



Effective Instructional Practice: Facilitating Constructive Dissent

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Instructional dissent refers to students' expression of their disagreements or complaints concerning class-related policies or practices (Goodboy, 2011a).

A number of instructor behaviors may cause students to dissent, including unfair testing or grading procedures, teaching style, classroom policies, violations of the syllabus, misbehaviors, and lack of feedback (Goodboy, 2011b). Students communicate dissent to a number of recipients, the most frequent being their classmates, friends, and family members as well as the instructor who caused their dissent (Goodboy, 2011a). The ways in which students choose to dissent are affected by their perceptions of the disagreement episode (LaBelle & Martin, 2014), the instructor (LaBelle, Martin, & Weber, 2013), and their own characteristics (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013).

There are three distinct ways that students communicate instructional dissent, depending on its intended purpose and to whom the message is communicated.

Expressive dissent involves students' desire to express and vent feelings for cathartic purposes (Goodboy, 2011b). Students who engage in expressive dissent tend to speak with classmates, friends, and family members instead of their instructors. *Vengeful dissent* center on students' formulation of messages that are intended to ruin an instructor's reputation, ensure that other students do not take a future course with the instructor, or attempt to have the instructor lose his or her job as retribution for the perceived wrongdoing (Goodboy, 2011b). Students who engage in vengeful dissent share these messages with their peers, professors, and administrators. *Rhetorical*

dissent reflects students' desire to persuade their instructors to take action and either correct a wrongdoing or remedy the issue at hand (Goodboy, 2011b). Students who express rhetorical dissent attempt to rectify the perceived action by directly approaching the instructor. As such, it is considered to be the most constructive of the three types of dissent, and is typically associated with more positive outcomes.

Facilitating constructive instructional dissent is important for three reasons. First, the way in which students express dissent affects how and if issues can be resolved in the classroom. If students vent to parents and friends about their course concerns, instructors are not alerted to the fact that there is an issue. However, students who engage in rhetorical dissent by directly speaking to their instructors allow them the opportunity to address an issue or improve teaching methods as necessary. Because student dissatisfaction is an inevitable part of the teaching process (Goodboy, 2011a), encouraging rhetorical dissent should be a primary goal for instructors (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013).

Second, the way in which students express dissent affects their course learning outcomes. Whereas both expressive and vengeful dissent are associated with negative outcomes such as decreased student communication satisfaction, state motivation, and affective learning, rhetorical dissent is associated with increased perceptions of student cognitive learning (Goodboy, 2011a). Third, the three types of dissent are associated differentially with a number of instructor outcomes. Instructors report feeling more emotionally exhausted, less satisfied in their teaching, and less efficacious in managing their classroom when students engage in expressive dissent (Frisby, Goodboy, & Buckner, 2015). When students engage in rhetorical dissent, however, instructors report

higher efficacy in their instructional strategies (Frisby et al.).

Five Tips for Facilitating Constructive Dissent in the Classroom

1. The research on instructional dissent has indicated that some students are predisposed to engage in negative forms of dissent. Understand that because some of these student personality and communication traits (Goodboy & Martin, 2014; Goodboy & Myers, 2012) are beyond your control, dissent from some students is inevitable. Instead, focus on the student characteristics that you can influence. For example, students who are interested in learning the course content, as opposed to merely earning a course grade, are more likely to engage in rhetorical dissent (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014) as are students with high academic self efficacy (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014; LaBelle et al., 2013). Structure your courses in a way that not only encourages students to prioritize learning over grade achievement, but also allows students to feel efficacious in their ability to succeed in the course.

2. The messages instructors send in the classroom have an influence on the type of dissent that students are more likely to enact (Ball & Goodboy, 2014; LaBelle et al., 2013). To encourage rhetorical dissent, be straightforward and explicit in your instruction with students, but do not be overly forceful or controlling in the requests you make of your students. The clearer and less dogmatic students perceive you, the less likely they are to complain to others and more likely to approach you directly to resolve an issue.

3. Create a respectful and open environment that encourages students to voice their concerns without risk of retaliation or harm to your relationship. Reduce any sense that students might have that speaking with you could lead to negative consequences

by allowing opportunities for informal feedback in and outside of the classroom (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2016). You may choose to conduct anonymous mid-semester evaluations of your courses and incorporate any reasonable feedback into your teaching practices as a result.

4. Relatedly, when students approach you with a disagreement, be approachable and demonstrate genuine concern to resolve it. Students are more likely to engage in rhetorical dissent when they feel that speaking with you about an issue will actually fix the problem (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2016). If you respond to students in an angry or sarcastic tone, they will be more likely to blame you for the incident (McPherson & Young, 2004) and subsequently engage in vengeful dissent (LaBelle & Martin, 2014). Remain calm and constructive to set the tone for the conversation.

5. Of course, perhaps the most obvious way to facilitate students' constructive dissent is to not give students a reason to engage in negative forms of dissent. Avoid engaging in instructor misbehaviors, which acts as a triggering agent for student dissent (Goodboy, 2011b; Vallade, Martin, & Vela, 2015), and work toward establishing a classroom environment that students perceive as fair and just (Goodboy, 2011a; Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014). In graduate programs, perceptions of bullying behaviors (i.e., belittlement, punishment, managerial misconduct, and exclusion) are associated with students' increased likelihood to engage in expressive and vengeful dissent (Martin, Goodboy, & Johnson, 2015). Engaging in behaviors that your students perceive as offensive, indolent, or incompetent--as well as those instructional practices that are perceived as unfair, unjust, or abusive--drive them away from communicating with you.

Assessing Students' Instructional Dissent

To assess the extent to which your students express instructional dissent, do so by completing the 22-item Instructional Dissent Scale (Goodboy, 2011a).

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