
Creating a Respectful Teaching and Learning Environment: A Conversation with Vanier's Social Service Officer

In Spring 2018, Humanities teacher Caroline Chwojka interviewed Ginny Iaboni, Vanier's Social Service Officer, to learn more about her role and the support she offers to students and teachers.

CC: What exactly does your role as Social Service Officer consist of?

GI: My title used to be Student Life Advisor, but it's been changed to Social Service Officer. I'm responsible for both discipline and crisis intervention on campus, as well as providing teachers with support when dealing with classroom management.

What do you mean by "classroom management"?

Classroom management means organizing your classroom environment so that teaching and learning can be a positive experience for everyone. It means establishing procedures and rules that are clear, simple, and positive.

Prevention is key when managing your classroom. I usually give teachers a list of 10 strategies they can follow when creating a positive classroom environment:

1. Set the tone of your classroom at the beginning of the semester:
 - a. Clearly state your expectations.
 - b. Review class rules; make sure that they are clear and simple.
 - c. Do not impose classroom rules you are not willing to enforce.
2. Be approachable: You aren't your students' parent, and you're not there to hold anyone's hand, but you do have a responsibility to create a classroom setting that engages students and fosters mutual respect. Learning occurs when you work together to celebrate strengths and work out differences.
3. Be positive: Use kindness and humor to make your classroom a comfortable place for students to thrive.
4. Learn their names: Students will feel welcome in your classroom and will hold themselves accountable for their actions if they don't feel anonymous.
5. Understand your students: Get to know them as individuals. Build relationships with them based on trust and understanding.
6. Be a role model: Mentor them, and teach by example. If students are encouraged, they perform better.
7. Be relevant: Include course material and learning activities that will resonate with your students.
8. Know the rights and responsibilities of both students and teachers as articulated in the College's Institutional Policy on the Evaluation of Student Achievement (IPESA).
9. Acknowledge disrespectful behaviour in class; don't ignore it.
10. Be aware of college resources: help students who struggle in your class by directing them to an appropriate resource.



If you adhere to these proactive strategies, you are less likely to encounter behavioural issues, but even with the best intentions and lots of effort, a teacher might come across issues. I have noticed that there is a growing culture of disrespect among students towards their teachers. It saddens me to observe this.

If you encounter behavioural issues in class, refer to the **Student Misconduct in the Classroom Policy**¹. The policy was established to provide procedures for handling cases where students disrupt the teaching and learning environment. Some examples are when students:

- Behave disrespectfully
- Are constantly late
- Don't pay attention
- Are consistently disrupt
- Use cell phones excessively
- Do not respond to direction

Could you explain when a teacher would need to refer to this policy?

It's when "students are not adhering to a positive learning environment and demonstrating conduct that is abusive to the teacher and/or other students, whether it's happening in the classroom, lab, clinical, or other instructional settings (on and off campus), including meetings or electronic correspondence between teachers and students." This quote comes directly from the policy, which was written in 2010. Revisions will have to be made to the existing policy as certain elements are out of date, but teachers should still follow the steps that are currently outlined in the policy.

It's really important for teachers to know that if you are encountering an **immediate threat**, you should bypass the aforementioned policy and go directly to the **Code of Conduct Policy**².

What is the difference between the Code of Conduct Policy and the Student Misconduct in the Classroom Policy?

It is imperative to know that both policies deal with misbehaviour. The Student Misconduct in the Classroom Policy only applies to students who are disruptive in the classroom. On the other hand, the Code of Conduct is a policy that applies to everyone on college campus including, students, faculty, administrators, employees, members of the boards of directors and visitors. It sets forth principles, guidelines, and norms of behaviour expected from all individuals present at Vanier College (Code of Conduct, Vanier College, 2017).

You referred to an "immediate threat." What do you mean by this?

Immediate threat is when the safety of either the teacher or students is at risk. This will prompt a call to Security. Some general examples that fall under the Code of Conduct Policy are:

- Intimidation
- Physical or verbal abuse
- Harassment and discrimination
- Threatening emails
- Cyberbullying

What are more specific examples where a teacher would need to call Security?

A teacher should contact security if they encounter any of the following situations in the classroom:

- Violent and/or aggressive student(s)
- A student is incoherent or out of control
- Student who refuses to get out of class
- Two students arguing disrespectfully
- Physical altercations
- Medical emergencies

Once the situation was under control, Security would report the incident to me, and I would meet with the individuals involved to assess the situation.

Over the years, teachers have noticed an increase in unmotivated students. What are the signs we should look for in these students?

Teachers will encounter some students who may exhibit signs of distress. Here are some signs that you should observe closely:

- Social isolation
- Chronic lateness
- Lack of concentration
- Missed class and/or meetings
- Procrastination
- Unusual or erratic behavior

Teachers contact me for two different reasons: 1. a student has revealed to them that they are experiencing a personal or emotional issue; 2. a student is constantly disruptive and teachers are seeking advice.

¹ See http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/bylaws-policies-procedures/files/2015/09/7210-19_Student_Misconduct-2.pdf

² See <http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/bylaws-policies-procedures/files/2017/10/CODE-OF-CONDUCT-APPROVED-BY-BOARD-OCTOBER-10-2017docx.pdf>

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In the Student Misconduct in the Classroom policy, it states, “If underlying reasons for the misbehaviour are revealed (e.g. medical, personal or family reasons), the student should be advised to seek help from Student Services.”

By supporting unmotivated students through counselling or other services, we can ensure that disruption is minimal. It is normal that not all uninterested students will seek help. Conflict can at times be inevitable.

How can we prevent unmotivated students from becoming disruptive?

All students have the potential to be disruptive. When challenges/disruptions occur, handle them in a firm and respectful manner. Not addressing or avoiding disruptive behavior only festers and makes matters worse. One should never ignore it. Holding students accountable for their behavior teaches them responsibility and ownership over their own actions. That’s such an important lesson for them to learn. To help them with these life lessons:

- Be consistent. When a teacher is inconsistent, students may try to take advantage of the situation.
- Display authoritative body language: “Non-verbals” are very important, so carry yourself with confidence and maintain self-control.

Students are constantly observing you. If they notice insecurity, they may try to undermine your authority. There are powerful steps that you can take at the beginning of a course to set the right tone. By following the 10 tips that I’ve outlined and by adhering to the Student Misconduct in the Classroom Policy, you will address potential disruptions and avoid escalation.

Should teachers document disruptive occurrences?

It’s imperative that teachers document incidents immediately after they occur. Documenting the complaints establishes a timeline and a record of the event. As the policy states,

The teacher should record details of the incident(s) of misconduct, the steps taken to resolve the behaviour, and the student’s response. These notes should be kept for the rest of the semester in case they are needed. The teacher should inform the Department and/or Program Coordinator of these steps, and may provide written documentation.” (The Student Misconduct Policy, 2010).

How do you convey all those important messages, rules, policies and nuances to teachers?

It is very important to understand your students; and that’s not always easy. I think that being comfortable in a classroom environment sometimes takes years of practice. It’s OK to make mistakes; only through experience do we improve. It’s imperative to build relationships with your students. There needs to be mutual trust and respect,

which will guarantee success in the long run. It’s also essential to make class engaging, so that the students actively participate and do not feel tempted to disrupt.

My colleague says that I should have a “Dear Ginny” blog where teachers ask me how to deal with uncertain situations. In all seriousness, I’m preparing a teacher’s toolkit to help educators deal with difficult events in the classroom environment. I am working with the PSI office to develop this essential tool. I’m also getting lots of requests to attend department meetings to describe my role and explain how I can be of support to teachers dealing with problematic situations. If teachers have questions or concerns, they can contact me at iabonig@vaniercollege or at extension 7104. Happy teaching!



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