Preventing and Dealing with Classroom Incivility: What the Research Tell Us

Let’s Talk About Teaching

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Ten years ago, distractions that could cause poor behavior in the classroom were confined to the classroom itself: an interesting seatmate to chat with, a window to gaze out of, an overheated room to slumber in. Now, the entire world via the Internet is a potential distraction—and with a cellphone, mp3 player, and laptop in almost every student's possession, the temptation to become distracted (and thus to engage in discourteous classroom behavior) is overwhelming.

Critical and Respectful Discourse Series

- Preventing and Dealing with Classroom Incivility
- UVic Policies and Protocols
- Dealing with Disruptive Behaviour
- Addressing Hot Topics
- Teaching Critique
- Having Difficult Conversations
Incivility Defined

Ryerson University (2004) defines incivility as “any unintended or deliberate conduct or comment, directed at another individual, that a reasonable person knows, or ought to know, is unwelcome or inappropriate.” (4)

Implications of Civility and Incivility

- Civility promotes inquiry and enriches the flow of ideas.
- Incivility has several adverse impacts on the learning community:
  - Faculty and Staff stress, discontent and burnout (Luparell, 2007)
  - Student learning opportunities are obstructed (Morrissette, 2001);
  - Administrators’ time is consumed with problem resolution.
Workshop Plan

This workshop will focus on what evidence-based research tells about preventing incivility and fostering critical discourse.

Participants will work with principles to create strategies that apply in their context.
Incivility

- List 3 examples of uncivil classroom behaviours.

194 nursing faculty and 306 nursing students participated in the survey.

Questions included:
- What student behaviours are considered to be uncivil by faculty and by students?
- What faculty behaviours are considered to be uncivil by faculty and by students?
Survey Data

Tables that follow show the percentages of student and faculty respondents who perceived behaviours as either Usually Uncivil or Always Uncivil.

Note: I have edited the wording of a few items to fit the space.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Behaviour</th>
<th>Student Responses</th>
<th>Faculty Responses</th>
<th>Combined Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holding distracting conversations</td>
<td>79.9%</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the computer unrelated to class</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demanding make-up exams, extensions, grade changes</td>
<td>78.2</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being unprepared for class</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>76.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sarcastic remarks or gestures</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>70.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheating on exams or quizzes</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making disapproving groans</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>61.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting class</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using cell phones or pagers during class</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not paying attention</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeping in class</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arriving late for class</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to answer direct question</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving class early</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting bored or apathetic</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating tension by dominating discussions</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Behaviour</td>
<td>Student Responses</td>
<td>Faculty Responses</td>
<td>Combined Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making condescending remarks/put-downs</td>
<td>81.7%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making rude gestures or behaviours</td>
<td>81.0</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>81.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exerting rank or superiority over others</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>75.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being unavailable outside of class</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>74.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being distant or cold toward others</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>74.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishing class for one student’s behaviour</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>73.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Threatening to fail for non-compliance</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being unprepared for scheduled activities</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>70.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being inflexible, rigid, authoritarian</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing or reluctant to answer questions</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>67.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring disruptive behaviour</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective grading</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arriving late for scheduled activities</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canceling activities without warning</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stating disinterest in subject</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not allowing open discussion</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective teaching styles or methods</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What does this study tell us?

 Shows that students’ and faculty members’ expectations are surprisingly coherent: we agree on the negative behaviours we find irritating.

 Suggests that the classroom is a place of shared expectations that can be realised or frustrated by either or both parties.

 Suggests that civility and incivility are reciprocal; faculty and students create them in relation to one another.
Students learn from a “hidden curriculum”

Students learn not just by what we say, but by what we do. Role modeling is a powerful mode of teaching, and the hidden curriculum is a powerful mode of learning.

However, a corollary is that students may learn things we did not intend to teach them, such as habits that long ago became invisible to us, but remain irritatingly obvious to others.

By observing how their teachers actually do things and how the system really works, students learn what is often hidden from our own view.

Your Turn

The following slide is extracted from a course syllabus.

Imagine you are a student enrolled in the course.

What is the hidden curriculum?

How might the instructor improve the message?
Lecture attendance is neither required nor noted. However, BE ON TIME AND REMAIN FOR THE ENTIRE PERIOD OR DO NOT COME AT ALL. This class is too large to have people crawling over each other or standing in front of the projector while trying to find a seat or leaving after the lecture has begun. Arriving late and/or leaving early is inconsiderate of your colleagues.

This class is also too large for chit-chat, please do not. You are unaware of how far your voices carry in FAV 150 and how disturbing it is to your classmates to be forced to endure your idle chatter and giggling. The students who sit near you are not interested in your romantic lives, how out-of-touch you think your parents are, how stupid you think your teachers are, etc. You may not realize how disturbing your “private” conversations are when others are trying to listen to a lecture.

Every one who registers for this class is an adult. . . . You should also be adult enough not to disturb others. Mindless talking during class is immature, inconsiderate behavior. Please ask questions or make comments about the art work that will benefit the entire class, but leave the chit-chat in the halls where it belongs.

Robert Boice (1996, 2000) visited large undergraduate classrooms “as an ethologist.” Sat at the back and observed classes; also interviewed students & interviewed faculty.

- Noted teachers’ negative communications to students (messages of blame, threat, guilt) as well as non-immediacies (such as perceived coldness) in non-verbal expressions on the part of teachers.

- Noted student disruptions (such as coming late, leaving early) and strong student incivilities (such as cat calls).
Findings

- Negative communications and non-immediacies on the part of teachers correlate very strongly with incivility on the part of students.
- Both have a higher incidence with inexperienced novice faculty.
- Experienced veterans with high student approval ratings have very low student incivility and also have low negative communications and non-immediacies on the part of the teacher.
Neg Coms: Teachers’ negative communications to students (e.g., threats)

Nonimmeds: Teachers’ nonimmediacies in nonverbal expressions (e.g., immobile, unfriendly posture)

S Disrupts: Student disruptions (e.g., coming late and leaving early, noisily).

SSI: Strong student incivilities (e.g., cat calls).

Experts: Exemplary veterans with high general ratings

Novices: Struggling beginners

FIGURE 8.1 Observation of Classroom Incivilities
Next, Boice (1996) coached the unsuccessful teachers from his first study.

- Provided 10 minutes of coaching per week.
- Provided feedback after he observed their classes.
- Observed their classrooms again in the next semester (using same system as before).
Findings

- One term of coaching (~100 minutes) given to struggling faculty members significantly improves student learning and reduces student incivility.

- Students made better notes.

- Students gleaned the take-home message of the class; understood key concepts.
**Neg Coms**: Teachers’ negative communications to students (e.g., threats)

**Nonimmeds**: Teachers’ nonimmediacies in nonverbal expressions (e.g., immobile, unfriendly posture)

**S Noise**: Student noise problems

**S Disrupts**: Student disruptions (e.g., coming late and leaving early, noisily).

**INT**: Inadequate note taking by students

**S Not Involved**: Students not involved (e.g., inattentive, not participating)

**Coached Ts**: Novices with 1 terms of coaching on teacher behaviours

**Controls**: Novices without coaching

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**FIGURE 8.3** Results of Coaching
Findings: Behaviours that Attenuate Incivility

- Most classes start with low levels of incivility
- Incivility remained low in classrooms with “positive motivators” and “strong immediacies” on the part of teachers
- Incivility also remained low when teachers use “enthusiasm, pacing, and clarity of organization”
- Incivility drops when teachers help students to prepare for exams with practice exams or give intermediate deadlines for major projects.
Findings: Behaviours that Aggravate Incivility

- Incivility rises in times of stress: before and after large tests, near deadlines for major projects.
- Incivility rises when the pitch of the course is incorrect (either too difficult or too easy).
How Veterans Mitigate or Avert Incivility

- Convert the beginnings of incivility into “occasions for explanations, fresh starts, and good humour.”
- Admit mistakes and address them constructively
- Use reflective listening ("so you are telling me that my syllabus has the papers due on a day when the university is closed?")
- Resist making decisions under pressure.
- Anticipate and address issues of stress.
- Address uncivil behaviour.
- Teach the language of respectful disagreement.
Turning Points

- Think of a time when you (as student or professor) experienced a moment of challenge to instructor’s policies, the course structure, course content, etc.

- Act out this scenario with a partner, not revealing how it was originally handled; the partner will play the role of the professor and will attempt to deal with it as a moment of “conversion.”
Green Light Session

- How can we use the first few weeks of class to give a green light to behaviours we wish to foster (civility, critical skills, intellectual engagement, and risk)?

- You may consider syllabus and assignment design, the hidden curriculum, positive immediacies and active modeling, icebreaking exercises and early classroom discussions

- Work in small groups; share ideas
You can expect your instructor to

 be on time and prepared for class
 teach to the course goals
 give clear instructions for assignments and exercises
 advise and support students in their course work
 treat students with respect
 act in a fair manner
 be available during office hours or, if necessary, arrange an alternative time to meet
 evaluate students fairly and constructively, based on criteria made clear to students beforehand
 return assignments in a timely manner, giving useful feedback
Your instructor will expect you to:

- attend all classes except in case of illness or emergency
- prepare for class by completing readings and assigned work in advance
- actively participate in classroom activities
- ask questions if you do not understand
- submit all assignments according to instructions, complete, and on time
- use instructor comments and feedback to improve future work
- cooperate with and act respectfully toward other students and the instructor
- communicate with the instructor about problems or concerns as soon as possible
- put focused and disciplined effort into the course assignments
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