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*Chronicle Careers*<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/10/2008102001c.htm>**ON COURSE****Anger Management****Besides learning how to deal with students' hostility in class, you have to learn how to handle your own**By JAMES M. LANG

Last month I gave a talk to new faculty members at a nearby college and afterward, a professor raised her hand and asked me how to deal with feelings of hostility in the classroom. I expounded at length upon the best ways to push through the skepticism and anger of students.

Raising her hand again, she said, "No, no. I mean how do we deal with the feelings of hostility that *we* have toward the students?"

Her question caught me off-guard, so my response was less than eloquent. But I was reminded of her question this week when a colleague came into my office to vent about the most recent batch of papers she had graded.

"Forty percent!" she fumed. "Of the ones I have graded thus far, 40 percent have some form of plagiarism in them."

She was angry, and I was angry for her. We spent a cathartic few minutes lamenting the sorry state of the world, and enmity toward our students lingered in the air.

We all have plenty of reasons, plagiarism aside, to get angry at students. I have a colleague who can't stand students wearing baseball caps in the classroom; he makes them all remove their hats before class. I had another colleague, since retired, who went into fits over students' use of the word "like," as in: "So Aristotle was like, ethics is all about doing the right thing in the right time in the right place."

Cellphones do the trick for me. Since I am one of the three people in the world who still doesn't own one, the omnipresence of cellphones on the campus, and in my classroom, both baffles and annoys me. Whenever I hear the sound of a phone buzzing in a student's bag or pocket (they're usually smart enough to turn off the ringers), I can feel little jets of

steam coming out of my ears.

But whether they are guilty of leaving on a cellphone, skipping class, plagiarizing, or committing any of the many other sins that can be so exasperating, I don't feel near the level of hostility or resentment that I used to feel toward students. That stems, in part, from watching my own children go through school. I now have a child in middle school who exhibits some of the same irritating behaviors that I see in my students.

But the real reason for my slower fuse these days comes from an incident that happened in one of my freshman-composition courses a few years back. I had a female student whose first paper indicated that she could write as well or better than most senior English majors in our department. I rejoiced that she had ended up in my section, happily anticipating both her contributions in class and her remaining papers, which would be easy to read and simple to grade.

However, as the semester proceeded, she missed class more and more frequently. She turned in papers late, or not at all, and the ones she did turn in showed continued evidence of her immense writing talent but also were filled with careless mistakes. I used my comments on her papers initially to give her pep talks about how she should not waste her writing talents, and then — when my comments seemed to have no effect — I got angry at her.

I tried to scare her into taking the class more seriously with stern warnings about the consequences for her grade if she continued to turn in late and sloppy work. My verbal warnings, like my written pleas, had no effect.

And then one day, near the end of the semester, she came to my office and told me very matter-of-factly that her mother was dying of cancer, and that she was living at home and taking care of her and commuting to the college. I had just watched my mother die of cancer a couple of years before, and so all of the horror of the experience was fresh in my mind.

After she left my office, I felt sick to my stomach to think that I had been angry with her. I had been deliberately threatening her with low grades to motivate her to pay more attention to my assignment sheets while she was caring for her dying mother.

Of course I would not have graded her work any differently as a result of the challenges in her private life. But had I known of her situation from the beginning of the semester, I certainly would have been more accommodating in offering her extended deadlines. At the end of the semester, with just one assignment left, I could do little to help her boost her grade.

Once the semester was over, and I had time to think about the experience, I realized that my anger had stemmed from my own projections onto her life, projections that I applied

to most of my students: that she was smart enough to succeed in my class, that she could certainly work harder than she did, and that instead of devoting time to her studies she was playing video games, talking on her cellphone, or out partying every night.

No doubt for many of our students those projections are accurate. But they do nothing but generate bad feelings toward students. What we are doing in our classrooms has been our life's work, and we care deeply about it. We expect them to care, too.

But we see only the tiniest slices of their lives, and those tiny slices rarely reveal what matters most to our students, or what major events or people are shaping their lives. Students in their late teens and early 20s are watching their grandparents die (and sometimes their parents); falling in and out of love for the first time; learning (or not learning) how to handle drugs and alcohol; living away from home for the first time and trying to get along with roommates; and figuring out how to spend the rest of their lives. Any one of those events or transitions has the potential to drain much of the emotional and intellectual energy out of a human being. Most of our students are dealing with several or all of them at once — and trying to stay on top of four or five completely different intellectual journeys each semester.

Our courses, while they occupy a substantial portion of our time and energy at any given moment, occupy a much smaller space in the hearts and minds of most of our students. I try to remember that when I find myself annoyed at students who clearly haven't done the reading, who are not working up to their obvious potential, or whose cellphones are buzzing in my classroom.

Chances are pretty good when a student's phone rings during class that someone is texting to set up lunch plans. But there is always the chance, however slim, that the student has a dying mother at home, and that this phone call matters far more than the proper method for incorporating quotations into academic writing. When I remember that, I feel a lot less angry.

James M. Lang is an associate professor of English at Assumption College and author of *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching* (Harvard University Press, 2008). He writes about teaching in higher education, and his Web site is <http://www.jamesmlang.com>. He welcomes reader mail directed to his attention at [careers@chronicle.com](mailto:careers@chronicle.com). For an archive of his previous columns, see [http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/on\\_course](http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/on_course).

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