The following document does not seek to be “authoritative”. It is drawn from my experience and reflects some of the issues that I have addressed in my class - sometimes successfully and sometimes not! Classroom conflict and student grievances are something that we all have to deal with, for better or worse. Having strategies to address conflict and grievances in advance is an important element of effective teaching.

### Classroom Conflict

Classroom Conflict: for the purposes here, I have conceived of classroom conflict as tensions that exist in the classroom itself, between the professors and the students and between the students themselves. From the faculty perspective, this may be translated into inappropriate classroom behavior and thus begs the question: how do we manage that behavior? Behaviors may include the following:

- Student tardiness or lack of attendance
- Students talking during your lecture
- Inappropriate comments in classroom discussion (creation of an unsafe classroom environment)
- Student hostility toward the professor
- Students leaving the classroom
- Students sleeping

### Student Grievances

Student grievances: may include the following:

- “Public/institutional complaints” - These are gripes about the institution that may arise in the classroom. For example: “I have problems getting reserve readings”.
- Complaints or grievances about other students - These are concerns students raise about other students, for example in a group work context. What are you, as the professor, going to do about students who underperform in group work or if they get sick?
- Student complaints about course work or issues about timeliness of return of assignments
- Student complaints about other faculty members - ie. Unfairness in another class or harassment
- Student misconduct that results in a student grievance.
Some Grievance and Conflict Management Techniques:

- One of the best ways to avoid student grievances is to “lay down the law” in your course outlines. Included at the end of this document are examples from course outlines that seek to do just that. Remember that the outline is a contract between you and the student.
- Try to be a “critically reflective teacher” - monitor your own behavior. Remember that our style and behaviour may be the source of some unexpected conflict. For example, a more personalized style which I tend to adopt, while encouraged from some pedagogical perspectives, can result in students assuming a flexibility on the professor’s part. If we seek to empower students in the classroom some students may seek to take advantage of the dispersed authority. Similarly, students may well take grades more personally if they feel more personally connected to you. Each of us has our own teaching style and if we are self aware we realize that our teaching style and attitudes towards the classroom have implications. We need to consider how our students are experiencing the classroom - that will help us address those unexpected conflicts or problems inside and outside the classroom.
- Talk to a colleague about classrooms strategies/talk to your chair – it is important to use care when discussing these issues especially given confidentiality rules at the university regarding student files, but you can always talk to your chair or talk to a trusted colleague who may has experience dealing with similar issues.
- Be consistent in the application of rules - special deals with students can cause you problems. But, if you believe that the student deserves a break and/or it is a legitimate medical or compassionate reason, put it all in writing. Students may also be required to provide documentation to support their case (See the UNBC rules regarding deferrals).
- If the student grievance is a result of your claim of misconduct (such as plagiarism or cheating) you should ensure that you have the necessary evidence to support your claim. How have you proven the cheating or plagiarism? See the strategy below regarding oral exams as a means by which to force the student to prove that their work is their own. Having a discussion in plagiarism and cheating in your class helps avoid this kind of conflict and having a section in your class outline supports your case if it goes to appeal.
- If you are dealing with a case of plagiarism and/or cheating ensure that you follow the appropriate procedures. There are forms that must be filled out and steps that must be taken to ensure due process. I strongly encourage you to report ALL cases of plagiarism and/or cheating.
• Students do have a right to appeal and you have a right to disagree with their grievance. To support your case, ensure you have appropriate documentation.

• If the grievance relates to harassment, this must be taken very seriously. Documentation is paramount as is discretion. The campus harassment officer can provide you with strategies for dealing with this issue. Contact Cindy Hardy, the Harassment Advisor and see also the section on Harassment and Discrimination in this manual.

• Remember that we all make mistakes and while you might want to confess to your class – experience suggests that you might want to rectify the problem in a fair but private way and at the same time try to “never let them see you sweat”. General classroom discussions about the fairness or accuracy of a multiple choice question can lead to mayhem (trust me!).

• Rules regarding plagiarism and cheating are available at: http://www.unbc.ca/calendar/undergraduate/general/regulations.html

EXAMPLES FROM COURSE OUTLINES

From Kathy Lewis (Ecosystem and Science Management):

Policy on late/missed assignments or exams

Students are expected to attend class, complete assignments by the due date, and write exams on the scheduled date. Exceptions will be made for students who have a scheduled and important event (e.g. surgery, family wedding) providing that the student informs the instructor PRIOR to the event, and makes an effort to hand in assignments BEFORE the scheduled due date. Exceptions will also be made for students who encounter an unexpected event providing that the student, or someone acting on the student’s behalf, notifies the instructor as soon as possible. In most cases, written documentation will be required before provision for the missed assignment or exam will be made. Exceptions will not be made for lack of good time management or muddled priorities.

From Heather Smith (International Studies/adopted from Political Science)

Students are expected to understand the rules and regulations regarding academic dishonesty and plagiarism. If you are at all unsure, consult the University Calendar.

Extensions on assignments are not permitted, except in case of illness or due to serious extenuating circumstance. In the event of illness or serious extenuating
circumstance, the student must inform the instructor before the due date, and documentary evidence of the illness or serious extenuating circumstance must be provided to the instructor. In addition, the student must also provide the instructor with a draft of his or her assignment at the time of the illness or serious circumstance that indicates that substantial progress has already been made towards a final product. Assignments that are not submitted on the due date will receive a grade of zero.

Jon Swainger - History

Plagiarism: Students are obliged to familiarize themselves with university policies and penalties regarding plagiarism. These guidelines will be enforced without exception.

Oral Examination: Upon request, students may be obliged to undergo an oral examination on the course materials or assignments before a grade will be assigned. (This is based on the assumption that all students should be able to describe their work - a means by which to address concerns regarding plagiarism)

Late assignments: All assignments are due on the date specified in the course outline. Unless accompanied by documentation demonstrating medical or compassionate reasons for late submission, along with evidence of a proportionate amount of research or writing having been completed to date, no assignments will be accepted after the specified due date. Computer failure or similar technical difficulties will not be considered legitimate reasons for late submission. A failing grade will be assessed on all late assignments.

Return of assignments: Students should not expect assignments to be returned in less than two weeks after the due date and should manage their time accordingly.

Some general tips related to discipline in the classroom

- Be consistent in everything you do
- Do what you preach
- Don’t just set the rules - stand by them.
- Apply all the same rules to everyone in class - no favoritism
- Make your expectations clear (about attendance, submission of work, participation, classroom behavior)
- Try to demonstrate understanding for your students, but at the same time be firm
- No matter what, do not lose your calm
- Use a firm voice, but do not yell or scream
• Do not confront an unruly student in front of the classroom, but rather talk to him or her in private
• Use humor to dissipate tension and frustration
• If you are having a bad day, do not bring it to the classroom
• Don’t take things personally
(Taken from; Vesna Nikolic and Hanna Cabji Am I Teaching Well: Self-Evaluation Strategies for Effective Teachers (Toronto: Pippin, 2000), 162.

*Some of my most effective teaching strategies have arisen from having to deal with classroom conflict. We too are learners, and so don’t be afraid to learn!*