Difficult students: Who, why, and responses

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Reference Data:
Sosa, M., & Casanave, C. P. (2007). Difficult students: Who, why, and responses.
In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

In this paper, we discuss students whom we might label as "difficult," i.e., students who are out of reach, disengaged, and uninvolved. What characterizes many of these students is that they seem to lack motivation, interest, and purpose. We provide examples of some difficult students, explore some possible causes of student uninvolvement, and suggest some responses to them. Our goal is to find ways to connect with our difficult students in more understanding ways, and to let go without guilt of students we cannot reach.

本稿は、学生に関する考察をまとめたものである。本稿においての扱いにくい生徒とは、手の届きにくい、授業に参加しようとしない学生を指す。 まず、それらの学生の特徴を述べ、次に、なぜ彼らがやる気に欠けるのか、その原因を探る。そのような学生たちの観点から見てみると授業はどのようなものなのか。最後に、教師がどのようにそれらの学生と関われるのか、いくつかの案を提示したい。

In our discussions with teachers, including those at the JALT2006 conference, we are often surprised at the many emotion-laden responses that the phrase "difficult students" can bring forth. For this paper, we should clarify that for students we describe as difficult, we are referring to those who are simply out of reach, disengaged, or uninvolved. What characterizes many of these students is that they seem to lack motivation, interest, and purpose. These are difficult students in the sense that they rob our classes of energy and make us as teachers feel as though we are wasting our time or, at worst, incompetent. We find this to be particularly evident at the university level, when students no longer have to learn English for entrance exams or when the newness of learning English has worn off, even while many universities still require students to

take English classes. Moreover, in recent years the potential for English classes to engage students in challenging and interesting ideas and activities as part of their language learning seems to be fading, as increasing numbers of universities jump on the TOEIC preparation bandwagon, a movement as anti-educational as any we have seen in Japan (McCrostie, 2006).

The primary goal of this discussion on difficult students is to consider some of the factors that make them difficult and uninvolved. A secondary goal is to speculate about ways to connect with our difficult students by listening to their stories, by showing our understanding and respect for their life-choices, and by being models of engagement and curiosity ourselves. Once we have made such efforts, it is then that we can let go without guilt of those students we cannot reach.

We first characterize some specific kinds of difficult students from our own experiences and our readings and describe some specific responses to them. We intend these characterizations to be descriptive, not evaluative. We then construct some possible general responses to difficult students that stem from our understanding of the background literature on motivation, engagement, and institutional constraints. Responses based on this understanding may help some students, while preserving teachers' positive attitudes toward their work, including fostering respect for students who may choose not to participate.

Characterizing and responding to *difficult students*

As a starting point, we invite readers to make some mental descriptions of their own difficult students without evaluating them. What do these students do or not do that makes them difficult? Quite often, these *difficult* students' passions and interests simply lie elsewhere. Miguel tells two stories, one of a student he was unable to reach and another of a student he was able to mentor.

Miguel's stories

When I was a high school teacher, I taught a reading class at a high school in Yokohama. There, I met a second-year student, Chieko (pseudonym), who came to every class on time, brought her book, kept a journal, handed her book reports in on time, all written in fairly clear English. For many teachers Chieko would be the dream student, except that she never took part in any of the discussions that we generated, and never shared her ideas with others. On many occasions, I tried to talk with her, but she would remain silent. Outside the classroom, she was very polite and once told me that she liked our class. As the months went by, I realized that Chieko had become one of my difficult students; I began to worry whether she had a problem with the class or with my teaching style. I did not know how to involve her in the discussions that we had in class. Other students would voice their opinions or try to respond to my questions. Chieko always sat near the door, read her book, and never volunteered any thoughts.

About half way through the school year, I learned that Chieko had been accepted to go to the USA as participant

in a one-month exchange program. I thought, "Great, now she will see the need to speak English and will talk more." Her attitude did, in fact, change after she went to Chicago and returned to Japan, but not in the direction I expected. After the exchange program, she was absent from class quite often, unlike before when her attendance had been very good. About one month before final tests, she talked to me outside the classroom. She explained that she had been absent because she needed to prepare for her university entrance examinations. I reminded her that it was important that she attend my class. She replied that she had never liked English, and that all she wanted was to pass. At that moment I realized that I had been trying to influence her to think and act according to my value system. Until then I had not thought that Chieko had any opinions about foreign language learning. I realized that I had never considered the possibility that some students really do not want to learn English. I realized that what bothered me was her lack of involvement, her obvious lack of interest in what I wanted my students to learn about reading. I could not tap into whatever spark she might have had hidden somewhere. She had not bought into my ideas, and that really bothered me. The fact that her assignments were usually good only made my disappointment sharper.

Chieko completed the course, not without having accumulated the exact limit of absences that would allow her to pass with a minimum grade. After she left school, she became a student of journalism at a local university. Years passed until we met by chance near a train station. When we met, I did not recognize her. Her appearance had changed. However, she remembered me and told me that she was in the process of moving to study in Europe. She had been accepted at a university in Belgium. Then I realized that she had nothing against me or English; she was simply not interested in learning English. She did have an interest in foreign languages, but English was not the language she wanted to learn. She now lives in Belgium where she is pursuing studies in French. In retrospect, what made Chieko a difficult student was not her attitude; it was my unwillingness to acknowledge that English was not the foreign language she wanted to learn and that what I believed she needed to know in order to be *successful* was irrelevant to her. In short, I contributed to turning her into a difficult student.

But not every difficult student is unreachable or remains difficult forever. A couple of years after Chieko graduated, I met Hideki (pseudonym), another student at the same school. Hideki was what we would call a weed, someone who does not fit in any garden. He did not join my writing class voluntarily. He was sent to my class because no other teacher wanted him. When I was told that I had a new student, it was half way through a semester. His homeroom teacher was trying to find a way to keep Hideki in school. At the time he became my student, Hideki had been expelled from three different schools. He had earned the reputation of being a violent student. The scars on his left arm were testimony to the many fights he had been involved in. On the day I was to meet him, one teacher leaned over and whispered, "Just ignore him; he is not a good student anyway."

The first time I saw Hideki, he was slouching behind his desk, wearing dark glasses. The first impression I had was that the desk was too small for him. Being an unusually tall

young man, which was another reason he stood apart from the others, Hideki had played basketball all his life. While I gave instructions to the class about a writing assignment, Hideki kept looking outside. It was a sunny day, and I could understand why anyone would prefer to be outdoors. Years later, he reminded me that the first thing I said to him was, "Isn't it nice? Yeah, I wish I could go out too." I had completely forgotten what I told him, but he had not. In fact, he said that I was the first teacher in months who did not introduce himself by starting an argument or talking to him with disrespect.

Throughout the term, students registered in my writing class were required to submit a number of pieces, ranging from stories about themselves as students, to concert and restaurant reviews, and a modified version of a fairytale. Hideki never engaged in any of the assignments I had asked students to produce. However, he did engage in a different manner. He used his assignments to write about the school system. His pieces were mostly a collection of sentences that only aimed at criticizing a school system in which the obedient succeed, while those with ideas (particularly unconventional ones) fail. Instead of demanding an explanation, I asked him to write more, and to make a conscious effort to use fewer four-letter words, which no doubt, were representative of the English he found useful and real. Through his writing, I found out that Hideki was very interested in rap music, but not only as a listener. He copied the texts of entire songs, analyzed the content, and liked to tell others about it. Sometimes Hideki would write about his dream of becoming a rap artist, and how he was going to produce songs for people who were "understood by nobody."

As the months went by, Hideki's pieces clearly divided the way I saw my class. On the one hand, students were writing about positive experiences, while on the other, Hideki was writing about how schools dismiss the potential of many young people simply because everyone is expected to fit automatically into the system. Clearly, he had something interesting to say. Gradually, each week I began to look forward to reading Hideki's pieces. His criticisms became less negative and gradually he began to write about his dream of "doing something" in music. Often, I found myself spending a few minutes talking with him at the end of a class, discussing his dream, and what would be interesting to explore about it. My strategy was to try to keep him focused. As a result, my responses to his writing were not about bringing him into line with the projects the other students were crafting. With Hideki, we created a different plan, and called it *Project Hideki*. Our project had a theme: learning more about the music business as a career option, and devising a plan of study in that area. Thanks to our conversations and work together, I learned that many teachers create their own difficult students when they refuse to listen to what students have to say or are interested in, thereby closing all possibilities for dialogue and mutual growth.

By the time our class ended in early March, Hideki had taught me that the worst thing society can do to young people is to instill in their minds a sense of failure.

Years have passed since Hideki left my class. However, we manage to stay in touch from time to time. He is currently going to university in New York where he is majoring in music production management. Some weeds blossom.

Other stories

Another type of difficult student has been described by Johnston (2003, pp. 2-6) as "Peter's Story." This is the case of the student who begins to attend classes just as the semester is about to end. In our experiences in Japan, we have often encountered this kind of difficult student. Typically, such students beg and implore that teachers to let them pass, basing their argument on the most creative reasons: The school year is about to end and they are fourth year students who need to graduate, or they have spent the entire semester looking for a job, or they have already found a job and their companies are forcing them to attend introductory meetings. For many of these students, our class has very little value; they have given up altogether, see absolutely no need for the class, or see no point in being there, because the class does not fit their idea of what an English class is (they may believe that students really should be doing vocabulary drills, filling in blanks, and doing grammar-based translations rather than engaging with ideas and with each other).

Another kind of difficult student is the one who not only is unengaged in what we are trying to teach, but who also challenges and tests the teacher, particularly if the teacher is new or inexperienced. We have not seen this type of difficult student so often in Japan (but they are there!), so this story comes from Frank McCourt. We tell it as a way to make a point about the responses of teachers to difficult students, rather than to characterize a particular type of student we might see (rarely) in Japan. In the book *Teacher Man*, McCourt (2005) tells a story that took place during his days as a novice English teacher in a tough working-class neighborhood in New York. On one occasion, a student threw a sandwich across the room and it landed on the floor right in front of McCourt. At that point, terrified, and desperate for a solution that did not translate into a threat or punishment that would set the students against him, McCourt picked up the sandwich and began eating it, not without first complimenting the student on his mother's cooking. The class sat in stunned silence until an administrator passed by the class and saw McCourt eating the sandwich. Even though McCourt himself was scolded by the administrator for eating in class, he refused to turn in the student who threw the sandwich. In this way, McCourt won the students over. They knew he was on their side. He even was eventually able to teach them a little English, but not from fill-in-the-blank workbooks. Instead, he engaged them in unusual activities about themselves. He told stories, they told stories, and they all, including McCourt, talked, wrote, and listened. Importantly, he did not take the students' challenges to him personally. In our classes in Japan, we too can share stories, talk, write, and listen as a way to engage difficult students without taking their challenges personally.

In short, as many teachers have told us in Japan, some students are difficult because they are forced to be in a class they don't want to take, they have not been given opportunities to question anything, their lives have been limited to completing tasks and taking tests, their teachers may not be interested in listening to them, and no teacher has ever presented them with alternative ways of looking at a problem. As a result, many students become difficult because they simply see no need to engage in anything that is not task-test based. They settle for the predictable life,

where study means preparing for tests and seeing an increase in their TOEIC score as a necessary, if not noble, goal in life. In these cases, it is virtually impossible for teachers to detect any curiosity coming from students. Engagement is replaced by task completion, and curiosity is replaced by textbooks that reduce interesting possible questions and topics to trivia, thereby killing all possibilities for asking *why* questions (Neil Postman describes school textbooks as "the most debilitating of all forms of nonsense that afflict the young"; 1988, p. 23). In the end, a pattern of apathy is established. Students become distant, they do not engage, and teachers become frustrated.

Responding to difficult students with understanding

Literature on motivation, autonomy, and agency (e.g., Deci, 1995; Dörnyei, 2001; Ford, 1992) and on the motivational and educational value of deep engagement in interesting and challenging activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Gardner, 1999) has helped us understand why some of our students are difficult in the ways we have described above. Within a test-driven inflexible institutional system that is linked to corporate culture rather than to the life of the mind (McVeigh, 2002), students and teachers may naturally feel constrained and uninspired to go beyond the grammar exercises and reading and writing topics that students find so boring. Moreover, when students have no choice as to whether they will take our classes, we should not be surprised at their apathy or at other forms of resistance. We may be powerless to change the system, but are we powerless within our own classes? Ultimately, our responses will be very personal ones, involving our interactions with particular students and groups.

One important exercise for teachers to do is to look back and review what our responses have been to difficult students over the years. Have we responded with anger and frustration? Have we tried to ignore the students we cannot reach? Have we lashed out at the system or at parents, at students, or at ourselves? Is most of our energy taken up trying to keep control of a class? Have we kept the same approach, or have we changed our responses? Have we given up, along with our students? Do we listen to our students? Many of Frank McCourt's stories recount his efforts at establishing respect and authority in the class by listening closely to his students. His stories resonate with most of us, and make us realize that his and our students may be difficult, but not necessarily impossible to reach after all. Here are a few ideas that have come up in our discussions and reading.

Seeing student disengagement as a rational choice

Is it possible (likely?) that students who are not engaged in our classes may have more interesting things to do and think about in their lives? What happens in classrooms may simply not connect with them in any meaningful way. Educator Elliot Eisner (1991) asks the following provocative question about students who are not engaged in the classroom agenda: "[I]f students are engaged in daydreaming or finding more interesting things to think about than what is occurring in the classroom, is not such behavior a testimony to their good judgment?" (p. 11). Similarly, Ira Shor notes of adult students he has worked with in the United States: "Students

routinely hold back their voices as a means of resisting traditional classrooms where authority is unilateral and where they lack an inspiring life of the mind which speaks to their dreams and needs" (1992, p. 53). In such cases, lack of engagement is a rational choice that students have made. Teachers can learn to understand and respect such choices, as long as students understand the consequences of their choices and are not disruptive to others.

Role of the teacher as a model of engagement, respect, and attentive listening

Moreover, the role of the teacher may be central to our understanding of how to respond to difficult students. First, teachers themselves may or may not be models of engagement, curiosity, critical thinking, and pursuit of knowledge. Nel Noddings points out that "[m]ost teachers are not critical thinkers because they have not been asked to think critically" (2006, p. 9). In our experience, this is certainly the case in our teaching lives, in which institutions that we have worked for ask, not for intellectual engagement and an active life of the mind, but for accurate record keeping, coverage of (often boring) material, and grades for students that do not damage the overall average of a particular university. Teachers themselves, in such conditions, face difficulties in keeping themselves motivated and energetic, and in providing role models for students of an engaged life. This problem has been addressed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997), in his studies of *flow* (that sense of total absorption in an interesting, challenging task such that we lose track of time), who comments on the influence a disengaged teacher can have on students:

> Young people are more intelligent than adults generally give them credit for. They can usually discern, for instance, whether an adult they know likes or dislikes what he or she is doing. If a teacher does not believe in his job, does not enjoy the learning he is trying to transmit, the student will sense this and derive the entirely rational conclusion that the particular subject matter is not worth mastering for its own sake. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 77)

Howard Gardner, as well, comments on the perceptiveness of students of their teachers' involvement in interesting ideas and projects: "[S]tudents take note when teachers are themselves continuing to learn, and when they appear to be excited by new discoveries" (1999, p. 134).

Additionally, teachers may or may not have good listening skills, and respect for and liking of students. Many of us are often primarily concerned about covering material, grading, and disciplining (institutional requirements, after all) rather than about getting to know more about our students. Likewise, teachers may or may not have developed the ability to improvise, which strikes us as a necessary skill in all teaching situations, but particularly in difficult ones. Elliot Eisner (1985) calls this ability *artistry*: "To say that excellence in teaching requires artistry implies that the teacher is able to exploit opportunities as they occur. It implies that goals and intentions be fluid" (p. 184). Listening and improvising well, teachers can learn a great deal about their students. They may find that some of the difficult ones open up to a caring listener who is not wedded to the syllabus or the textbook.

Offering students real choices, while respecting their choices

Finally, we seldom offer students real choices for how to participate in our classes, but instead ask everyone to toe the line, in lockstep: Attend every class, go through the same textbook, do the same exercises, write the same essay topic, prepare for the same tests, and worry about scores and grades. Many students do not have problems with a shared agenda like this, and may even feel that it is the job of a student to suffer through the learning of grammar rules and personally irrelevant textbook exercises. But we should not be surprised that students who are forced to take an English class against their will participate unenthusiastically. What choices can we offer these students, and how can we learn to respect their choices? Elsewhere, we put it this way:

> Our own experiences as well as those of educators such as Frank McCourt have shown that it is possible to like and respect students who choose not to participate fully in our educational adventures. But such students need to understand that they have a choice; we, then, need to respect their choices. The choices need to be real, not veiled threats: Here is what you need to do in my class to get an "A." Here is what you need to do to get a "C." Here is what will earn you a failing grade. Here are the consequences of failing. You choose. I support whatever decision you make and will do my best to maintain my interest in you as a person. With such an understanding between teachers and students, the burden of frustration is lifted. Teachers can let students go their own way, and possibly even develop a curiosity about the lives of these difficult students outside the classroom. Something must be holding their interest, if not my class. (Casanave & Sosa, 2007, p. 43)

Concluding thoughts

Our discussion at JALT2006 in Kokura ended with teachers sharing their ideas about and experiences with difficult students. After listening to what teachers had to say and reflecting on our own experiences, it has become clear to us that we cannot save all of our difficult students. In reality, there is little we can do to change the events and institutions that affect the way our students see their world. What we can do is to make a conscious effort to recognize talent that has yet to come to the fore, and to develop some curiosity about our students' lives outside our classes. Our experiences have taught us that in many cases, it is worth spending more time than we usually do observing our difficult students, and actually *converse* with them. Our hope is that in showing interest in them through small acts of kindness, we will be able to help them recognize their potential and to take the first steps toward realizing their dreams. Helping students in this way inevitably means going beyond the textbook, the grammar exercise, and the test. It means setting up conditions whereby students can talk and write to us and to each other about themselves. By reminding them that their stories are important to us, and by being models of curiosity and engagement in learning ourselves, we may be able to connect with some of our difficult students. We believe that difficult students may grow as we learn more about the stories behind them and can therefore respond to them with enriched understanding.

> Believing in the potential of difficult students may be compared to an act of faith: One believes in what is not yet seen. The insightful teacher looks into students and sees them the way a sculptor sees a stone or a tree, envisioning a work of art yet to be uncovered. (Casanave & Sosa, 2007, p. 44)

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