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Coping with Difficult Situations in a Course

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1. Introduction

All teachers occasionally encounter difficult situations when teaching, which is expressed in student behaviour either as direct criticism in class or through coolness or hostility. This extremely wide range of phenomena is termed resistance here, and can be directed either at the teaching or the teacher.

Related issues: conflicts - discrimination - threats

Other forms of disruptions and conflicts, such as **conflicts or discrimination between students**, are not dealt with here. The following materials may provide you with ideas on how to deal with these issues:

- Handlungsempfehlungen für Lehrende in Fällen von Diskriminierungen zwischen Studierenden
(Recommendations on how teachers should act in the event of discrimination between students, in German)

- Interventionen im Fall von Konflikten & Verletzungen
(Interventions in the event of conflicts and offensiveness) – video from the 'Wie machen Sie das?' (How do you do that?) series, in German

- Umgang mit antidemokratischen Positionen & Diskussionsstilen
(Coping with antidemocratic positions & discussion styles) – video from the 'Wie machen Sie das?' (How do you do that?) series

If you feel that the behaviour of certain students is not just a challenge but in fact a **threat** (to yourself or to other students), the Teaching Manual may help:

- Teaching Manual

- You can also always obtain advice from the "Team Bedrohungsmanagement" (Threat management team) of the University of Vienna, website in German. Your concerns will be dealt with in confidence.

First of all, it is important to state that resistance is a **behaviour** by individuals, **not a personal trait**. Behaviour arises from an interaction of the individual and the situation; so associating it with someone's personality is often not only wrong but counterproductive.

Moreover, resistance should not simply be regarded as a negative – e.g. as a lack of interest, ability, or social competence. In fact, resistance can be the result of active engagement with teaching content or the general teaching environment. Although it can be hard to accept resistance as a form of feedback on your teaching, you may want to consider using it as a **productive resource** in your teaching choices.

For example, teachers who deal with ethical questions or aim to develop self-reflection in their classes can take resistance as a sign that a critical point has been reached in the discussion. In this case, resistance becomes a valuable learning opportunity to be addressed.

This article aims to **support** teachers in such difficult situations and encourage them to **engage reflectively**. Taking such a sensitive approach requires a nuanced understanding, therefore we will first of all consider how to evaluate the situation. Then we will present a range of ways in which teachers can intervene, and illustrate them with specific case studies.

2. Situation analysis

Effective intervention in the event of resistance in class requires a nuanced analysis of the situation. In practice however you often have little time; in many teaching situations you have to act without having prepared in advance for a specific scenario. However, if signs of resistance arise over several weeks, you can undertake a situation analysis to develop effective interventions. You can also use the analytical tools we suggest to reflect on your intervention afterwards. They may at least partially help to explain why a specific approach worked well or not so well.

There are several aspects to a situation analysis:

2.1 Perception: How are participants behaving?

Manifestations of resistance are often complex. As a teacher you focus almost automatically on aspects that are especially irritating or noticeable. However, in class a 'disturbance' usually involves the entire group. Thus, it is important also to take note of how other students react and incorporate this in your overall view.

The following questions can help you to structure your perception of the situation:

- *What behaviour can I observe (primary and secondary scenarios)?*
- *Precisely whose behaviour is involved (primary and secondary participants)?*
- *How does the group respond to the behavior of individuals?*
- *What are the conditions when this behaviour occurs?*
- *How has this behaviour changed since I noticed it?*

The more detailed your situation analysis the better. The more accurately you can describe the situation, the more precisely and sparingly you can intervene. Also, try to limit immediate responses to resistance to exceptional cases only. Take your time, instead of automatically jumping in to counter the resistance. If circumstances allow, try to gain an understanding of as many aspects of the situation as possible.

2.2 Understanding your own position: Where do I stand in the situation?

Resistance disrupts the flow you have planned for a class, and you can therefore perceive it as unwelcome, irritating, disconcerting, annoying or even hurtful. Hence, typical reactions include a variety of thoughts and feelings, which may interfere and are often disordered

In contrast, effective intervention demands a **clear position**. This depends on among other things clarity about how you personally are affected, possibly hurt, and the appropriate choice of an intervention in this case. You should try therefore to be clear about the range and the importance of your thoughts and feelings.

- (a) **Gather information:** Try to take control of your thoughts and feelings as much as possible.
- (b) **Set priorities:** Consider which thoughts and feelings are especially 'loud' or recur in different ways and are therefore especially important to your perception of the situation.

Often, it is not easy to admit that you are unsure or vulnerable. However, credibility is usually more convincing than a strained self-confidence.

2.3 Effect: What do I want to achieve by my intervention?

You may have a variety of goals for your intervention, such as:

- stopping a disturbance
- defining a vague problem
- restoring a positive working environment
- maintaining your own image

Interventions often fail because either their objectives or the extent to which they should achieve different things at the same time are not well enough defined.

As a rule of thumb: choose one primary objective. This will generally make it easier for you to direct your intervention towards this goal. The clearer your goal, the more precisely and effectively you can intervene.

3. Reasons for resistance in class

The reasons for resistance in class are rarely obvious. The following categorisation is heuristic, since the reasons are usually complex and diverse. This list merely indicates the range of potential factors.

- **Teaching approach:** unclear or unsuitable time management, too great/too small challenge for students, teacher not transparent enough about the process/the objectives;
- **Teacher's leadership:** teacher is evidently insecure, instructions or expectations of students are unclear, students are not clearly or not sufficiently involved;
- **Requirements of students:** students or teacher insufficiently experienced with certain types of class, unclear motivation for the studies/subject, lack of interest in specific content, some students feel they cannot articulate reservations about content adequately, lack of preparation by students;
- **Social factors:** self-image of some students in the group, anxiety in the group because of dominant individuals, wanting to 'test' the teacher;
- **Situation-related factors:** poor air quality, unsuitable room conditions, time of day, poor acoustics;
- **Attribution, prejudice, discrimination:** with regard to students or the teacher (gender, nationality, age, language, appearance, etc.). More information on the Infopool page ([Diversity \(3\): Reflection & sense of responsibility](#)).

Even though thinking about potential reasons is important, you can still counter resistance effectively without being absolutely certain about the reasons. Perceiving resistance as justified at all is in itself a significant step, if you are looking for ways to deal with it productively.^[2]

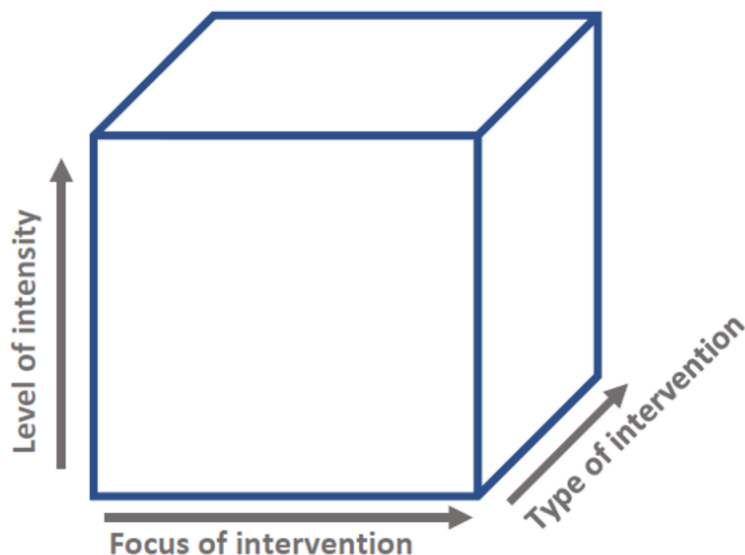
When you are seeking reasons for resistance, please bear the following in mind:

- **Students who display 'resistant' behaviour are not necessarily themselves aware of the reasons.** ^[3] Resistant behaviour is often a way of expressing a vague unease or general lack of clarity.
- **Conspicuous behaviour is not always resistance.**^[4] Unusual behaviour often arises from group dynamics, defining a role, self-image or group-related power relationships. It may however also simply be a mannerism or habit of that person. So you are often faced with the difficulty of determining potential reasons for the resistance and at the same time not exceeding your abilities..
- **Therefore you should avoid leaping to conclusions.** At least question your first interpretation.
- **Ask Questions**, when faced with conspicuous or disruptive behaviour, instead of speculating.
- **Sometimes teachers are themselves the cause of the resistance.** At times, a specific class fails to gel because of (unsuitable) teaching methodology choices, and not the resistance of students. If you exhibit annoyance or disappointment in these situations, it can make the students feel unjustifiably accused and then really respond with resistance. Such mistaken choices can result in a lack of clarity uncomfortable for the students or them being overwhelmed or underchallenged.

4. Coping with resistance

A three-dimensional model, the intervention cube, is often used to differentiate types of intervention.

[5] This distinguishes the following dimensions:



4.1 Focus of the intervention

The intervention that is chosen can address different people:

- An individual
- Several people
- The whole group

Tip: Consider whether you want to speak to one person or several outside class, or whether your intervention should deliberately be directed at the whole group during face-to-face teaching.

4.2 Intensity of the intervention

The intensity of the intervention can vary. The three basic forms are:

- **Tangential:** The teacher does not speak about the resistance as they perceive it, does not relate their intervention explicitly to an aspect of resistance and often does not even express it transparently. Examples: small changes in lesson plans or time plans for a unit, changing position within the room (standing more/less, behind/in front of the desk), etc.
- **Direct:** The teacher addresses the form of resistance directly – as they see it..
- **Confrontational:** Addressing the resistance is accompanied by an interpretation of the behaviour, with the threat of sanctions, a demand for an explanation for the behaviour, etc.

Principle: Don't use a sledgehammer to test out what is just effective enough. crack a nut! Use the least intense approach for your intervention and test out what is just effective enough.

4.3 Type of Intervention^[6] - practical options in class

4.3.1 Change the situation

You can make changes in various ways:

- Varying your position within the room (standing/sitting, distance to students)
- Control the formation of work groups
- Choice of teaching methodology (adjust in lesson plan)
- A surprise response to resistance (appreciation of an objection, understanding students' strong reservations, etc.)
- Clarifying basic conditions or rules (contracting, negotiating responsibilities, clarifying basic conditions and leeway for co-determination, etc.) (see also "First Class Meeting" (, v.a. 5. Clarifying Organisational Matters and Work Modes)

4.3.2 Describe the situation

Discuss your own perceptions:

- Behaviour when communicating (who speaks how much/with whom/when...): "[Student name X], you haven't said a word today." "[Student name Y], you've answered four of the five questions already." "[Student name Z], you contradict [Student name N] while looking at me."
- Perceived resistance (verbal and nonverbal): "[Student name B], you've said you don't like something five times already now." "[Student name F], you've been looking out of the window for 3 minutes instead of reading the text." "[Student name M], you're frowning."
- Behaviour (who does what when): "[Student name A], I've interrupted my explanation three times now because you are chatting with your neighbour." "[Student name C], this is the third day in a row when you've turned up 20-30 minutes late."
- Perceiving and following standards: "I've noticed that some of you always put your hand up when you want to say something, while others just speak. Some of you have reacted by frowning or grumbling when someone speaks without waiting for permission."

4.3.3 Explain - give reasons - request behaviour

Describe a situation in relation to a theory, a principle, a rule or standard. In other words, give reasons for judging a type of behaviour ("I don't think it is a good thing i only two of you respond regularly, because...") or you give a reasoned suggestion for how the situation could change ("In future I'd like to take a brief break after 45 minutes because...").

- Explain and give reasons for your behaviour transparently (e.g. change of lesson plan)
- Explain and give reasons for your ("I don't comment on each of your contributions straight away because I want each of you to learn to analyse them critically for yourselves. However, to do this you have to pay more attention to each other than you seem to have been doing.")
- Discuss the students' responsibilities and give reasons for requesting this behaviour

4.3.4 Reflect (discuss emotions - ask for student opinions)

State a perceived emotional reaction (of an individual or the group). In this case, unlike the description of the situation, it is more about an interpretation. In order to avoid a quasitherapeutic situation arising that is inappropriate to a class, you should bear the following points in mind:

- Only use this kind of intervention with care. Stick as much as possible to description and as little as possible to interpretation.
- Combine addressing your own perception with an invitation to the students to express themselves (e.g. as part of a class evaluation). Concrete options for implementation:'
- Flashlight': students respond briefly to a given question (e.g. in turn)
- Mood curve: students draw a mood/attention curve of the session and comment on it
- Specific enquiries
- Imitate or parody the body language or expressions of students (keep it as friendly and humorous as possible, aggression is inappropriate and counterproductive)

4.3.5 Interpretation - Discuss and interpret behaviour that you perceive as resistance. This is usually a high-intensity intervention, so it should only be used in exceptional cas

- Example: "You've vigorously objected to my reading of the text three times now, but without giving clear reasons. Are you wanting to test how a young woman like me reacts to this?"

5. Case studies

✓ **Example 1: Student makes derogatory comments about the teacher's statements**

✓ **Example 2: Student dominates with lengthy contributions**

6. Sources of support and further information

If you would like to learn more about coping with difficult situations in class, try the [courses offered](#) by the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Through role playing, you can experiment with and experience various approaches to solve such difficult situations in a workshop. This is important, as the effectiveness of interventions depends massively on very specific formulations, timing, manner of address, body language and other details.

You can also obtain individualised advice on [customised course development](#)

Sources:

[1] The concept of resistance has not received much attention in educational research. A few publications which indicate the heterogeneity of how this issue is handled are given as examples here: Arnold, Rolf. 'Identität und Emotion als Faktoren: Erkenntnisse aus der Lernwiderstandsforschung'. In DIE Zeitschrift für Erwachsenenbildung, published by Ekkehard Nuissl, No. 2 (2000), Bielefeld, 23-25; Faulstich, Peter, und Petra Grell. 'Widerständig ist nicht unbegründet - Lernwiderstände in der forschenden Lernwerkstatt'. In Lernwiderstand, Lernumgebung, Lernberatung: Empirische Fundierungen zum selbstgesteuerten Lernen, published by Peter Faulstich et al. Bielefeld: Bertelsmann, 2005, 18-92; Franz, Melanie. Widerstand in kooperativen Bildungsarrangements. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004; Giroux, Henry A. Theory and Resistance in Education. Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition. Revised and Expanded Edition. Westport and London: Bergin & Garvey, 1983/2001; Grotlüschen, Anke. Widerständiges Lernen im Web - virtuell selbstbestimmt? Eine qualitative Studie über E-Learning in der beruflichen Erwachsenenbildung. Münster: Waxmann, 2003; Holzer, Daniela. Weiterbildungswiderstand: Eine kritische Theorie der Verweigerung. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017; Holzkamp, Klaus. Schriften I: Normierung, Ausgrenzung, Widerstand, Hamburg and Berlin: Argument, 1987/1997, 159-195; Moore, Helen A. Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Sociology Department, Faculty Publications, 88 (2007); Rybnikova, Irma. 'Auffassungen des Widerstandes von Lernenden in Bildungsinstitutionen: Der Fall Hochschule'. Organisation und Theorie. Beiträge der

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Opladen/Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich/UTB, 2011; Seidel, Shannon B., and Kimberly D. Tanner. 'What if students revolt? - Considering Student Resistance: Origins, Options, and Opportunities for Investigation'. In CEB - Life Sciences Education 12, No. 4 (Winter 2013), 586-595.

[2] See Faulstich and Grell. 'Widerständig ist nicht unbegründet' [1]; Franz. Widerstand in kooperativen Bildungsarrangements [1]; Giroux. Theory and Resistance in Education [1]; Grotlüschen. Widerständiges Lernen im Web [1]; Holzkamp. Schriften I [1]. Here too: what is seen as the point of resistance is judged very differently.

[3] For an early position presenting this thesis, see Giroux. Theory and Resistance in Education [1].

[4] See again Giroux. Theory and Resistance in Education [1] for an early relevant assumption.

[5] This was developed by Cohen, Arthur Martin, and Robert Douglas Smith. The Critical Incident in Growth Groups. San Diego, 1976; further developed and adapted to process consulting of groups by Reddy, B. W. Intervention Skills: Process Consultation for Small Groups and Teams. San Francisco: Pfeiffer and Co, 1994..

[6] The basic distinction corresponds to the model, the terms are in some cases adapted.

[7] The suggestions are not valid in every circumstance. The effectiveness of an intervention depends on many situation-related factors and personal characteristics. The numbers in brackets relate to the relevant points in the previous section.

[8] The advantage of anonymity is for example that students do not think that they will be 'found guilty' for their critical position and receive poorer marks, and this can increase the likelihood of honest statements. The disadvantage is that you cannot respond individually to needs, and that it does not in general promote a working environment where controversial discussions and productive criticism are possible.

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