# An enduring college classroom annoyance: The wandering student phenomenon

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## Abstract

Anyone teaching at the U.S. university level for two decades or more may recall when a dramatic change in student classroom behavior first became manifest. A tendency to regard attendance at a given class session as flexible, volitional, *variable*, and without concern for disruptive side-effects—with respect to each class segment—arose rather suddenly within the last 20 years, and continues. Specifically, for students to casually leave the room during class has become commonplace. Diagnosis of possible cause(s) and motivation for such arbitrary or rude wandering is attempted here, along with tentative prescriptive response. Investigative methods are primarily analytic and exploratory, including hundreds of interviews, augmented by formal survey. The basic finding is that faculty respondents do find the referenced behavior a serious problem. This work-product is apparently the first research to target the designated behavioral change.

## Practitioner Notes

1. A new form of disruptive student behavior, actually a tectonic discontinuity, has plagued college classrooms in recent years, and needs to be addressed.
2. Before behavioral correction can be attempted, broad faculty awareness of the issue must be established. This aim is aspirational because such general cognition does not seem to have been registered.
3. The purpose of the following article is to call attention to this operational issue of the higher education classroom, one that has not been taken seriously enough, apparently.
4. Yet a plurality of survey respondents at one university identify the focal student behavior as problematic, with literature search results suggesting national scope.
5. Evidence suggests absence of legitimate reason for the new behavior pattern, which would elevate the gravity and urgency of faculty reflection and response.

## Keywords

higher education, student deportment, student evolution, college classroom, discipline problems, instructor evaluation

I have been meaning to offer this report for years, but also hoped the problem would resolve itself. That does not appear to be happening. Your classroom is out of control. At least, available evidence suggests it is for many who are reading this, maybe most. How so?

Have you not noticed a tendency for today's university students to just come and go, in and out of the classroom, *during class*, apparently as they please? Of all those college kids who get up to leave the room ostensibly for a bathroom break, how many do you think really need to? All? Most? Are you as naïve as the students think? Let us address this systematically.

It started about 15 years ago, maybe a little more, in my own experience and beyond. Student classroom behavior changed drastically then, from one semester to the next, from the end of one school year to the beginning of the next. (It approximately coincided with arrival of the Millennial or "entitlement" generation, perhaps not so coincidentally.) I have been teaching at the university level for 45 years now, first at a large public and for the past 42 years at a smaller but prestigious private, so even at the retrospective time in question I was in a position to know what was normal—again, in my own prior classroom experience. I knew the usual frequency of students getting up to leave my classroom was so rare that it was almost negligible. For reasons to be explained presently, I made a serious estimate of the phenomenon's periodicity: about once every five to ten *years*—across all my students, all sections, all courses, all years. Later, hundreds of formal and informal interviews with long-term faculty at my school confirmed the rough local generalizability of those numbers. You can try the same exercise with your own "old-timer" colleagues.

Then, suddenly, 15 years ago or so as mentioned, the behavior pattern changed, and it has not changed back. From one occasion of a student leaving the room every 5-10 years, it became 5-10 times *per class session*. "What's going on here," I and many colleagues wondered. (This reflection may resonate with other senior faculty.) As one veteran of the profession expressed it to me about his MBA students: "They treat the classroom like a damn lounge. They stroll in late, stay for a while, get up and leave for a while, maybe come back in, maybe not." From other informal, interpersonal indications, non-U.S. educators may perceive that their comparable student "wandering" problem is even longer-lived and more severe than as described here in the American setting.

What could explain? Could there have been a sudden change in student physiology? Maybe diuretic drugs came into fashion? Of course not; let us be serious. So, what was it? To try to answer (after weathering a few years of observation), I led a faculty senate committee investigation.

## The research

At first, we had only similar, corroborative, anecdotal reports—informally collected over several years—of the epidemic of newly restless students coming and going in and out of class. This was followed-up by more conventional exploratory research to discern whether my own limited experience could be idiosyncratic. It was not. Literature review revealed that the same change was occurring around the country (the U.S.), beginning at roughly the same time (Kelly 2010, p. 80; Marshall 2012). There even is a broader literature on "classroom incivility," but it makes little or no mention of the particular leave-taking issue (Boice 1996; Burke et al. 2014).

Finally, after working up to it for years through the academic bureaucracy, overcoming committee inertia and turnover, formal survey research was executed with the cooperation of my school's Office of Institutional Research. Relevant target population was our entire university faculty of nearly 1500, with about one-third of the whole group sampled. Response rate was 35.6% (178/500) and comparison with population demographics indicated a representative set of sample respondents. (These demographic factors included years taught, faculty classification, average number of students per year, and gender. The academic setting was a medium-sized private university located in the Midwestern U.S.) Variables measured were mainly faculty perceptions of objectionable student deportment. The key finding: About 40% reported that students' excessive and chronic exiting of the classroom,

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during class, was at a seriously problematic level. Empirical confirmation! It was not just one person's fixation. (The only behaviors to receive materially more faculty complaint were tardiness and use of e-devices in class. All non-confidential elements of the research report itself are available from the author upon request. The project was done under university-level and faculty senate auspices, as mentioned, and output was shared with our school's provost office.)

This primary behavioral datum actually may be more troubling than it appears. Testimony from our science and engineering faculty revealed negligible "roaming" problems in their classrooms. (Their students may be too serious or nerdy to skip in-class time discretionarily.) So, exclude the science and engineering faculty from the results, along with the small liberal arts seminar-type sections where roaming would be too overt and less anonymous, and the 40% finding covers nearly all the rest! Maybe something similar is happening at your school.

## More research and reflection

Such evidence suggests and maybe establishes the magnitude of the problem, but the original question remains: Why is this happening? Why the drastic change in student behavior? And is there no chance the new behavior mode is genuine, i.e., justified by some condition?

No to the last, at least tentatively, as can be supported. Among the hundreds of local exploratory interviews were some with students. The main question posed to them was their view of what proportion of such classroom exits were not necessary or legitimate. The modal answer was 90%, sometimes expressed as "about 90%." One outlier, a student politico (actually the student body president), insisted that if students leave the room, they must need to, so the number must be zero. Plausible? Credible? Incidentally or not, no student has ever offered me or anyone I know a cogent alternative explanation for what is adduced here, and I have invited over a thousand to do so. If you have seen or heard one, please let the author know.

So, again, what is it? Getting to that soon, but first, the high-end *JUTLP* audience deserves more evidence that the alleged phenomenon is real. Bridging that aim with a partial explanation is this: Another approximate coincidence with the estimated "roaming student" historical starting point was the mass popularization of the smart phone. One more piece of evidence my study developed was testimony on the high incidence of students being observed leaving a class to—need I say it?—make or take a phone call. This is no excuse for them, obviously, and not exactly Sherlock Holmes-level detective work, but further confirmation of the behavior's illegitimacy. (To reiterate for emphasis, also closely synchronous with the wandering phenomenon's mass debut was the emergence of a generational cohort whose traits are distinctive enough to merit a title: the so-called "entitlement generation.")

Other data points contributing to the informational mosaic and bill of indictment are these: (1) Typically, whenever I confront a serial offender, the in-class behavior changes. Mid-class trips out of the room cease entirely. Evidently, the perpetrators did not really need to leave the room so often. Try that intervention and you may confirm. (2) An assistant dean reported this one to me: Our business school has a large scheduling and course selection meeting of about 250 undergrads each spring. It is remarkable, he told me, that, year after year, no one ever gets up to leave the room while the session is in progress—revealing that the vacating tendency, so to speak, is truly discretionary. See, they can behave when they really want to! (The same administrator also lamented how a flood of class exits occurs immediately after attendance is taken in his regular 8 a.m. class.)

So, finally, why? The smart phone must be part of it. It is just too much of a temptation and tough rival for sitting through a dull college class from start to finish, at least comparatively from a student perspective (cf. Hari 2022 on tech media distraction more generally, esp. pp. 77-81, 33-44, 119-123). And we should not be surprised when a new generation's behavioral tendencies are different from a previous one's, or are objectionable to an older generation's nature. But the topical behavior changed so suddenly. There must be more to it.

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A few of our student interviewees yielded a common insight on this conundrum, at minimum a grounded hypothesis. One, circa Y2010-12, put it this way: "It's because of the idiots who run the high schools in this country," she said. "A few years ago, high schools decided a kid shouldn't have to raise their hand to leave the room. Those kids are now in college." I see. (The timing again fits with the problem's origin.) Give immature high school or college-age students that kind of latitude and they will tend to exploit it, as in "I can leave the room any time I want and this naïve prof will actually think I need to leave the room. This game is easy." Couple this mechanism with the smart phone temptation, and we may have most of the answer. My own contribution: Previous generations of students had the academic integrity and courtesy not to disrupt their classes needlessly. Apparently, the cohorts of the last 15 years or so do not. (My students just love it when I offer that interpretation.) In short, evolution of student attitude has produced a parallel debasement in behavior. The entitlement generation is indeed upon us. Burke et al. (2014, p. 174) also nominate increased narcissism as a general explanation for classroom incivility. Narcissism, of course, is a construct that incorporates perceived entitlement.

One may consider the hypotheses of the foregoing paragraph (high school administrators, smart phone, integrity/courtesy) as propositions 1-3, formally. Now, what can we do about this? What, if anything, should be done?

## Conclusions

Some faculty, surely many readers, perceive no such problem as I have described and wonder what the issue is. First, to them: Please tell us your secret. Is it just your captivating oratorical style? But there has been good instructor oratory prior to 15 years ago and since, so a different variable must be operating. The reported problem is indeed a documented nuisance for many. And if you have not been teaching for 20 years or more, you may think it is normal for multiple students to exit during a class period. It is *not* normal physiologically, as longer-serving faculty know. (A connective test for the reader: When was the last time *you* needed to interrupt a class by exiting the room, either as prof or student? For this reporter it was the second grade school year of 1956-57.) To be clear, although a large fraction of our respondents report awareness of the behavioral problem, what many are not in a position to recognize is how new and unnecessary it is.

To address, a university's top management inevitably has a role. Burke et al. (2014, pp. 179-181) prosaically suggest university-wide classroom behavior codes and instructor behavior modeling, but recognize the empirical ineffectiveness of such methods more generally. To illustrate a different aspect and oblique impingement: My school is renowned for its dedication to students, especially undergrads. Of course, devotion can be overdone if it morphs into pamper or pander, perhaps through simplistic implementation. (Supreme devotion to students is laudable. Letting students know that they are the center of our universe is one of the worst tactical mistakes a school can make.) One common faculty refrain, again found by our survey research, is that profs are *afraid* to enforce classroom discipline because it will damage their student evaluation scores. Our administration, for honorable if idealistic reasons, treats those evaluations more seriously than most do in determining salary and promotions, despite the generic method's long record of questionable validity as reported in the educational psychology literature (e.g., Alshammari 2020; Berrett 2015; Gaski 1987; Kidd and Latif 2004). That policy stance, because of its unintended side-effect on faculty incentives, is a challenging milieu for a university community. A more refined or nuanced administrative attitude toward the mixed value of student feedback would help in controlling classroom chaos.

Finally, one related faculty insight emergent from both literature search and interviews: Instructor indulgence of the disruptive behavior also perpetuates it (Bjorklund and Rehling 2010; Burke et al. 2014, pp. 179-180). Some instructors prohibit smart/cell phones from the classroom altogether, which at least eliminates one instrumental source of the problem.

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Myself?  My own primary tactic is simply to explain all the preceding to students on the first day of each semester; that is, why I believe nearly all occasions of in-class student exits are not legitimate.  Then, when they claim that I do not allow bathroom breaks, my response is, "I said nothing of the kind.  If you really need to leave the room, go right ahead.  But if it happens more than once every five or ten years in my classroom, I will be very skeptical.  I will suspect that you are intentionally and gratuitously disrupting the proceedings—and I may remember that when determining your final grade."

Bad student deportment may not be the biggest contemporary crisis of higher education, but it is a chronic problem.  It is absurd that any attention need be given such an issue for a *college*-age population, but those of us who have been on the front lines of the profession for decades can recognize that things are worse than before, at least in this one respect.  You may want to ponder how closely your school matches the pattern I describe here.

An obvious limitation of the reported empirical research is that it is localized, so a natural future direction would involve use of a regional or national sample frame.  (Some studies closest to direct relevancy do use local, i.e., single university, samples: Bjorklund and Rehling 2010; Myers et al. 2016; Seidman 2005.  However, Bjorklund and Rehling also advocate use of private school settings, as done in this project, to balance and generalize the more common public institution research; p. 17.)  Yet the most comprehensive reference on international manifestations of student behavior problems reports that conditions are largely the same in many different countries and regions (Burke et al. 2014, p. 168), so most of the accompanying complaints, diagnoses, and recommendations may apply broadly, at least to some degree.  Regardless, we can hope for this report and commentary to engender greater consciousness of the issue, thereby leading to a solution.  If you have helpful ideas, please advise.  Perhaps social media discussion would be viable, as has transpired in other contexts (Allen et al. 2022).

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