Isn’t it great when everything goes together perfectly in your hunter education classroom?

The room is nice with comfortable seating and clean tables. Students are attentive and well behaved. Your fellow instructors are prepared, courteous, and outstanding communicators. What’s that you say? “Not likely in my classroom!”

Distractions! Could that be the problem? Distraction is defined in the dictionary as a diversion, interruption, something which prevents concentration, causes perplexity or bewilderment.

The three main classroom distractions I want to discuss include the physical environment, the students themselves, and the teaching staff. In the classroom you may experience problems with the seating, that is, lack of, arrangement, or type. There may be problems with temperature control, a public address system that does not work, or insufficient lighting. You may not have adequate audiovisual equipment, a chalkboard/marker board, or adequate display or demonstration areas. Perhaps noises outside the classroom are a problem.

What is the solution? Are you familiar with the old saying, “proper planning prevents poor performance?” A responsible instructor can prevent most classroom distractions by simply planning ahead. Anticipate those things, which may cause or become distractions in your teaching environment and confront them prior to class time.

Students may be one of your main causes of distraction, both to you and to other students. You, the instructor, have likely seen many of these distractions; talking during the instructor’s presentation, aggravating the neighboring student, tapping a pen or pencil, unable to sit still, and on and on. There are sometimes students who will attempt to “push” the instructor to the limit and just see what he or she can get away with. Also, those “what if” questions can distract from the lesson plan.

Sometimes a young student starved for attention will take advantage of an instructor to monopolize the questions. His or her parents don’t have time to listen to the youngster, the school teacher probably quit putting up with it, but here’s the youngster’s opportunity to receive attention from a fresh face. Before long, the student’s monopoly of the questions becomes a distraction to the rest of the class if not the instructor. Explain to little Johnnie or Suzie that you will answer their questions at the next break — and do so. Do not let this student bog your class down and waste instructional time.

It is not difficult to solve problems caused by most students. Stop the distracting behavior immediately! Let the class know the instructor is in charge, not the students. If you ignore student distractions, you send the message to the class that the instructor is not in control.

Sometimes, the instructor may be the distraction in a classroom. An instructor’s unusual physical appearance, poor speech, or peculiar mannerisms can be somewhat disturbing. Clothing that’s not mainstream dress, poor grammar, pulling your ear or scratching your head will definitely call more attention to the instructor than the lesson being taught.

Look AT your students while you teach. Do not talk to the chalkboard (with your back to the class) and do not talk to the back wall over the student’s heads. This is distracting to your students.

An instructor who asks a question and immediately answers their own question results in students not willing to raise their hand to answer again. Perhaps you teach with other instructors who go elsewhere in the classroom while you teach. Then they feel they must add their “two cents worth” by talking unrecognized from the back of the room. This is not only discourteous to you, the instructor, but also distracting to your students. Teaching should take place in front of the students, not shouted from the back of the classroom. If the other instructor(s) have a comment, they should raise their hand and be recognized by the current teaching instructor.

In summary, handling problems before they become major distractions is the solution. Analyze the problem and take action immediately. Prepare your classroom in advance, take charge of student behaviors that need attention, and do not become the distraction yourself.

And remember that distractions which you have no control can be overcome with motivated, involved, active students.

Jan Morris is a retired public school teacher. He serves on the IHEA Board as Instructor Representative, Region III. He is a director for the Missouri Hunter Education Association and has been a volunteer instructor since 1972.