

Behaviour case study

This is a case study focusing on the experience of a student teacher Andy in a FE college setting. Read the scenario and consider what was going on in this situation. How would you have responded?

The tables are arranged in a horseshoe, and Andy starts by sitting on the teacher's table at the front of the class and briefing the learners on the task they're about to do. They'll each be given a picture on which to base a piece of descriptive writing. There is silence as he speaks. Most of the learners appear to be listening. One or two are making notes. Andy then gives out the pictures, one to each learner, as he walks around the inside of the horseshoe of tables. As he does so, he checks with each of them that they understand the task and that they have paper and pens with them. The learners are cooperative, even enthusiastic – nodding, asking questions, picking up their pictures and looking at them with interest. Then he comes to a young woman – Nicola – who responds very differently. She doesn't look at him. She doesn't respond to him. When he sets a picture down for her on her desk she simply folds her arms on the table in front of her and lowers her head down on to them as though she was going to sleep. Andy hovers there for a moment or two, looking uncertain; but then moves on to the last two learners, who respond positively like the others. He goes back to the front of the class, asks whether or not there are any questions and, receiving no response, tells them to begin the task, for which they have twenty minutes.

As the learners work, he moves around the room, inside the horseshoe, giving help and asking questions. The first time he approaches Nicola's table she sees him coming and starts packing her things away, putting her pencil case and folder back into her bag and pushing the picture away from her to the far side of the desk. Then she puts her head down on her arms again. Andy hunkers down so that he's not looming over her, and says, 'Come on, Nicola. Let's see what you've written.' No movement. No response. 'Come on. What's the matter? Don't you like the picture?' No response 'Do you want another picture?' Still no response. Andy waits a moment, stands up, glances towards his tutor, and then moves off to help other learners. The second time Andy approaches her table, Nicola, still head down, begins slowly tapping her forehead against her table – not hard, but audibly, nevertheless. She hasn't looked at her picture. Her pens and folder are still in her bag. Andy hunkers down again. He says: 'Come on, Nicola. What are you doing?' No response. 'Come on. Don't do that. You'll hurt yourself.' No response. Andy looks uncertainly towards his tutor. Then he says: 'Come on, Nicola. Let's have a look at that picture. Let's see what we want to say about it.' No response. Andy remains there a moment or two, then stands up and moves on to the next learner, who is working well and who, like the others, responds to him in a friendly way.

When the twenty minutes for the task are almost up and Andy has almost completed his third circuit of the room, he approaches Nicola again. This time, as she sees him coming, she begins banging her forehead more forcibly against her desk. Bang. Bang. Bang. Andy stops in his tracks and, raising his voice above the murmur of on-task noise, he says: 'OK. Time's up. You've all worked very hard. Let's take a ten minute break. Back in here at quarter past.' The learners, who hadn't been expecting a break, file out happily, chatting. Nicola goes with them, leaving behind her bag and her coat just like the rest of them.