Ensuring a Civil Classroom

What does the research say?

How many times have you looked across your classroom to see students texting, sleeping, talking on cell phones, arriving late or leaving early, carrying on side conversations, or using their laptops to look at social media? It can be easy to interpret these behaviors as evidence that students feel entitled or aren’t interested in learning. It is especially easy for young or inexperienced instructors to take these behaviors personally and begin to resent their students for what they see as a lack of respect. But attributing uncivil or disruptive behaviors to students alone can make instructors feel powerless to change them. This often leads to an excessive focus on policing students’ conduct, which takes time away from learning and can create unnecessary tensions between instructor and students. Is there a better way to ensure a civil classroom?

The research on classroom incivility suggests that there is! This research shows that instructors are not powerless; in fact, they play a key role in influencing student behaviors, both positive and negative. Civility (or incivility) is often driven by students’ beliefs about their instructors’ attitudes toward and treatment of them. This is good news because it means that you do have the power to create the conditions that mitigate against disruptive or uncivil behavior. Outlined below are three positive student beliefs that can help motivate civility, along with several strategies you can use to help cultivate these beliefs.

Civility increases when students believe that the instructor cares about their learning.

Simply put, research suggests that when students believe that an instructor is committed to helping them learn, they are less likely to engage in disruptive or uncivil behaviors (Knepp, 2012). Instructors can tell students that they care about their learning, but this is not enough. An instructor’s pedagogical choices are the most important way to show students that their learning is the most important thing in the class. What are some pedagogical choices that can help you encourage civility?

Slow down and engage students in class. When the majority of class time focuses on the instructor lecturing, explaining, or demonstrating, students can fall into a passive role. Moreover, students frequently report frustration with instructors who move through lectures so quickly that there isn’t even time to ask questions, much less to assess their understanding of the material (Knepp, 2012). Students who don’t believe there is any work for them to do in the class or, worse, that it simply isn’t possible for them to keep up with what is happening, will find ways to distract themselves (and sometimes others). Pausing class regularly to have students engage in a learning activity, respond to a question, ask questions, review and recap their notes, or engage in a discussion can make a big difference in their perception of your willingness to help them learn. One easy-to-implement strategy for engaging students is called think-pair-share: you pose a question and ask students to write down their answer, ask students to share their ideas in pairs, and then ask some of the pairs to share their thinking with the whole class. Pausing for one or two think-pair-share activities during a class period encourages civility by engaging students.

Seek feedback from students. Students are more likely to believe that an instructor cares about their learning when that instructor asks what is or isn’t helping them learn. While there are formal measures for collecting extensive feedback from students (like ITLAL’s Early Semester Survey service), there are also some simpler, more informal strategies to facilitate communication with students. For example, you might ask students to respond in writing to some basic questions like “What is one thing that is helping you learn in this class?” or “What is one thing that the instructor could do differently to help you learn in this class?” Collecting this feedback just two or three times during the semester and responding to concerns can demonstrate that student learning is important to you.

Make yourself available to students. Research shows that a common frustration for students is instructors who don’t make themselves available outside of class (Boice, 1996). The belief that an instructor isn’t willing to devote time to helping them learn can help students justify uncivil behavior to themselves. It’s important to observe regular office hours so that students know they have dedicated time to meet with you for help. In order to show students that you want them to use them as a resource, you might consider taking students on a “field trip” to your office in the first week of class. Knowing where your office is located is important, but more important is the implied invitation to visit!

Civility increases when students believe that the instructor respects them.

When students feel that an instructor is disrespectful to them; they are more likely to reciprocate with...
uncivil behavior. Research has shown that students become very frustrated with instructors who they find rude, arrogant, condescending, or dismissive of students (Boice, 1996). While it is unlikely that most instructors intend to disrespect students, students’ perception of instructor incivility can lead to disruptive behaviors. How can you show respect for students to encourage civility?

**Be mindful of tone in interactions with students.** When an instructor finds herself fielding questions that are answered in the syllabus, having to repeat information that was just presented, or listening to ill-formed student opinions, it can be easy to show frustration in a curt or sarcastic response. However, sarcasm can be perceived as disrespectful, damaging the instructor’s relationship with not only the student involved in the exchange, but also with the class witnessing the interaction. If you find yourself facing these kinds of frustrating situations, it’s important to pause, take a breath, and consider what might be behind the student’s question or behavior. Sometimes a student has simply fallen behind, is struggling to make sense of a great deal of information, or is also feeling frustrated in that moment. Pausing creates an opportunity to slow down, depersonalize the situation, and offer students a thoughtful and respectful reply.

**Personalize the classroom.** This can be especially difficult in large classes, but it is a challenge worth taking on. When instructors take the time to learn students’ names (even just a few of them!), interact with them individually, and give some individual feedback on their work, students believe that they matter to the instructor (Knepp, 2012). You can reduce anonymity by asking students to give their name when asking a question or contributing to a discussion, and try to call on students by name whenever possible. Another basic instructor behavior that can create a sense of community is arriving early to class and having informal conversations with students. Finally, even in large classes you can have students turn in very short writings (maybe only a sentence) to create the sense of an individual relationship and some opportunity for individual feedback. All of these small steps help create a positive learning environment that mitigates against student incivility.

**Show respect for students’ time.** Instructors are often frustrated by students who come to class late or leave early. Similarly, students report frustration with instructors who come to class late or keep students over class time (Boice, 1996; Knepp, 2012). This overlap tells us something about students’ expectations: they want instructors to set a positive example by showing respect for their time (just as instructors expect students to respect theirs). It may seem simplistic, but one of the most important things you can do to create a civil classroom is to come to class on time (just as instructors expect students to respect theirs). It may take the time to learn students’ names (even just a few of them!), interact with them individually, and give some individual feedback on their work, students believe that they matter to the instructor (Knepp, 2012). You can reduce anonymity by asking students to give their name when asking a question or contributing to a discussion, and try to call on students by name whenever possible. Another basic instructor behavior that can create a sense of community is arriving early to class and having informal conversations with students. Finally, even in large classes you can have students turn in very short writings (maybe only a sentence) to create the sense of an individual relationship and some opportunity for individual feedback. All of these small steps help create a positive learning environment that mitigates against student incivility.

**Civility increases when students believe that the instructor responds appropriately to incivility.**

One of the interesting findings in the research is that students are bothered by classroom incivility as much as (or in some cases, more than) instructors are (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010). This means that most students want and expect instructors to encourage a civil, learning-focused classroom. So how can you respond appropriately to uncivil behavior when it does occur?

**Choose which behaviors require an immediate response.** Sometimes individual behaviors that annoy us aren’t truly disruptive because they don’t affect other students. It is best to ignore some non-disruptive behaviors (i.e., those that aren’t bothering other students), or respond to them privately with individual students. Responding too strongly or publicly to these behaviors can actually lead to disruption that the behavior itself wouldn’t have caused. For example, if a student enters the room a couple of minutes late but quietly slips into a seat in the back row without disturbing the people around her, you may choose not to acknowledge that behavior or to talk with the student after class and remind her of the importance of arriving to class on time.

**Don’t ignore disruptive behavior, but respond assertively and respectfully.** One of the biggest challenges newer instructors may face is determining how to respond to disruptive behavior productively. If they ignore behavior that is interfering with student learning, they risk escalating the behavior and losing the trust of students who look to them to maintain order in the classroom (Boysen, 2012). It is important to handle disruptions firmly but respectfully and positively. If students are talking loudly, for example, politely ask them to stop: “Excuse me—that noise is disrupting the class. If you need to talk about coursework, that’s fine, but speak quietly so that your classmates can focus.” If students persist, ask them to speak with you after class.

**Ask for help in exceptional or extreme situations.** If a pattern of disruptive or problematic behavior emerges or you have reason to believe that a student needs further intervention, don’t hesitate to talk with your department chair or advisor and seek advice on how to proceed. If a student displays behavior that concerns you, you can make a report to Student CARE Services by emailing ulbanycares@albany.edu or calling 518-442-5501. That office can coordinate support and advise you on how best to work with the student.

If you would like to learn more about ensuring a civil classroom, we would love to talk with you! You can request a consultation by visiting our website: www.ital.org.

**References**


