of ulterior motives always lurks in the background to spoil things.

So wait until the semester is over and the grades come out. (If it's love at first sight, and you're desperate, tell her you'd like to ask her out, but cannot as long as she's in your section. Then she can offer to change sections, or gracefully decline by telling you that you're such a great teacher she wouldn't consider changing.)

If it's the student who makes the first move, perhaps by asking if you would meet her for lunch, or have dinner in her dormitory, you should decline gracefully, unless it's a public event with other students and teachers present. Don't get into situations which could prove awkward later. (But if inclined, you can suggest waiting until the semester is over.)

The troubled student

Students may come to you with personal or academic problems because they like and trust you. Listen as you would listen to a friend who wanted to talk, and respond as you would to a friend, offering what advice you can.

If you feel more experienced guidance is called for—this will certainly be so if the problems are serious—then beware of offering too much advice of your own. It's better to refer the student to one of the Deans who does counseling (you can find out the resources at MIT by going to <http://web.mit.edu/counsel/www>); they see troubled students all day long and have a lot of experience. Normally students are referred to them by their advisors, and you should find out if the student has talked to his or her advisor or would like to. You need to be tactful. In general, for serious cases, try to have the student make the appropriate appointment by phone while still in your office.

A more formal resource is the Medical Department. Psychiatric referral is usually done through a counseling Dean, but you can call the Medical Department yourself if the case seems very serious or an emergency.

These resources are available to you for consultation. If you're not sure of what the best thing to do is, call them up and ask their advice. They want you to, and you may be able to head off serious trouble.

Academic problems

You should get in touch with students who do poorly on the first exam, or who miss a couple of homework assignments, to find out what the problem is. It is usually you who will have to do the seeking out, since students are embarrassed by poor grades or performance and feel awkward about seeing you. Many will try to pretend to themselves there is no problem, or optimistically hope that things will go better “when they get things together.” Freshmen often behave this way. After twelve years of success in school, they find themselves in academic trouble for the first time and have to cope with the resulting internal and external pressures.

Your job is to confront these students gently, but with a dose of reality. Was their poor exam really just a “bad day,” or aren’t they preparing as well as they think they are? Get them to make sensible plans for their academic work. They may need suggestions on how to study and manage their time, as well as help with the course material. Encourage them to take advantage of the tutoring services available—those offered by the large freshman courses, the Dean’s office, the dorm and fraternity tutors. Perhaps there is someone else in the section who lives nearby with whom they could study, or some upperclassman who can help.

Remember, you are one step closer to the students than anyone else in the course, and therefore the first line of defense against their academic troubles. If the problems seem serious, particularly if they extend to the other courses (be tactful about inquiring), you should contact the student’s advisor or the resident tutor in their living group. If these don’t seem like an appropriate first resource, it may be better to alert one of the Deans. They do academic counseling and have programs designed to assist students with study skills and time management.

If you cannot get in touch with the student, at least alert the advisor, whose name you can get from the Dean’s office (or from the class list you circulated).

