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# Ask Ms. Multi

## Part 2



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**S**ince Miss Manners was not available to answer questions about how to behave appropriately in a multilevel class, her cousin, Ms. Multi, agreed to answer teachers' questions. Ms. Multi has the same ironic tone as her better-known cousin, but she assured us that her responses are of the most serious nature.

*Dear Ms. Multi:*

*I have had it, plain and simple. I have such a range of abilities, interests, ages, ethnic groups, and so on in my class I can't seem to get a handle on where to begin unless I do total individualized instruction. However, there are 23 students in my class and I have no tutors. Some are new arrivals to this country and need much more cross-cultural orientation than others who have been here for years and need more advanced work to prepare for the GED or EDP. Help!*

*Ms. Frazzle*

Dear Ms. Frazzle:

Ms. Multi suspects this is a policy issue, not a classroom issue. First of all, a class of 23 students is simply too BIG! Sometimes it is necessary to stand up at a staff meeting and proclaim: Enough! We have to set some limits! The class has a right to an identity of its own! No one is being served! Ms. Multi wonders if your program has examined this issue thoroughly and has brainstormed other ways you may structure your classes. Try bringing it up as an agenda item for your next staff meeting. (Ms. Multi assumes you have staff meetings and that teachers are encouraged to contribute to the agenda. If not, there's an even bigger problem here....)

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*Dear Ms. Multi:*

*How does one handle it when "higher" students in a class display impatience toward less advanced classmates?*

*Curious*

Dear Curious:

Ms. Multi will not tolerate rude, unkind, or hurtful behavior in her classroom, and she makes this explicit in the beginning of each cycle when she negotiates with students the guiding principles, or "ground rules," of the class. These rules address how students should treat each other. You have not described how these "higher" students are displaying their impatience, however. Name calling, spitting, disparaging comments in *sotto voce* are never to be accepted or ignored. Fidgeting, sighing, looking out the window at the street cleaners, and other signs of impatience tell Ms. Multi, however, that, though students are trying to contain their impatience, they need to be challenged more, or the pace of the class might need to be re-evaluated. Ms. Multi also thinks that the higher level students should have the right to a challenging class, as you would, I am sure, agree. Her advice is: set limits on anything unkind, but provide opportunities for the go-getters to shine as often as you ask for tolerance for the less advanced to struggle through an answer. Keep talking about this balance you are trying to achieve with your students so they are explicitly aware of what's going on.

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*Dear Ms. Multi:*

*How do you deal with upper level students always providing lower level students with the answers? Asking them not to do this and explaining that it is not helping their classmates to learn does not seem to help.*

*Frustrated*

Dear Frustrated:

Ms. Multi implores you not to get angry at the upper level students; they may be following a deeply ingrained cultural imperative to work collectively so others do not lose face. Perhaps you could work on this situation by eliminating the power struggle. That is, group or pair the upper level students together and group or pair the lower level students together. That way, the lower level students may be willing to take more risks among themselves and the upper level students can move ahead a little more quickly. They can all start out together in the introductory phase of the class.

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*Dear Ms. Multi:*

*I have 9 students: 1 Spanish speaker, Stella, and 8 Cantonese speakers. I am European American, but I have a fair amount of fluency in Cantonese, and I tend to clarify things in that language. I'm afraid Stella is getting left out. What can I do?*  
Xie Xie

Dear Xie Xie,

Have you discussed this issue with the students or tried to find out how Stella feels (through a dialogue journal, for example, or through discussion after class?) Or how the other students feel? Sometimes in adult ed. classes we have this “elephant in the living room” phenomenon—there’s a very visible thing going on but no one talks about it. Ms. Multi likes to “foreground” these issues via problem-posing scenarios, or even direct discussions with students so they can all be a part of discussing guidelines to make sure people feel included. Then, as you develop guidelines in class (when it’s OK to use the native language, etc) you will have depersonalized the issue and will be better prepared as new students enter the class and change the composition yet again. Ms. Multi also suggests that you try to find issues that are of concern to all the women in the class to ensure unity in the subject matter of your teaching. Do the women all work? Are they all parents? Will they be affected by recent legislation regarding immigrants? Ms. Multi assumes, of course, that you already provide opportunities for Stella to share some aspects of her language and culture with the rest of you. She also assumes that you are trying to learn a little Spanish? If not, perhaps you might try to let Stella teach the rest of you!

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*Dear Ms. Multi:*

*How can I do everything and do it well? I really believe my students deserve my time and attention. I plan individual lessons and a group lesson for my 13 students, who are very different in abilities and interests. They need assistance with so many things beyond the academic, though, and I feel they just don't get the support they need other places in their lives, so I try to help as much as I can. In addition to teaching, I spend a lot of time solving problems for them, dealing with health, work, tenant and other issues in their lives, one on one. I help take care of their kids. I am even sheltering a woman student from an abusive relationship right now. I am trying so hard to be student centered, but....*  
Cares Too Much

Dear Cares:

Ms. Multi empathizes with you and suggests that, first and foremost, you unplug the phone, have a cup of chamomile tea, and go take a nap. When you awake refreshed, try doing the following. Take out your journal (Ms. Multi assumes you have one; a notebook will do just as well) and reflect upon your boundaries. Boundaries are where you can reasonably draw limits between yourself and, in this case, your students. If you have no boundaries, you will simply burn yourself out within a couple of years and have no resources to draw from to continue teaching. (Christina Maslach has written a book called *Burnout, the Cost of Caring.*) Ms. Multi strongly urges you to think about where you can comfortably say no to students so you will have room for your own life. Also, perhaps you can think a bit about your ultimate goal for your students. Are there ways you can help them to become more self-directed and resourceful on their own or with each other rather than depending so much on you? Brokering and rehearsing situations with them may promote more self-reliance than your solving the problems for them. More referrals might help as well. You may also gain some perspective by talking to more veteran teachers who have faced and come to terms with this issue. Ms. Multi agrees that your students deserve the best. So do you.