Bad Manners in the Classroom

1. Poor student behavior affects the teaching/learning of everyone in the classroom.

2. Such behavior often is linked to students’ needs as *people* rather than their needs as *students*.

3. Poor behavior can be:
   - Caused by a variety of personal and social causes, but still influenced by teacher behavior- especially the tone set during the first few days of the semester
   - Headed off at the pass by the creation of a “Effective Participation Model” created by students and the instructor
   - Influenced by students’ expectations for the course—e.g., thinking it’s a lecture class and discovering it will be all student presentations done in teams. In fact, student expectations for a particular course may have more influence on classroom civility than the expectations for the instructor who is teaching it.

4. What to do when student behavior gets out-of-hand
   - Nonverbal signals: make eye contact with student who is disruptive; or, if someone is dominating the discussion, do not make eye contact with them but do with another student; walk so that you are standing behind them and they must then talk to—and see the facial expressions of--their classmates; if you are sitting down, stand up.
   - Active listening: If a student monopolizes the discussion, goes off on tangents, or argues unproductively with you, summarize their views and move on. Or invite them to continue the discussion during your office hours.
   - Invoke the Effective Participation rules the class composed and agreed to at the beginning of the semester.
   - Gently direct the progress of the discussion by setting ground rules such as, “Before you may speak twice, someone who has not spoken yet must speak.” Or, “Listen to a peer’s comments; think for 10 seconds; respond, trying to build on what was said previously.”
   - Deflect difficult behavior with humor. Do not invoke sarcasm or a patronizing tone.
f. Connect. Try to show that you care about students’ learning. This does not mean you need to be their best buddy or swap stories about your personal lives. Caring about their learning does show students that you care about them and does so in the appropriate context of their academic lives. Also, be prompt, organized, and enthusiastic about your subject.

g. Set high, but attainable standards and academic goals at the beginning of the semester. Periodically remind them of those goals and standards and that you are confident they can attain them.

h. Change the method of teaching. A student who is disruptive in a large group might feel less inclined to act up among his peers during small group work. Someone who tends to be excessively critical of you or her peers during a discussion might offer more productive comments via a one-minute paper.

i. Recognize that ignoring certain kinds of mildly negative behavior is acceptable. You don’t want to seem to be constantly policing your students. On the other hand, such behavior might be a clue that you need to respond by acknowledging it and reorienting the teaching/learning process.

j. If the negative behavior of one or a few students is detrimental to the teaching/learning process, contact the student(s) via email and request a brief meeting before or after class or during your office hours. Remind the student of the behavior rules drawn up at the beginning of the semester and firmly request a change in behavior to conform to the agreed-upon rules. If a substantial number of students is involved, remind the entire class of the Effective Learning Model and ask if they want to spend five minutes considering whether the model needs to be changed.

k. Don’t take it personally. Many of the motivations for bad manners probably have nothing to do with you or the class. Disruptive students may be reacting to personal difficulties, medication changes, academic frustrations, lack of sleep, etc. If the disruption is more than you think you or the other students should have to tolerate, ask students to momentarily put aside the outside issues that bother them and try to help create a positive learning environment during class time.