

4. How to Handle Students' Negativity? – Acknowledge and Accept

This is the fourth in a series of Autonomy-Supportive Behaviours that teachers can use in the classroom. Remember: You're not responsible for creating motivated students; you're responsible for creating an environment where students can motivate themselves.

In the previous write-ups, you read about taking your students' perspectives while planning for your lessons, and how you may introduce a new activity at the start of the lesson to engage them. Here, we go into addressing and solving issues while your lesson is in progress.

What?

Acknowledging and accepting negativity means that you **recognize that your request may be misaligned with students' preferences**. You **accept that your students' negativity, complaining, and resisting are reasonable reactions to your request**, at least from their point of view.



Students' negativity involve complaints, resistance, protests, 'bad attitude', and negative emotions. These arise because they think that your requests, assignments, rules, or expectations are unfair, unreasonable, asking too much of them, uninteresting, or unimportant.

Some frequently encountered classroom problems are:

Disengagement	Students show insufficient involvement to profit from the learning activity. Students are off-task, display little or no effort, use only superficial learning strategies, fail to participate, and receive instructions passively.
Misbehaviour	Students act in maladaptive or antisocial ways. Students are irresponsible, unprepared, aggressive, and cheat, curse, tease, utter disrespectful language, break rules, skip class, fail to complete their assignments, and show delinquency.
Poor performance	Students perform carelessly or incompetently. Students produce sloppy, careless, or lackluster work. Students underperform standards or expectations.

Why?

If left unaddressed, students' negativity will affect – or poison – their engagement and learning in your class.

Addressing them directly is your best chance of getting their negativity out of the classroom. When you consider that students' negativity may be valid and legitimate – at least to a certain degree – you gain the chance to restructure the lesson into something more appealing, and reduce your students' resistance.

By acknowledging your students' negativity, you **show sensitivity to and a tolerance for their concerns and problematic self-regulation**. You give them the chance to be motivated and engaged in your class.

When?

This is most timely **when what you want your students to do** (e.g. revise a paper, pay attention) **conflicts with what they want to do** (something less demanding, talk with their neighbor).

How?

Teachers often react to students' expressions of negativity in a defensive way. Teachers might not see students' resistance as valid.

One thing we know for sure is, blaming students ('You're immature, lazy, irresponsible') and trying to change their resistance and negative feelings into something acceptable ('Quit your complaining, now get to work and do what you're supposed to do!') will be a disaster for students' motivations – you'll only be adding fuel to the fire by reacting this way.

To solve the problem, first **acknowledge and address negativity**.



I see that you're not interested in today's lesson. Do I have that right?

You acknowledge the problem of students' boredom.

Yes, we've practiced this same skill many times before, haven't we? Okay, what can we do differently this time? Any suggestions?

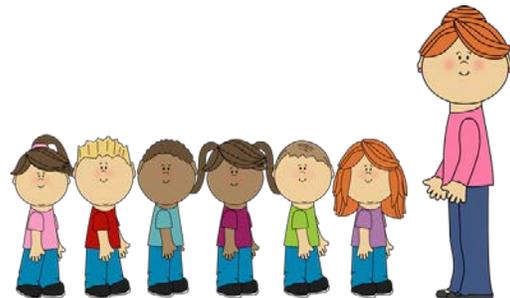
'Yes' shows that you accept students' negativity as potentially valid. 'Okay' is your starting point to find the source of negativity and extinguish it. Now you'll have the chance to give appropriate instructions.

Students need to know you are sincere in your effort to alter your instructions. It's often necessary for you to **take the first step and suggest options**:

(Stop instructional flow by putting down the chalk, closing the book, interrupting the discussion)

Okay, how about a story or a demonstration? Or an example? Will you like to learn about this in a different way? What sounds good?

Getting negativity out of the classroom is difficult, especially when students are angry or resentful. But the teacher who acknowledges and accepts negativity has a greater chance of dissipating it. Plus, it'd help you to be more in synch with your students in the long-term.



Source: Reeve, J. (2016). *Autonomy-supportive teaching: What it is, how to do it*. W. C. Liu, J. C. K. Wang, & R. M. Ryan (Eds.). Springer Science+Business Media: Singapore. Written by C. M. Q. Sim, 2016.