

Practical Strategies to Reduce or Eliminate Student Incivility*

Faculty can be instrumental in establishing boundaries, influencing student behaviors, and promoting civil learning environments (Clayton, 2000; Heinemann, 1996; Monaghan, 1995). Specific strategies addressed below include:

Develop Effective Communication Skills

Spell Out Academic and Behavioral Expectations in the Syllabus

Gather Midterm Teaching Feedback

Peer Observations and Reviews

Establish a Collaborative Learning Environment

Set a Good Example

Reframe Potential Conflicts

Re-engage Students

Establish a Student Grievance Process

Talk about Appropriate Behavior with your Students

Effective Communication Skills

Faculty can remain respectful and manage student behavior through effective communication (e.g., active listening). To improve faculty-student communication and avoid incivility, Heinemann (1996) suggested that faculty (1) use civil language, (2) maintain inclusive attitudes, (3) teach the language of disagreement, (4) respectfully listen to students, and (5) serve as role models for respect and understanding. From the aforementioned suggestions, it can be concluded that faculty can exercise fundamental interpersonal skills and work toward *speaking with* rather than *speaking at* students. As pointed out by Downs (1992), faculty can sometimes flaunt their power and resort to authoritarianism. Although more will be said about establishing respectful relationships with students later, it should be underlined that practicing effective interpersonal skills and common courtesies is essential to achieve this end. Students who sense that faculty are genuinely trying to understand and honor their perspective are probably less likely to feel disregarded or belittled in front of their peers. Conversely, students who feel insulted or needlessly ridiculed may retaliate covertly (e.g., inviting other students to challenge the course requirements) or overtly (e.g., constantly challenging lecture content).

Attempting to clearly communicate may involve more effort with some students. What should not be underestimated, however, is the value in having other students observe one's concern and regard for a student who may be struggling to articulate an idea or response. Moreover, setting a tone of respect can be invaluable when establishing an overall trusting rapport with students.

Spelling Out Academic and Behavioral Expectations in the Syllabus

Course syllabi can be introduced as contracts between faculty and students that describe realistic and achievable educational objectives (Matejka & Kurke, 1994). During the first class, rather than simply distributing a syllabus, faculty can carefully review the contents of the document to ensure that students understand course objectives, expectations, and evaluation criteria. A careful review with students can be useful in identifying a variety of common errors (e.g., assignment dates, exam times). For the most part,

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ambiguous or poorly constructed syllabi may contribute to student resentment and anger. Downs (1992) contended that faculty should continually evaluate syllabi to ensure that expectations are clear and concise. She further remarked that student anxiety and resentment grows when there is a lack of clarity.

A common concern among students pertains to faculty who arbitrarily and independently change course objectives and expectations. When such behavior occurs, students express anxiety regarding the direction of the course and newly established expectations. In short, students resent professors who abandon initial learning agreements, alter assignments, and redesign courses in mid-stream.

Syllabi can also be used to communicate appropriate social and inter-personal boundaries and classroom behavior. For example, to promote appropriate classroom behavior, faculty can spell out unacceptable behavior (e.g., chit-chatting and mindless talking during lectures) and stipulate guidelines in their syllabi. Faculty can also articulate student codes of courtesy regarding lectures by guest speakers (e.g., appropriate timing of questions, dismissal times).

To set standards and the desired tone for a civil classroom, Moore (1996) contended that faculty should establish their credentials early on and dress in a fashion that projects professionalism and leadership. Faculty who ignore important professional boundaries between themselves and students can quickly lose the respect of students and contribute to student confusion about their role. In an effort to gain support and form alliances, faculty may begin to fraternize with students. Although sounding innocuous, professors can experience difficulty when attempting to re-establish their credibility in the classroom. Further, students can become resentful toward professors who behave differently within social and classroom contexts.

Arranging for Mid-term Teaching Feedback

To assist faculty while providing students with an opportunity to share their opinions, mid-term teaching evaluations can be designed and instituted. In addition to quantitative information, such evaluations should include space for qualitative responses. When reviewing student feedback, faculty may detect patterns (both positive and negative) or blind spots that can be addressed to prevent or diffuse hostile student-faculty interactions. Demonstrating a willingness to evaluate one's own work while seriously considering student observations can contribute to an open and honest learning environment.

Students can be asked to complete mid-term evaluations in order to provide faculty with information that faculty can use to improve their teaching and interaction skills. Taking the initiative to secure this information, and eventually integrate it to enhance course delivery, can demonstrate faculty's openness to feedback, flexibility, and a willingness to make necessary changes. This process is collaborative in nature and can assist faculty in keeping a pulse on student needs. Faculty who remain oblivious to student feedback, or mistakenly assume that all is well, can encounter a rude awakening when reviewing their teaching evaluations.

Arranging for Peer Observations and Reviews

The peer observation and review process can provide faculty with invaluable insights into their teaching and interactional style. This process can be accomplished by inviting colleagues from different departments to review syllabi and observe classroom instruction. In addition to inviting feedback from university colleagues, the author has welcomed the input from respected community colleagues who possess expertise in a specific subject matter. These individuals can be especially helpful in providing important feedback about course content and the anticipated needs of future graduates. To assist in organizing the peer observation process (e.g., timing and delivery of feedback), Mento and Giampetro-Meyer (2000) have developed the *Colleague Observation Form*.

Coupled with mid-term/final student evaluations, peer observations and reviews can be helpful in identifying and confirming patterns, strengths, and needs (Osborne, 1998). Faculty can be particularly helpful to

reviewers by requesting feedback in specific areas of teaching and facilitation. Attempting to scaffold or build on suggestions from previous peer reviews may serve to fortify positive interactional styles and instructional methods.

Establishing a Collaborative Learning Environment

The California Community Colleges Academic Senate (1996) asserted that faculty members can be creative in designing classroom experiences that focus on student success by fostering a collaborative versus competitive learning environment. Consequently, the traditional lecture format, individual assignments, and examinations would need to be reconsidered. To encourage collaboration, a co-operative learning environment involving students and faculty could be instituted and reinforced. In essence, the traditional transmission model of education wherein students are perceived as empty vessels waiting to be filled with information would be replaced with learning environments influenced by constructivist learning principles (e.g., Fisher, Taylor, & Fraser, 1996). This latter approach values prior experience and knowledge and welcomes appropriate student challenge, questioning, and debate.

Although sounding reasonable in theory, establishing a co-operative learning environment is complex and involves several key ingredients such as effective social and team building skills. According to Downs (1992) when creating a co-operative learning environment, faculty role modeling can be a powerful tool. As alluded to earlier, the onus is placed on faculty to remain sensitive to the developmental needs of students and more importantly, their behavior and responses toward students.

Setting a Good Example

Boice (1996) stated that, "The most experienced researchers on classroom incivilities assume that students and teachers are partners in generating and exacerbating it" (p. 458). He echoed an earlier remark made by Downs (1992) who asserted that, whether faculty want to admit it or not, they can be the source of conflicts. In discussing student and teacher power in the classroom, Kearney and Plax (1992) emphasized prosocial and antisocial teacher behaviors and student responses. In terms of prosocial behaviors, faculty are perceived as warm, friendly, and motivational. More specifically, they maintain a positive attitude toward students and demonstrate an interest in them. Antisocial behaviors, on the other hand, include aloofness and disinterest on behalf of faculty.

Faculty can inadvertently provoke a violent cycle by publicly debasing, humiliating, or invalidating students (e.g., remarking that a question is ridiculous or unworthy of an answer) or by making snide remarks. From a systemic perspective, such antisocial behavior can invite hostile student reactions and retaliation.

The arrogance of some faculty can blind them to the fact that incivility often begets incivility. For example, students can feel unfairly criticized, embarrassed, and/or disrespected by faculty who are either unaware of or indifferent to their inappropriate behavior. Faculty can model appropriate behavior (Mills, 1998) starting with how they address students. Although some faculty expect to be addressed formally (e.g., Dr. Jones, Professor James), students rarely enjoy the same courtesy and are commonly referred to on a first name basis. To demonstrate respect, faculty can simply ask students how they would like to be addressed. Even colleagues who teach large classes make an effort to follow this practice.

Reframing Potential Conflicts

The purpose of reframing behavior is to side-step unnecessary power struggles. To reframe, faculty need to plan ahead and understand that such situations will arise despite their best efforts to create a respectful learning environment. The idea that student challenge behavior can be an attempt to seek additional information (Jones & Simonds, 1994) may be useful in helping faculty avoid personalizing ill-mannered student responses or reactions.

Faculty reframing can include responding non-defensively and respectfully to a student's comment or behavior. For example, when a student excessively criticizes the content and process of a course, his or her obvious disappointment can be acknowledged. Further, the student's commitment to acquiring information that is personally meaningful and his or her willingness to speak out for the betterment of the course can be noted. In essence, reframing can assist faculty in viewing student behaviors in a different light. The reframing process also allows faculty to *respond* productively rather than *reacting* harshly to students. In order to effectively reframe situations, it is critical that faculty avoid personalizing student remarks (e.g., the text is useless!, this class time is bogus!). Rather than reacting and entering into feuds with students, faculty can simply acknowledge concerns and empathize with their disappointment.

Re-engaging Students

To repair strained relationships, faculty can take appropriate steps to re-engage students and resolve differences. Although faculty are encouraged to establish mutually rewarding relationships with students, faculty should only meet with uncivil students to resolve issues in the company of other staff (Amada, 1992). In cases where a male faculty wants to re-engage a female student, a female colleague should be invited to participate to reduce the possibility of student-directed allegations of faculty misconduct.

The re-engagement process provides faculty with opportunities to identify patterns or issues that would otherwise persist. Once again, a secondary benefit that can be gained from this process is student recognition and respect. Some faculty who have been encouraged to use this approach have been reluctant and have expressed a concern regarding their loss of status. On the other hand, faculty who invest in the re-engagement process can be perceived as individuals who are genuinely committed to student learning and personal growth.

Establishing Student Grievance Process

To prevent student-faculty conflict from escalating, a process needs to be established wherein student complaints and concerns are taken seriously and appropriately investigated. Students often report that their concerns are trivialized and are easily dismissed. Although most universities have a grievance process in place, it may only be symbolic and lack integrity. The grievance process is particularly important when considering:

In samplings of core courses at large public universities, as many as a third of faculty treated students with unmistakable rudeness and condescension. In a few cases, they physically assaulted students who pressed them for answers or help (Boice, 1996), perhaps about as often as students assaulted professors. In many more instances (we do not know the exact figures), professors take advantage of teaching dynamics to sexually and otherwise compromise students" (Amada, 1992, p. 458).

If fair and effective student grievance procedures are lacking, students and faculty must demand an institutional policy change. Training for faculty and students about the grievance procedure should be implemented. The institution must also make a determination about the privacy and right-to-know issues surrounding the grievance process.

Using a Back-to-the-Basics Approach

A back-to-the-basics approach to conflict resolution is recommended at the beginning of each semester during college/university or departmental gatherings. Although sounding simplistic, it is important that faculty be reminded of the potential ramifications of uncivil student behavior. The California Community Colleges Academic Senate (1996), lists several suggestions designed to avoid classroom conflict and this includes inviting or hiring experts to introduce conflict-management skills to faculty and staff. Although some faculty may scoff at the notion of discussing the importance of promoting civil behavior in the classroom, the negative ramifications of such behavior cannot be ignored.