

Handling Noise and Mobile Phone Usage in the Classroom: A Disruptive Behaviour Case Study

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Abstract

Disruptive behaviour is the most critical and persistent challenge a teacher faces throughout his career. Pedagogists term disruptive behaviour as the behaviour that stops the process of learning to take place. Disruptive behaviour has a catastrophically demoralising effect on the teachers. Study of the literature reveals that the instances of classroom disruptions date back to the 13th century Rome. Active research in this domain has enabled researchers to devise effective strategies to cope with disruptions of various natures. This case study analyses classroom disruptions caused by students indulged in making excessive noise, and use of mobile phones. We assess physical, emotional, and environmental factors behind these disruptions, and discuss strategies to effectively tackle them.

Keywords: Classroom Management, Classroom Disruptions, Discipline, Student Behaviour

1. Introduction

Classroom discipline is one of the very important elements of successful teaching and learning. Classroom management is becoming a critical aspect of a teacher's professional skill set. Disruptions in the classroom are a historic phenomenon; as Holton (1995) has described incidents of classroom disruption dating back to 13th century Europe. US National Education Survey has reported that given an option, 36% of the teachers will not opt for teaching as a profession, primarily due to students' unwillingness to study and their disrespectful attitude (Wolfgang, 1986).

FEDA (1998) defines disruption in the classroom as "patterns of repeated behaviour which significantly interrupt the learning of others or threaten their personal security or well-being". University of Arkansas (2017) defines disruptive behaviour as "any behaviour that inhibits a faculty member's ability to conduct the class or limits other student's ability to benefit from instruction". Merv (2013) has defined disruptive behaviour as the "behaviour that stops the process of learning to take place".

The ability of a teacher to handle classroom disruptions is given a key priority in observations of teaching and learning conducted by the regulators. Ofsted believe that the "low-level classroom disruption hits learning" (Sellgren 2014). They report that "low-level disruptions are a major issue depriving too many young people of the education they deserve". Their statistics reveal that the students are losing up to an hour of learning each day because of bad behaviour" (Paton 2014). Ofsted has also observed that "the teachers are not doing enough to tackle unruly behaviour" in their classes.

Besides its impact on teaching and learning, and meeting regulatory standards, disruptive behaviour has a very critical consequence in terms of the morale and mental well-being of teachers. In a survey, McCorkell (2010) reveals that 70% of the teachers have considered quitting because of badly behaved pupils. More than 90% believe that classroom behaviour has worsened during their careers. More than a third took time off work, over 40% tried to move to another establishment, and 81.2% reveal that they have experienced stress, anxiety or depression. Townsend (2014) reveals that 42% of the teachers taking part in a survey have suffered from stress and almost a quarter had lost confidence at work.

There has been a recent surge in the classroom discipline issues in the UK as reported in a survey conducted in the further education establishments (Townsend, 2014). Survey reveals that 79% of the staff complained that the students talked in class, would not pay attention, and messed around in during the lectures. Some 68% added that students were disrespectful and ignored their instructions. 55% said they had dealt with verbally aggressive students and a fifth with physically aggressive students. The things get complicated when teachers are left on their own to solve the discipline issues. A recent Ofsted report reveals that only 45% of respondents from FE institutions and 56% of respondents from schools have their senior leaders collaborate with teachers when they need to solve classroom discipline problems jointly (Ofsted, 2019).

Teachers have faced noise and chatter as their worst enemy for centuries when it comes to classroom discipline. In the contemporary educational landscape, mobile phone usage however has surpassed all other classroom disruptions in its frequency, and enormity (Nikolopoulou, 2020). Researchers agree that the use of mobile phone is beneficial in formal educational settings provided there is a development in skills for both students and teachers (Calderón-Garrido, 2022; Dias, 2022; Nikolopoulou, 2020).

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 discusses the context important to be understood to affectively understand the important information on the student at the epicentre of this case study, and the group demographics. Section 3 provides the account of instances of disruptions caused by the student in question, and the strategies adopted to tackle his disruptive

behaviour. Section 4 details some alternative strategies that could have been adopted to tackle the disruptions under analysis in this paper.

2. The Context

Alex (name altered for anonymity) is a 17-year-old level 3 student in technology at an FE institution in Yorkshire, United Kingdom. Alex is in the 2nd semester of a 2-year diploma programme. In a racially diverse class with 24 students, approximately 40% of the frequently attending and punctual students are of the same ethnicity as of Alex. He gets along very well with the students with same ethnic group whereas his attitude is very formal with the rest of the class. Antonio (1998) reports that it is natural for the students to tend to be close to the students from the same race or ethnicity.

Skills in English and Mathematics are requisite for writing assignments and cope with technology-related modules. Alex has a grade C in both Mathematics and English. Alex lacks creativity in English writing and has difficulty understanding technology concepts that are primarily based on mathematics. Moreover, Alex is always behind with his assessments. In fact, he had performed poorly on all the modules in the first semester of the course. His minimum target grades for all the modules are set to a minimum pass grade, however, due to his attitude, teachers struggle to get him to achieve the target grades. Despite the unsatisfactory performance in academics, Alex has a good attendance record and is very punctual. Although teachers across the board complain about his disruptive attitude, Alex was not reported a disrespectful student.

3. Instances of Disruptions and Adopted Strategy

I (the lead author) was assigned this group in the fourth week into the semester, due to an emergency absence of a colleague. Prior to my first session with the group, with the help of group profiles used by other colleagues teaching the group in question, I prepared a detailed group profile including a differentiation plan (Levy, 2008). A close analysis of group profiles and my discussion with his lecturers, revealed Alex as the most disruptive student in the group.

I started my first lecture with an introduction of myself. In order to better know the students in aid of teaching and learning process (McDonalds, 2012), I asked students about their names, interests, and their ambitions in life. Being a stern believer in setting ground rules in early days of a class, I briefed students on the ground rules for my class (Frank, 2005). Students were informed that the activities including (but not limited to) constant talking, making excessive noise, and the use of mobile phones at any time during the class will be strictly dealt with (Skinner 1938).

After the introduction session, I started delivering on the topic. The room was arranged in horseshoe style that enabled me to have a clear view of every student in the group (Vizard, 2007). I began by asking Socratic questions to gauge the understanding of the students on the module. It was then when Alex started teasing students on their responses to my questions. I consequently directed one question towards him, to which he could not give a reply. It, however, made him keep quiet for a while in embarrassment perhaps. After finishing delivery, I gave students a task to complete using their computers. Kounin (1977) describes withitness as teacher's ability to know what is going on in their classroom at all times. While I was attending to a question from a student, I noticed Alex using his mobile phone. After answering that student, I approached Alex, where a close look revealed that he was on an external video call. I cautioned him and made him disconnect his call and put his phone in his pocket, to which he acted promptly. I made him open his assignment on the computer and asked him to complete the task for the session.

Alex seemed uninterested in working on the task, however, due to my persistence, he seemed to be complying. Within 5 minutes of me cautioning him, Alex started an argument with a classmate sitting next to him, who as per my understanding through the group profile, was his close friend. When I interfered, Alex gave a silly excuse for the argument. The argument finished within seconds upon my

intervention and cautioning both of them. I could, however, sense at least 3 students getting seriously distracted from this disruption caused by their argument. Ofsted has identified that disruptions deprive young people of the education they deserve (Sellgren 2014). In order to avoid other students getting affected, I decided to tackle the next distraction strictly, in accordance with my ground rules (Frank, 2005; Skinner 1938).

I did not have to wait long before that second instance, as I noticed Alex using his mobile phone yet again. As this disruption was not distracting other students, I took the time and opportunity to speak to Alex to assess the physical, emotional, and environmental factors associated with his disruptive attitude (Sally, 1999).

In context of use of mobile phone, emotional factors such as loss and maturity were considered. Alex revealed that he fears a breakup if he does not reply to the messages. Fear of loss is an important emotional factor behind the disruptive behaviour; however, research reveals that students cannot multi-task with mobiles and study (Coughlan, 2015). Keeping in view the devastating effects of using mobile phone in the class on his performance in the module, Alex was warned against the use of mobile phone during class, and of strict actions including expulsion from the class in conformance with the ground rules. I also attempted to assess maturity as an emotional factor behind his disruptive attitude. From our conversation, it revealed that Alex clearly lacked maturity expected from an FE student and his inability to gauge the academic challenge involved in writing assessments at level 3. Alex also appeared to lack the maturity to value the importance of time.

In relation to environmental factors behind his use of mobile phone in the class, I assessed Alex on factors such as norms for conduct, the challenge in the task, stimulus, and culture. Alex was repeatedly made aware of the expectations of conduct in relation to the use of mobile phone in the class. In terms of challenge in the task, the assignment tasks were adequately challenging for each student, however, it appeared that Alex was unwilling to make a serious effort to complete the tasks. To make the task more interesting and rather in approach for Alex, I provided him with additional support material. With a stimulus, I assumed that he would start taking interest in the task. I also explored the change of culture (from a school to an FE institution) as a reason behind his excessive use of mobile phone. It was revealed that as an FE student, he considers the use of mobile phone as his privilege and no violation. I explained to Alex that the use of mobile phone is not permitted in my class under any circumstances and gave him reasons backed by scientific research and my personal experience.

In my conversation with Alex to explore factors behind his use of mobile phone, I also attempted to explore physical factors such as fatigue and illness as reasons of disruption. Alex was asked if there were any issues with him in relation to stress or fatigue, to which he replied in negative. Psychologists relate the excessive use of mobile phone to a mental disorder, which could have been a potential reason behind this disruption (Bhatia, 2008). I, therefore, decided to observe Alex more closely in future sessions to draw a conclusion on my findings.

After spending significant time in our conversation, I left Alex to work on his assignment task, assured that he will be more focused on completing his work while I started supporting other students with their queries. Within a few minutes of our one-to-one conversation, Alex started yet another argument with the student sitting next to him. My intervention revealed that it was Alex who was trying to engage that student into a conversation that ended in an argument. I felt a little disappointed in Alex and cautioned him again to abstain from this behaviour.

In context of excessive noise, attention-seeking and lack of maturity could act as important emotional factors. Although the lack of maturity was evident, I decided to investigate his attention-seeking attitude further through discussion with his current lecturers.

Norms of conduct, the class size, challenge in the task, and culture could have been important

environmental factors behind Alex's noisy attitude. In context of norms of conduct, there was no ambiguity with regards to intolerance of the lecturers in the institution towards classroom disruptions such as noisy attitude. In a class of 24, I had Alex under my constant thus class size had no impact on his noisy attitude. In context of challenge in task as a factor behind his attitude, as stated previously, the task was appropriately set keeping in view the differentiation plan for the group. Alex was also provided with additional support during the session. Thus, the tasks in the assignment were neither too easy to result in students losing their interest, nor too difficult to impact their inability to complete them and consequently resort to disruptions such as excessive talking. I also explored shift in culture as an environmental factor behind Alex's noisy behaviour. I concluded that Alex had difficulty adjusting to a rather different and challenging culture of the college, which had perhaps resulted in him losing interest. I decided to investigate this further through a discussion with my colleagues in conformance with the recommended behaviour management guidelines (Husu, 2004).

Fatigue or illness (including hearing problems) could be important physical factors behind noisy attitude (Sally, 2009). Except for addiction of use of mobile phone as described earlier, my conversation with Alex and a read through his personal profile, Alex was confirmed not suffering from any physical or mental impairment.

At the end of the session on that day, I asked Alex to stay back for yet another one-to-one conversation. I made it clear to him that I had spent a good portion of the session attending to his disruptive attitude that was affecting the learning of other students (Merv, 2013; Paton, 2014). I also made him aware of the consequences of repeating this attitude in the future sessions. Alex argued that he uses mobile phone for necessary conversations, and that his argument with the other student during the class was not his fault. Alex offered to be sent to the student learning area for his assignment work after I have completed delivery in every session.

After the session, I discussed the possibilities of Alex sent to the student learning area, with the tutor responsible for the facility (Husu, 2004). I was informed that Alex was regularly being referred to the facility by other teachers due to his disruptive attitude. The tutor added that Alex would not abstain from resorting to disruptive behaviour in that facility as well. He also expressed his serious concerns over Alex's attitude and disinterest in the course in general. Thus, instead of relegating my responsibilities of disciplining Alex to the tutor in question, I decided to take on this challenge myself and planned against allowing him being sent to the student learning area in my session at least.

After a discussion with my experienced colleagues and study of practices in behaviour management, I formulated a comprehensive strategy to tackle Alex's excessive use of mobile phone, and his noisy attitude. To cope with his excessive use of mobile phone, I decided to caution him on the first use thus giving him an option before the enforcement (Charles, n.d.). A repeated use would result in confiscating his mobile phone till the end of the session. Resistance to surrender his mobile phone would result in sending him to the library for completion of the assignment task to avoid disruptions caused by him affecting other students, while I would in the meanwhile devise a new strategy to deliver rather severe consequences to Alex. Although in the library the use of mobile phones was limited, there were no guarantees on Alex committing all his time to work on his assignments.

The second part of the strategy was focused on Alex's noisy attitude. Two of his classmates complained to me after the first session that his noisy attitude had become a serious cause of disturbance for them and suggested that they would prefer to be sent to the library to work on their assignments once I have finished my delivery. In my strategy to tackle Alex's noisy attitude, I decided to change the seating arrangement, and isolate Alex from his friend whom he had involved in an argument with in the last session (Lit, 2012). I also decided to direct more questions to him in an effort to tackle his attention-seeking attitude, and to assure him that isolation does not mean exclusion from the group. Although I had every confidence that this strategy will keep him on task, sending him to the library would be the only option if he would still resorts to a noisy attitude. During

the class, his mobile was confiscated due to repeated use. Although isolated to a corner, Alex did not abstain from noisy attitude and interfering into others' conversations with silly comments. He was cautioned and eventually sent to the library to reduce the impact of disruptions caused by him on other students.

After the lecture, having a thorough discussion with my senior colleagues, we decided to issue a formal departmental warning to Alex, giving him 4 weeks to improve his performance and attitude. He was put under special arrangements where his non-conformance would result in a possible delisting from the course. A letter was sent to inform his family about the concerns of teachers. Alex was instructed to spend more time with his personal tutor for additional support and monitoring purposes.

In the next few sessions with me, Alex seemed a little upset or perhaps exhausted due to extra tutorial sessions he was attending with his tutor to complete his assignments. His noisy attitude was under control except for some odd instances. Alex preferred spending more time working on his assignment during my class. He had his mobile confiscated during all the sessions thereafter. This was course was not an ideal situation, however, Alex did make a steady progress on his assignments, and more importantly, had let others focus on theirs.

4. Alternative Strategies and Related Issues

Kounin (1977) developed theories on classroom management, describing withitness, overlapping, momentum, smoothness, and group focus as important traits for a good teacher. I kept a constant watch on Alex to make sure his disruptions do not go unnoticed. Although I ensured that the momentum of the lesson is not broken, his disruptions would inadvertently distract other students. I tried my best to ensure smoothness despite overlapping and was able to keep the group focused on their task.

I was posed by two distinct types of distractions while dealing with Alex. In context of his constant use of the mobile phone during my session, although I adopted a range of strategies to tackle this disruption, adopting further strategies in conformance with the humanist approach could have been affective (Rogers, 1994). For instance, I could have designed activities to be performed on mobile phones and exploit Alex's interest in mobile phones. Use of mobile applications like calendars, email, productivity, and social media application to interact with Alex could have proved useful. Moreover, I could have made some assessment tasks more interesting for Alex by using technologies such as Kahoot. In context of dealing with excessive noise, using humanist approach, I could have involved him in discussions to solicit his opinion on the topic and share his ideas instead of asking directed questions failure to answer which resulted in Alex feeling discouraged perhaps. I could also have based myself closer to him all the time to discourage him from talking loudly. Strategies such as keeping an eye contact with the noisy students and directing questions to the students sitting near the talkers could also have been adopted.

Despite knowing that Alex is repeatedly disruptive, I gave him benefit of the doubt and spent weeks trying different solutions. I analysed physical, social, and environmental factors behind his disruptive attitude. It all came down to a vital environmental factor i.e., the student's interest in the course as during the extra tutorial sessions, Alex revealed to his tutor that he did not fancy the subject area in first place, and he plans to set up a non-technology business in near future. This issue was overlooked at the time of his admission and apparently his appropriateness for the course was not thoroughly investigated. After this finding, I decided to read through the admission and enrolment documents of my groups and updated their group profiles accordingly.

It can be argued that I could have agreed to Alex's proposal of sending him to the student learning area after delivery in every session. This, as per my understanding, would have meant that I was passing on my responsibility to the tutor responsible for that facility. Although sending Alex to the

library would help me get rid of the disruptions caused by him, Alex appeared not utilising his time properly in the library and was not making any progress in terms of completion of his assignment. Moreover, I also considered different legislative and regulatory factors in context of allowing him to use the student learning area or the library. In reference to the Duty of Care, teachers are not allowed to leave students unattended (Kambrya, 2014). Authorising Alex to work independently in the library or the student learning area would have required me to ensure that he is there during the time of detention, failing which would have potentially resulted in serious regulatory or legislative issues.

Setting ground rules in the first session with a group and their reinforcement is the key in tackling classroom discipline. Frank (2005) emphasizes on the importance of the first impression of a teacher and has termed it as a determinant of the course of their entire career. Caboni (2004) has highlighted the importance of negotiating ground rules with students in the first session. Similarly, Kreuter (2012) has emphasised on the principal of “ease up, don’t ratchet down” i.e., setting ground rules and communication of behaviour expectations to the students in the first session as a tool in tackling future disruptions. As a stern believer in this practice, I did ensure that I communicate the ground rules to the group in the first session, thus giving students including Alex a clear idea of my expectations in terms of their behaviour in the class.

I followed a recommended 3-tier approach in solving the behaviour problem in the class i.e., using preventative, supportive, and corrective discipline (Charles, n.d.). The goal of preventative discipline is to provide proactive interventions to potential disruptions. Supportive discipline provides students with suggestions or options for correcting behaviour before a consequence is necessary. Corrective discipline refers to a set of consequences delivered to student following an infraction. In my class, I adopted preventative discipline approach that enabled me to provide proactive interventions to potential disruption. I did this by establishing ground rules. I initially resorted to supportive discipline when there was a breach. I provided students with options for correcting their behaviour before any consequence was necessary. If the student in question continued with his disruptive attitude, I resorted to corrective discipline, and delivered the consequence to the student.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed the classroom disruptions caused by the student making excessive noise and their use of mobile phone in the class. This paper also provides an evaluation of the severity of the issue of classroom disruptions, the impact of such disruptions on morale of the teachers, the history of discipline issues in classroom, and the regulators’ take on the matter. In context of disruptions in question, the physical, social, and the environmental factors behind these disruptions have been explained in detail. Various strategies to tackle these disruptions have also been discussed, including the strategies, found effective in tackling disruptions during the course of this case study.

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