

Case Study: Classroom Going Awry

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Imagine the following scenario from an accelerated developmental course (an integrated reading and writing course or pre-Statistics course). In the course the instructor plans to give students more challenging tasks than are traditionally offered in the standard curriculum. (In English, the students are reading high-level texts and writing full academic essays; in math, the students engage open-ended statistical problems involving complex data sets).

The semester started out well. After initial ice-breakers, students seemed comfortable with the teacher and each other. The first few weeks they were doing what the teacher asked them to do. Around week 3, the instructor began giving students more challenging tasks, and she noticed a shift in the class. During group work, students weren't really engaging. Some were staring at their desks, some were talking about other topics, only a couple were actively working on the task. Walking around the room, she heard a variety of comments. One student said, "This class feels like high school. When is she going to teach us." Another: "Do *you* get this? 'Cuz I sure don't."

The instructor suspected that the task was too hard. She brought the class back together and spent the next 25 minutes up at the board explaining the material in detail to help them understand it better. She could feel the energy in the room dropping, and she felt unnerved by the sight of students propping up their faces on their palms and staring at her with glazed eyes.

Reflecting on the class afterwards, the instructor suspected that students hadn't done their homework to prepare for class. The next class, she started with a pop quiz on that day's homework, and most of the class bombed it. She offered an impromptu mini-lecture on how to be a successful college student: two hours of work spent outside class for every one hour in class, how these skills prepare them for success in the workforce. You won't be able to just *not do* an assignment at your job!

Over the next two weeks, the attendance sheet showed increasing numbers of students missing class. The teacher had a bad feeling about the upcoming test/essay. She told herself she'd done everything she could – you can't *make* students care if they don't – but she couldn't get past the feeling that she was failing.