

Tips on How to Handle 'High Maintenance' Students

By Åsa Maria Bradley, physics instructor, Spokane Falls Community College WA

Some students take more time and effort than others, often challenging our qualifications and believing they know more than we do. A female colleague and I found a politically correct term for them: high maintenance (HM).

Usually these people prefer a world run by athletically built, straight, male Caucasians. Authority figures or experts of a different sex, skin color, build or sexual orientation make them anxious and frustrated—and obnoxious.

The story of Steve

I met my worst HM student during my first year of teaching college physics. After eight years in the software industry of Silicon Valley, I looked forward to my career change. Unfortunately "Steve" cheerfully disrupted my classes before I had gained confidence in teaching; I almost quit the profession after a few weeks of trying to teach him.

He enrolled in my yearlong introductory sequence because it was a prerequisite for a PhD program in physical therapy. "I've been practicing PT for so long they should just give it to me," he told me on the first day.

I pegged him to be mid 30s or early 40s—older than me by a few years. When he asked about my academic background, I listed my masters degree in medical physics and my industry experience. We chatted about my new hometown where he was born and was raising a family—three kids under the age of ten. He asked if I had children. When I said no, he told me to start soon, because "Women shouldn't have kids after the age of 35."

I found the comment odd, but I had noticed that non-traditional students, as our college refers to them, were more likely to use my first name and interact with me as if I was a person, rather than someone with ultimate power over their grades. I prefer speaking to my students as peers and approach teaching as a conversation between me and my students. Steve seemed easy to communicate with and I figured he'd be a great asset in classroom discussions.

I was wrong.

A few weeks later, his questions had gone from challenging to obstructive to disrespectful. Although his initial questions were phrased as a request for information, he'd fire follow-ups in the spirit of "I don't think you're right." I resisted the impulse to tell him to shut up and let me finish.

My teaching handbooks said it was important not to "shut students down" but instead to turn their questions into a "teaching moment," modeling social skills to "young people." I didn't think it was my job to teach Steve anything but science, and I just wanted him to be quiet long enough for me to do so. Returning to my office after a frustrating class, I stuffed my jacket in my mouth and howled out my



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That day I had taught Newton's third law: For every action there's an equal and opposite reaction.

"How can this be true," Steve demanded, even before I'd finished my color-coded diagram of internal and external forces of a system. "If all forces cancel out there's no acceleration and the second law is untrue," he stated.

He ranted about logical fallacy and I sounded like a broken up cell phone conversation as I tried to interject "but—," "no—," and "if you just—." I should have used equal reaction to Steve's action and provided resistance to his word flow before the situation got out of hand.

Instead I noticed how my loss of control affected the other students. Jason, a shy but smart student, sometimes put his head down for a nap while I tried to stop Steve's verbal assaults. Others checked their text messages or had side chats.

I pulled Steve aside after a class and explained that although I appreciated his energy, he was monopolizing the conversation and depriving the other students. He disagreed, saying "I think it's interesting for them to get another perspective and since you are often wrong, they're lucky that I'm here to give them the correct one."

I needed help.

Advice from a male colleague

I explained the situation to Jay, a computer science instructor and good friend. "This guy is openly challenging your authority as an instructor and subject expert. Tell him to shut up. You're the teacher so what you say goes," he advised.

I was uncomfortable confronting Steve in class. Back when I was a student, everyone hated disruptive people, but if the teachers turned on them, we would turn on the instructors. Even disliked, those students were part of "us" and the teachers always part of "them." My fifth grade music teacher had lost his temper with the class troublemaker. Afterward, students openly taunted him, earning laughter from the rest of us. He quit before the end of the term. I didn't think things would get that bad here, but I wasn't willing to risk it.

Tension headaches plagued me at the beginning of Steve's classes. I found resources that discussed classroom management, but in the case studies, the students were younger than the teacher and responded favorably to corrective actions. My efforts with Steve ended with him explaining how much smarter he was than everybody else, because he had a high grade in the class. I reviewed his assignments extra carefully and celebrated when I could subtract points, only to feel guilty over the petty ways in which I extracted revenge.

Advice from female students

Half way through the quarter, two of my best students visited my office. "You have to do something about Steve," Lisa said. "His disrupting is driving us nuts." Sherry added,

“And when he disrespects you openly, he’s disrespecting all the girls.” I hid my shock. Was Steve’s behavior gender related?

It seems impossible now that I didn’t have a clue about why Steve was an HM student. I’d experienced machismo in college and graduate school, but it involved older professors so I thought it was a generational thing. Besides, the roles had been reversed; I was not the authority.

I also had had female science and math teachers; no students—male or female—had ever challenged their credentials. In California, my colleagues judged people by their technical skills, not their gender. Things were different in rural, religious, right-winged eastern Washington.

I needed another female’s perspective.

Advice from a female colleague

I asked Alana, a chemistry instructor, to observe my class. I explained how horrible I felt to have created a situation where I modeled acceptance of a man disrespecting women. On the day she visited, I introduced Alana at the beginning of class, using my tenure process as an excuse for her presence.

“You mean you’re not tenured yet?” Steve interrupted. After I explained it took a few years to earn tenure, he said, “This is why I home-school my kids. Teachers aren’t qualified enough.”

The lesson was about torque and I explained why a long lever arm made it easier to loosen the lug nuts on a tire. Steve didn’t think I used the right “terminology” and suggested I had no practical experience with wrenches.

Although not good at standing up for myself, I felt the stakes were higher after the visit from Lisa and Sherry.

“Not only do I know how to change my own tire without calling AAA or breaking a nail, but I’m also a master of the box wrench. I worked in a high energy particle accelerator lab and maintaining the ion source everyday required removing three plates, each was fastened with 16 lug nuts,” I explained, earning a giggle from Lisa and Sherry.

“Well,” Steve answered. “A lab environment is not the real world.” From the corner of my eye I saw Jason slowly banging his head on the table in front of him, over and over.

Alana confirmed Lisa and Sherry’s suspicions. “Plus, he’s your average narcissistic asshole,” she said.

The rest of the story

Although my headaches continued, the classroom situation improved. Knowing that Steve had a problem with my gender liberated me. I wasn’t as concerned about him. The other students were more important and I was okay with giving up on one for the greater good.

The puzzle pieces clicked together as I learned that Steve didn’t “allow his wife to work outside of the home.” While he hoped his boys would go to college, his daughter should aspire to be a good a cook like her mother. What he had really asked me on that first day was this: Why I wasn’t home taking care of kids, as a woman should be?

There were a few more instances of me fast-walking to my office after class to bite my jacket, but they were less frequent and no longer involved tears.

Returning from winter break, I felt recharged and confident, but disaster struck a few weeks later. The incident had a familiar pattern. As I drew a basic schematic of moving metal in a magnetic field producing current in a particular direction, Steve interrupted me, noting, “That’s not what the book says.” He pointed to a picture where the current moved in the opposite direction.

I read the caption under the picture aloud, which explained how the situation violated the conservation of energy law. “Maybe you should read the book more thoroughly before coming to class,” I advised. “Burn,” one of the student exclaimed, and Steve stomped out.

Steve then filed a written complaint to the dean and demanded disciplinary charges against me because I had “shamed him” in front of the class. Once I explained, the dean dismissed the complaint and offered to speak with Steve, but I didn’t want him to have to run interference for me. Although I didn’t apologize to Steve, I told him that I had not meant for him to feel inadequate.

The power play of complaining satisfied Steve somehow and he didn’t interrupt as often or argue when told to wait for an answer. He still required more energy than the rest of the students combined. When he told me a scheduling conflict prevented him signing up for the third quarter, I tried not to sound too relieved as I told him goodbye.

What I learned from Steve

I’ve had many HM students since Steve, not always male, not always older than me, and not always behaving badly based on my gender. Every single one of them taught me new ways of effective teaching, but Steve laid the groundwork. Thanks to him, I am now able to avoid letting a student hijack my classroom by remembering:

- *Not all HM students challenge my authority.* They might just be talkative or prefer a learning style involving direct questions. I recognize true HM students by the higher pitch of their voice caused by the frustration of having their preconceptions challenged.

- *When students cut me off mid-sentence, it is okay to interrupt them back.* I ask them to “hold that thought” until I’ve made my point—which the rest of the class appreciates.

- *It is okay to spend most of my energy on the majority of the class.* I don’t let one HM student drain my reserves.

- *Becoming frustrated and defensive is not an effective way of reaching any students.* It’s important to not take things personally.

- *It is great to have students who like me.* But it’s even better to earn their respect.

A few years later, Steve emailed me to ask for my ice-breaker exercise. Despite not completing his PhD, he was teaching physical therapy assistants at a commercial college and needed my exercise. He ended his email with, “At least you did that well.”

Sending him the requested file, I signed off “Enjoy and take care” in what has been our final communication.

I am still secretly pleased about getting the last word. 📌

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