

How to Deal with Difficult Students

What is a difficult student? This is a hard question to answer because everyone has a slightly different view of what's difficult and what's not.

There are a number of things that cause teachers angst in the classroom and this article suggests some ways of dealing with these commonly reported problems.

The Know-it-All

This student has read all the books, maybe taken another class about the subject, dabbled at home and thinks they are better informed than you, the teacher. You wonder why they've even come on your course because they are quick to point out what you are 'doing wrong', or contrary to how some other teacher/author says it should be done.

Another thing the Know-it-All does is to tell everyone how they would do what you've just taught them. Sometimes this can be useful. There are so many ways to achieve the same result with metal clay that it's a learning process for everyone, including you. The question is whether what they are saying undermines you or removes control of the class from you.

As a teacher, if you are not in control of your class, someone else will be. This doesn't mean your classes are run like dictatorships! It just means that students expect the teacher to lead, to give direction and structure to the class. And you should have a very good idea about the pace and flow of your class so you can ensure you give value for money to each student.

If someone in the class is taking over and running their own "mini-masterclass" on your time, it's uncomfortable for everyone.

What can also sometimes happen is the know-it-all will helpfully tell others how to use pieces of equipment, torches, drills etc. This is potentially very dangerous and undermines your health and safety preparation. All potentially dangerous equipment should be demonstrated by you so you know you've covered the health and safety aspects of using it. If another student 'helps' someone to use the equipment, and something bad happens, you will be liable. The safety of your students is your responsibility. Intervene immediately if you see one of your students directing the use of dangerous equipment or tools.

So how do you deal with this?

It starts before you even run the class. Think about your marketing, promotion and registration process. Is the level of experience required for this class clear on your marketing material, website and flyers? If it's a beginner's class, make that very clear. This doesn't mean more experienced people won't sign up for it but it does mean they know what to expect.

When someone registers on your class, ask them a specific question about their level of knowledge or experience. This gives you prior warning if you've got a metal clay teacher attending your beginner's class for instance. Or a complete beginner signing up for an advanced class (see next subject).

If you have someone who is very experienced attending a beginner's class, make a mental note of who they are and ensure you talk to them privately before the class starts. This can be a very easy and light conversation along the lines of, "I'm sure you have your own way of doing things and I may do them differently. I would appreciate you trying my way while you're in this class and respecting my position as the teacher today." Most people will comply with this happily.

At the beginning of the class, if time allows, get each student to introduce themselves and talk about their experience with metal clay. The whole class can then find out who has a bit more experience.

Tell your class that there are many ways to achieve the results you are teaching and you are showing them the way it works for you. Everyone develops their own style and techniques as they gain more experience so it's worth acknowledging this with your students. You may decide that you want to ask the more experienced person if they have any tips or hints to add to your teaching. This shows you are confident about your own techniques and you recognise that there may be other ways of doing things. Maybe the Know-it-All will say your way is better!

If you discover someone giving a "mini-masterclass" during your lesson and you hadn't realised they knew the subject, what then? The best thing to do is to take them to one side, maybe during a break, and talk to them as it says above. Don't make a big deal of it – if you get angry or upset, it can appear that you are not confident about your teaching.

The Inexperienced Student on an Advanced Class

Planning your classes involves making sure you are clear on who the class is suitable for. Advanced techniques assume the student knows the basics of working with metal clay. You wouldn't expect to remind students to oil their tools or wrap up extra clay to stop it drying on an advanced class. So what happens if you have a complete beginner on your advanced class?

First of all, you should follow the guidelines for promoting your classes listed earlier. Make sure your promotional material is clear about the skill level for the class. When the student is booking the class, ask them their skill level. This can be tricky if you have an automated booking system on the Internet but it's worth considering how you'll ensure students have the right experience.

If you get a beginner on an advanced class, what then? The easiest way to deal with this is to carry on as if they weren't there BUT tell them not to do anything until you've spoken to them about the basics.

Before the class starts, tell the beginner you will be delivering this class at advanced level but will go through some basic techniques with them separately at an appropriate time. Make it clear to them, in a polite way, that the advanced students will be your main focus for the class but you'll try to make sure the beginner gets some help too. You could offer the beginner a transfer to a beginner's class if it's appropriate.

The structure of most training goes something like this:

- Show the end product – this is what we're going to make
- Talk about the process, tools etc
- Do a demonstration of the first part of the process
- Let students start making it

While your advanced students get on with the first part of the making, you can go through the basics with your beginner. Keep it simple and brief and concentrate on handling the clay, oiling the tools and rolling, texturing etc.

You should also remember that the advanced students have paid for an advanced class. They will expect to speak to you about advanced techniques and will have advanced questions. You should give your attention to the advanced students for most of the time.

At an appropriate point, maybe after the class is over, try and find out how the beginner got booked onto this advanced class. If you have an automated system, what made the beginner book on a class clearly marked as advanced? You need to make sure the same thing doesn't happen again.

The Apologiser

This is the person who always seems to preface their questions with, "Sorry to ask you this but..." Or, "This may be a silly question but..."

Some people lack confidence and need to be encouraged to ask questions. There are no such things as silly questions in a learning situation. It's useful to establish this with students by saying just that – "There are no such things as silly questions in my classroom so please ask anything that occurs to you."

Encouraging questions from students can be a bit daunting for teachers, particularly new ones. What if they ask you something you don't know? See the next section for the answer to this. Most of the time, students will ask questions that you can easily answer. It's also worth bearing in mind that if one student voices a question, it's safe to assume that others were thinking the same thing.

You should encourage an atmosphere of open questioning so everyone feels comfortable asking questions. You also need to be prepared to answer anything. What if they ask a question about something that's taught on one of your other classes? Telling a student that they can only have that information if they come on your other class makes you seem mean with your knowledge. If you look at the descriptions students give to the best metal clay teachers, one of the most common things they say is the teacher is generous with their knowledge.

If you give a student information about something you teach on another class, it's likely they will book on that class. Be prepared to give enough to answer the question and be enthusiastic about the subject. Be careful not to get too far off track though. You need to keep to the timings of the class. There's no way you can give them enough information about the other subject to negate attendance on your class. What you do give them is the impression you are a generous teacher and they'll want to take more training with you.

The Hard Question

One of the joys of teaching is that you are constantly learning yourself. This can also be a cause of stress for a new teacher. What if a student asks you a question you don't know the answer to? The way you deal with this is the most important thing. If you panic and guess or bluff the answer, you risk losing credibility with your students.

Metal clay is a relatively new medium and it's developing all the time. So if a student asks you a hard question, thank them! There's no need to apologise if you don't know the answer. Say, "what a great question, thanks for asking that." Admit you don't know the answer – there's no shame in it – and smile. Simply say, "I've never been asked that and I've never thought about it so we've got a great opportunity to discover something new together."

Accept that you may well be asked a question you don't know the answer to, keep an open mind and have plenty of resources to find the answer.

The Complainer

This student seems to be moaning about everything. They didn't get the booking confirmation or it came late. Or they didn't realise they had to pay for additional materials. Or the training room is too hot or too cold or too dark or too bright...

Some people go through life seeking out the bad things. They're not happy unless they're complaining.

With a student like this you need to find out what needs to happen to resolve the complaint. What is it the student wants – really? If they're just moaning with no real direction for the moan – they're not actually asking you for a response to the gripe – let them get on with it. Jumping in with a solution or even an apology may not be necessary. But if their moaning is obviously annoying their fellow students, you must do something about it. In your classroom, you are in control. The other students will expect you to deal with someone who's spoiling the atmosphere.

Take the student to one side, maybe at break time, and tell them you've noticed they don't seem to be happy. Sometimes people don't realise they're moaning – strange as that may seem. Be clear about what it is they're doing that seems to be annoying their fellow students. Say something like, "when you keep commenting about being hot it's distracting some of the other students." Offer a solution to the main complaint if you can.

Or simply ask the student what they want. Be careful about your language. "What do you want me to do?" puts them in a position of power and puts the responsibility onto you. They may demand something you can't or are not prepared to give.

"What do you actually want?" keeps you in power and makes them think about what's really going on. Put the ball back into their court and ask them for a solution. If they can't give you one, ask them politely to keep their comments to themselves. If they suggest something, evaluate if you can do it without causing more upset in the group.

If they have a complaint and it's directed at you, deal with it swiftly and as amicably as possible. If the fault is yours – you forgot to send them booking confirmation or specific information – admit it and apologise. Do what you can to put it right. This might mean you having to give them materials for free if they weren't told before the class that they'd need to pay. Learn from the experience and put procedures in place to ensure it doesn't happen again.

The Chatterbox

This is the person who just can't stop talking. You get a running commentary on what they're doing, feeling, thinking. Sometimes this seems like the internal 'self-talk' we all have going on inside is leaking outside.

For some people, silence is very frightening. They feel compelled to fill silence with anything and end up talking incessantly.

Others may just be quite socially isolated in their everyday lives and use classes as a way of meeting others. They want to know all about you or tell you all about them. Sometimes this can lead to disclosure of personal information that makes others uncomfortable.

So how do you deal with this? Having background music on in the class can be a good way of breaking the silence that makes some people uncomfortable. Keep it at a low level and fairly neutral – heavy rock music or opera may not be to everyone's taste!

Watch your class. You may find the chatter annoying or distracting but the class might be enjoying it. Tune into the feeling of the class and make a judgement about whether the talking is annoying or distracting others. If people are interacting and seem to be having happy conversations, that's fine. If one person is dominating the airwaves and distracting or interrupting others, you need to be watchful. Often this can resolve itself. One student may ask another not to speak to them while they're concentrating, or may just ignore the questioner.

If you start to see people getting irritated by the chatter, rolling their eyes or fidgeting, you may need to step in. If you can, take the person to one side and tell them that their talking is distracting other students. Say something like, "I've noticed that some people are getting distracted by you talking when they're concentrating." Ask them if they can keep the chatting to a minimum while people are concentrating.

Sometimes someone will disclose something so awful – a recent bereavement or terminal illness for instance – that it causes the atmosphere of the class to radically change. There's not much you can do in this instance except be a human being – offer your condolences or some other acknowledgement of the matter. Then move on. As the teacher, engaging in more discussion by asking questions can bring the whole class down. How you deal with this type of situation is a very personal matter.

Students who are Late

If you are running an all day or weekend class or workshop, a student being a little late on the first morning may not be much of a problem. If you're running a three or four hour taster lesson, late arrivals can be a major headache.

When you're planning an all day or weekend class, make sure you factor in a little time for people arriving late on the first morning. Some people may be travelling from a distance or may not be familiar with the venue you've chosen. Think about the impact if you are 10 or 15 minutes late in starting.

It's useful to put an instruction in your booking confirmation letter or email asking students to arrive on time or to call you if they're going to be late. Even with this, some people are just not good timekeepers. Lead by example – always be on time yourself, return from breaks on time and be well prepared.

Make a decision about when you will start the class if not everyone is there. Most students who are on time will be happy to wait five or 10 minutes at the beginning of the lesson, particularly if you have plenty of things for them to look at, like books, samples you've made etc. Any longer and they begin to get annoyed about the wait. 10 minutes is about the maximum you should wait for a day or weekend class.

If you're running a three or four hour taster session, start on time unless you are still waiting for a significant number of attendees. You don't have time to delay.

When the latecomer turns up, tell them you'll recap for them when everyone starts working. It's very frustrating for those who were on time if you go back through everything you've already said for the benefit of a latecomer.

Make sure that during your introduction, you ask everyone to return from breaks and lunch on time. When you do have a break, tell the students the time you'll be starting again. If you've given the students this information, you should start on time whether or not all the students are in their places. This is particularly important at the first break. If you wait for stragglers, you send out a message that you're not really serious about good time keeping. Remember, students being there on time shows respect for you as the teacher and their fellow students.

If someone is persistently late back from breaks and lunch, what then? Always start on time, without them. Don't recap for them, complete the segment you are on and set the other students off on the next exercise. You don't even need to acknowledge they have joined the group – maybe that's what they want, to make an entrance. Wait for them to ask you if they missed anything, then recap for them and ask them to ensure they are back from the next break on time or you will not have time to recap again.

There's a judgement here too. If you are teaching adults who have paid for the class, you have a responsibility to those who are on time and ready to learn. If someone is persistently late, that's their choice. But it's also your choice to deliver your class under your rules. If you have to spend time with the latecomer that you should be devoting to those who are on time, it can be a big issue. Remember, if someone isn't playing by your rules, you don't have to give them special treatment. You risk annoying everyone who is on time and ready to learn. Be clear about your rules and impose those rules fairly and consistently.

Students who don't pay Attention

If you're teaching adults who have paid money for the class, you assume they want to learn and will pay attention when you're teaching. So what happens if you get someone who doesn't pay attention?

The clues for not paying attention can be quite subtle. Sometimes you might get a student who will ask you a question you've already answered, either from another student or in your demonstration. Answering the same question several times is normal for a class. Not everyone takes things in the first time. But sometimes you may find a student asks a question that you've spent some time answering. Or they'll ask something that you've told everyone is written in the handout. The first couple of times this happens, it may just be the person is slow to understand things. Keep an eye on things and see if this is a pattern for the student.

Another thing to be aware of is if the person has learning difficulties. Not everyone wants to disclose if they struggle with learning things so you need to be sensitive to this. Be careful about only having a handout for people to follow, this can be very distressing for someone with literacy problems or dyslexia. Your handouts should ideally have pictures to illustrate key points.

Some students get so caught up in what they're doing that they don't listen. Making sure you have the full attention of everyone when you're delivering important information is part of the skill of teaching. You should clearly signpost when you are going to say or show something important. Call the class together, ask them to stop what they're doing or give them a time limit – "I'm going to show you how to use Liver of Sulphur in five minutes" – allows them to finish what they're working on and switch their attention to you.

Wait for the full attention of everyone. Before you start talking about a new topic or demonstrating a new technique, wait for all eyes to be on you. Peer pressure is a useful tool here. If someone is still working on their piece or chatting to their friend and you're sitting and waiting, the other students will normally comment. If nothing happens, call the person by name and tell them you're about to start the next topic.

Students who are Inappropriately Dressed

What is inappropriate dress for a metal clay class? There are some safety issues when you get to the firing stage that may mean some kinds of dress are inappropriate. If you're teaching torch firing or soldering, long flowing sleeves may be a fire risk. Wearing flammable fabrics can also be an issue.

Firing and soldering involve hot metal, so bare legs and open toe sandals or flip-flops can be a safety risk. If a hot piece bounces off the table and lands on someone's feet they can get burned.

People normally think of working with metal clay as quite a clean pastime but it can get pretty messy when you get into firing. Students who turn up in their Sunday best might get a little annoyed if they get clay dust on their best clothes. And Bronze Clay can be very messy.

It's worth putting some advice about suitable clothes in your course confirmation documentation. Again, lead by example and ensure you are dressed appropriately.

Students who Flout the Safety Rules

If you have specific safety rules for your classes, you must be prepared to enforce them. Wearing safety goggles while firing, soldering, using drills or polishers are common safety precautions. Always wearing closed in shoes when firing or soldering is another. When you do a risk assessment for your training, you should note the precautions you take and the rules you impose. Your insurance may also require you to take certain safety precautions.

If you have a student who doesn't like wearing safety goggles and you allow them to work without them, you are taking a huge risk. If anything happens to that student, you will be liable and may invalidate your insurance. The other students will also know you allowed that to happen.

Be very clear about the safety rules, watch your students and enforce the rules at all times. Make sure your booking confirmation outlines any safety rules linked to dress or tools the student should bring with them. Have a response ready if a student says they don't like wearing the safety goggles or arrives with sandals on.

The safety of your students is your primary responsibility.