When class goes sideways

Respond to conflict without losing clarity or dignity

A difficult moment calls for a proportionate response, not a diagnostic theory. Maintain appropriate expectations while making the route back into learning visible.

10 PRACTICAL MOVES

1 Check immediate safety

If someone is at risk, use the established safety process. Otherwise, avoid treating discomfort, disagreement, or unusual communication as an emergency.

2 Describe what happened

Say “Several people were unable to hear the speaker,” not “You are being defiant.” Separate observation from assumptions about motive.

3 Regulate your delivery

Use a steady voice, short sentences, and fewer competing instructions. A public escalation can make an already difficult situation harder.

4 Make expectations concrete

Identify the relevant rule and how to comply. “Wait until the speaker finishes, then raise your hand” beats “Show respect.”

5 Reduce the audience

When reasonable, move a follow-up discussion outside the spotlight. Protect the student’s privacy without promising secrecy you cannot keep.

6 Offer realistic choices

For example: “Would you rather write your response now or speak with me after class?” Options should be genuine, not disguised ultimatums.

7 Leave processing time

A pause or written prompt may improve the next exchange. Do not require an immediate verbal explanation when it is not necessary.

8 Follow the actual policy

Conduct standards, approved accommodations, safety rules, and applicable law still matter. Consult the appropriate campus offices when needed.

9 Document observable facts

Record actions, time, context, response, and follow-up. Avoid amateur diagnoses, character judgments, and undocumented speculation.

10 Repair the design too

Ask whether ambiguous instructions, sensory conditions, unclear group roles, or inconsistent procedures made the conflict more likely.

Read the full guide: ttwnest.org/for/instructors/

Questions, suggestions, or corrections? info@ttwnest.org

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PUT IT INTO WORDS

When a student interrupts repeatedly

LESS HELPFUL

“Stop being rude. You always disrupt this class.”

TRY THIS INSTEAD

“I want to hear your point, and I need everyone to finish. Please jot it down until the speaker finishes. We can talk after class about another way to jump in.”

This preserves a real boundary while giving a specific next action and an opening for later repair.

FIVE-MINUTE ACTION CHECKLIST

- [ ] State the classroom expectation in observable terms.
- [ ] Use the least public response that is appropriate.
- [ ] Offer a realistic way to rejoin the activity.
- [ ] Record what happened, not what you think a diagnosis means.
- [ ] Review patterns and relevant campus procedures after class.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

CAST’s UDL Guidelines 3.0 are a design framework for making participation and expectations accessible. Milton’s double-empathy model challenges one-sided accounts of communication breakdown. Neither source proves that one script will resolve every disruptive incident.

BOUNDARIES AND CAVEATS

Do not infer a disability from behavior. Appropriate conduct and safety policies apply, with individualized consideration of approved accommodations and applicable obligations.

SOURCE STARTERS: CAST (2024) · Milton (2012) · Dwyer (2022)

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