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Understanding Incivility in the College Classroom

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Abstract

In recent years, faculty have seen an increase in latecomers, sleepers, cell phone addicts, and downright disruptive students in their courses. Classroom incivility is the disruptive behavior that occurs in higher education learning environments at an alarming rate. Incivility is often a reciprocal process; both students and faculty may contribute to a climate of disrespect and disregard for the learning process. University students are increasingly diverse, unprepared for academic work, juggling multiple life roles, and facing tremendous pressures to perform in large, impersonal classrooms. Moreover, faculty are often trained as researchers and struggle to effectively manage their classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to review academic literature about classroom disruptions, including the causes of incivility and strategies to manage negative student behaviors. In particular, young, female, low-status, and minority instructors face the greatest challenges. Recommendations for faculty include presenting engaging lectures at a moderate pace, respectfully interacting with students, communicating clear expectations, returning assignments at the end of class, and maintaining consistent office hours.

Understanding Incivility in the College Classroom

On Wednesday morning at 10:00, half of the 100 *Introductory Psychology* students are in their seats. The instructor, an assistant professor in her early 30s, begins class on time. Eighteen students stagger into the lecture hall between 2 and 20 minutes late. One student sitting near the side wall is sleeping. The student next to him is reading the newspaper. Several students in two different groups are discussing their weekend plans, despite the instructor's impatient stares and pauses in the lecture. Four students are text-messaging on their cell phones. Twenty students have laptops that are open to Facebook or email. Four students leave between 5 and 10 minutes early, while the professor is still speaking.   Other students have their backpacks packed and are ready to leave 5 minutes before the end of class. After class, as the professor packs up her belongings, she wonders why students today engage in such a high frequency of discourteous, disruptive behaviors. After all, students did not seem nearly as rude when *she* was in college. Uncivil behavior in higher education takes many forms. In this paper, uncivil behavior will be defined and categorized. The possible causes and contributors of incivility will also be discussed. Lastly, the paper will describe strategies that can be used to prevent student and faculty incivility.

What is Incivility?

Incivility, as defined broadly by Berger (2000), refers to any "speech or action that is disrespectful or rude" (p. 446). Clark (2008) expands on this definition by noting that incivility indicates "disregard and insolence for others, causing an atmosphere of disrespect, conflict, and stress" (p. E38). In the context of higher education, Clark proceeds to note that incivility "may be demonstrated by students or faculty and…violates the norms of mutual respect in the teaching-learning environment" (p. E38). Clark points out that when students and/or faculty fail to recognize and obey these norms of mutual respect, emotions such as fear, anger, hostility, and

resentment may develop between the parties involved. As a result, the learning environment is compromised.

To that end, Feldmann (2001) regards incivility as "any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom" (p. 137). Morrissette (2001) echoes this idea by stating that "incivility is…the intentional behavior of students to disrupt and interfere with the teaching and learning process of others" (p. 2). Thus, when one examines the definitions of incivility, several themes emerge. First, uncivil behavior is performed intentionally (even though the perpetrator does not always realize that his or her behavior is disruptive or rude). Secondly, uncivil behavior is pervasive and widespread; it has the potential to impact an entire classroom. Thirdly, both students and faculty members may engage in uncivil behaviors to the detriment of the learning process. Lastly, uncivil behavior violates an unspoken or implied understanding of respect for the learning process and the academy as a whole. If not dealt with swiftly and effectively, it can have a detrimental effect on teaching and learning in both the short and long run.

The specific uncivil behaviors that faculty and students consider disruptive often overlap with one another. In particular, Feldmann (2001) claims that both faculty and students are bothered by individuals who hold side conversations with classmates that are loud and disruptive. Faculty and students are also annoyed by students who make sarcastic remarks or express boredom or displeasure in a noticeable way (e.g., groaning, sighing). Another behavior that faculty and students have cited as uncivil is making loud emotional outbursts during class. Instructors tend to consider the following student behaviors uncivil: 1) failing to participate or express interest in the course, 2) coming to class unprepared, 3) making demands and

unreasonable requests toward the instructor (e.g., extended deadlines, make-up exams), and 4) disrupting class by arriving late or leaving early.

While classroom incivility is often discussed and examined from a faculty perspective, research (e.g., Center for Survey Research, 2000, as cited in Feldmann, 2001) has shown that instructors often engage in uncivil behavior that is noticed and reported by students. Specifically, students are bothered by faculty who engage in the following behaviors: 1) presenting lectures at a fast pace with little to no student involvement or interaction, 2) acting in an aloof, distant manner toward students, or conveying to students that they are a burden to faculty, 3) surprising students with unannounced assessments or unanticipated exam questions, 4) arriving late to class or canceling class without prior notice, and 5) permitting students to belittle or ridicule classmates.

Uncivil behavior in the classroom is frequently grouped and categorized. Feldmann (2001) groups uncivil behavior into four overall categories: 1) annoyances, 2) classroom terrorism, 3) intimidation, and 4) threat of violence. Annoyances comprise the largest and most common incivility category. By itself, each instance of annoying behavior does not pose a serious threat to the learning environment; however, annoying behaviors tend to add up over time. Examples of annoyances include arriving late to class or leaving class early, using cell phones during class (e.g., talking or text-messaging), displaying overt inattention (e.g., completing work for other courses, reading the newspaper, sleeping, not taking notes), and wearing inappropriate clothing or attire.

Feldmann's second category of classroom incivility, classroom terrorism, constitutes a more immediate and serious threat to the learning environment. Students who engage in classroom terrorism monopolize class time by raising irrelevant topics, and thereby take away

learning time from fellow classmates. In addition, some students who display terrorism-like behavior in the classroom may display intolerance toward other students' perspectives and ideas. The third category of incivility involves intimidation. For instance, a student may attempt to threaten a professor by reporting to the department head or dean to complain about that faculty member. Another intimidation tactic includes writing unwarranted negative feedback on an instructor's teaching evaluation. The fourth category of incivility is the most serious, and occurs when students threaten instructors or other students with violence. Clark (2008) notes that, while acts of violence on college campuses are rare, they do occur, and such incidents have been given substantial media attention in recent years.

Berger (2000) describes classroom incivility in more general terms; he groups incivility into two categories. Uncivil behaviors may be active or passive. Passive incivility includes inattention, lateness, noisily shuffling papers and backpacks, using computers during lecture for purposes unrelated to the class, and using cell phones. On the other hand, active incivility includes direct challenges to the instructor, offensive language or gestures toward the instructor or other students, verbal attacks or taunts directed at other students, and physical threats.

Causes of Classroom Incivility

Classroom incivility has been the focus of increased attention in higher education circles, and is commonly labeled as a "growing problem" (Morrissette, 2001, p. 3). Nonetheless, experts still struggle to answer the following question: Has incivility always been a problem on university campuses, or has it become worse in recent years? According to Nilson (2003) and Nilson and Jackson (2004), many of the widespread uncivil behaviors seen in college classrooms today were virtually nonexistent through the mid-1980s. Only in the last two decades has classroom incivility been recognized and labeled as a national concern in higher education.

When discussing potential reasons for the increase in incivility, Nilson (2003) points to the shifts in the academy that have occurred over the past 20 years. First, Nilson argues, college campuses have become increasingly diverse, and that diversity brings a broad array of student attitudes and expectations about learning and the academic environment. Nilson and Jackson (2004) claim, "Many traditional-age students experienced success in high school without practicing the courtesies that college-level faculty expect" (p. 4). Therefore, evidence suggests that today's college students are arriving at universities unprepared for the culture and environment of the academy. Nilson (2003) also cites the increasing specialization of faculty interests. Faculty who are primarily research-focused may lack the resources and/or interest to invest time and effort in teaching and classroom management techniques.

Nilson notes that universities have exacerbated classroom conduct and incivility problems in their own right. For example, universities only tend to sanction the most serious forms of uncivil behavior. Nilson and Jackson (2004) argue that universities have such a strong desire to retain their students that some uncivil behaviors may be overlooked. Further, universities are continuing to grow in size, and class sizes are becoming larger. Incivility is more likely to occur in large enrollment classrooms, where a student may feel like a "number" rather than an individual learner. When students believe that they can act anonymously, they are more apt to behave uncivilly. Generally speaking, today's university environment is "impersonal" and "indifferent," according to Nilson and Jackson (p. 4).

Moreover, Nilson and Jackson claim that another byproduct of the increase in university size and specialization is the fact that adjunct professors and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) often teach courses, labs, or recitation sections. Certain demographic or personal characteristics of the instructor may foster an environment of incivility. For example, traits such as gender, age,

race, ethnicity, and status within the university can affect the frequency of student incivility. Specifically, instructors who are female, young, non-White, and low status (e.g., adjuncts, lecturers, or GTAs) may experience more incivility issues than instructors who do not possess these qualities. Nilson (2003) notes that students tend to view the college professor in the traditional sense: as a mature, White male with a deep voice and commanding presence in the classroom (she refers to this as the "professorial stereotype" – p. 56). When students encounter an instructor who does not fit these characteristics, they may experience resistance, and hence, are more likely to act in an uncivil manner.

Alternatively, Kuhlenschmidt and Layne (1999) assert that uncivil behavior in the classroom may have nothing to do with the instructor. The authors claim that, when students exhibit disruptive and rude behavior, instructors often personalize it. On the contrary, Kuhlenschmidt and Layne point out that behavior tends to be time-contingent. For example, disruptive talking between students commonly occurs near the end of class. Instructors can plan activities or administer assignments near the end of the period to combat this problem. Also, incivility may sometimes occur after graded exams or papers are handed back; therefore, instructors should reserve this until the final minutes of the class session. In addition, Kuhlenschmidt and Layne indicate that disruptive behavior often occurs because it has been rewarded previously. For instance, in high school, a student may have received attention from his or her teacher for acting in an uncivil way (e.g., talking in class, regardless of whether the student said something relevant to the discussion).

Moreover, students may not realize a behavior is disruptive to the professor or other students; not every uncivil behavior is performed with malicious intent. On the other side of the coin, sometimes students are bothered by uncivil behavior that the instructor does not observe or

recognize (e.g., two students talking in the back of the room). If the behavior continues to occur without the instructor's awareness, and as a result, the instructor does not address the behavior, he or she loses some credibility as a manager of the classroom. Kuhlenschmidt and Layne also mention the following factors as potential causes of classroom incivility: medication or other substances students may be taking, illness (both physical and mental), fatigue, stress (e.g., feeling overextended), emotional challenges (e.g., loss of a loved one, break-up of a relationship), emotional immaturity and poor problem-solving skills, attention-seeking, redirected aggression (i.e., when a student becomes upset with a professor due to an unrelated event that occurred outside the classroom), and vision and hearing problems (or other disabilities). In regard to stress, college students are often juggling multiple roles. Some students may have full- or part-time jobs, in addition to taking a full courseload. Kuhlenschmidt and Layne claim that, "As time pressures [for students] increase, civility is often lost" (p. 51).

Berger (2000) discusses the issue of consumerism in higher education today, and how such attitudes might contribute to incivility. The underlying assumption behind the consumerism mentality is that students (or their parents) are paying for an education in order to obtain a final product: a degree. Consequently, Berger notes that such students believe they "…are in the best position to know what they want and to decide whether the education they are getting is relevant and worthwhile" (p. 447). In short, students who subscribe to the consumerism mentality of higher education believe they are owed something for the tuition dollars they pay. As perceived consumers, students may pressure faculty to satisfy their demands and requests, and may blame the professor for a failing grade. Overall, Berger claims that consumerism "…promotes an anti-scholarly approach to higher education" (p. 447).

Irrational or unrealistic faculty beliefs may also contribute to incivility. Faculty tend to believe that students should be attentive, respectful, and interested in the course material at all times. Further, some faculty assert that students should blindly accept their authority and expertise. As a result, faculty may behave in an uncivil manner toward students when these unrealistic expectations are violated. The tendency of faculty to behave uncivilly only adds fuel to the fire when it comes to student incivility.

On a related note, Berger notes that more uncivil behaviors occur in classrooms with faculty members who do not exhibit prosocial behavior (i.e., these faculty members do not practice *immediacy*). Prosocial behaviors such as asking the class, "Do you understand?" (p. 446), as well as nonverbal indicators of immediacy (e.g., eye contact, leaning forward when a student asks a question) can promote civility in the learning environment. Teachers who do not possess these prosocial skills are often viewed as standoffish, distant, and callous in the eyes of students. When students suspect that the professor does not care about them, they are more likely to engage in incivility. Other uncivil faculty behaviors (e.g., delivering lectures that are too fast-paced or do not involve students, discouraging questions or comments, lacking approachability, showing a disregard for office hours outside of class) suggest to students that the faculty member is a deserving recipient of uncivil acts.

<div align="center">Preventing Incivility in Higher Education</div>

Incivility experts have suggested multiple ways to prevent uncivil behavior in the classroom. First, Nilson and Jackson (2004), as well as Morrissette (2001), recommend that instructors include classroom conduct policies in their syllabi. Specifically, instructors should outline in a written document "…what kinds of behaviors will be considered inappropriate and deserving of sanctions, as well as why (e.g., that these behaviors annoy other students in the class

as well as the instructor)" (Morrissette, 2001, p. 4). Instructors should describe grading policies

in regard to tardiness, attendance, participation, missed or late assignments, and make-up exams

(Nilson, 2003). Faculty members might consider listing their policies regarding sleeping,

inattention, side conversations, cell phone usage, and showing disrespect toward the instructor or

other students.

Another approach instructors can take is to focus on desired behaviors, rather than

undesired behaviors. For example, instead of writing, "Please refrain from holding side

conversations during class with your neighbor; it is very distracting to your classmates, as well as

the instructor," faculty members may write, "Please show respect toward the instructor and your

fellow students by listening attentively during class discussion." Regardless of whether desired

or undesired behaviors are emphasized, Morrissette advises that instructors clearly delineate their

expectations and policies in the syllabus, noting that students can become hostile and resentful

when syllabi are ambiguously written.

Moreover, instructors should consistently enforce such policies and address them

immediately when they are violated. Often times, instructors ignore uncivil behavior, hoping

that it will go away. Unfortunately, the uncivil behavior usually does *not* vanish on its own, and

in fact, it may even become worse. If a faculty member fails to punish or acknowledge

classroom incivility, students may interpret the faculty member's silence as assent. Furthermore,

Morrissette states that, when faculty fail to respond to incidents of student incivility, "…students

can begin to capitalize on their new sense of power within the classroom and attempt to

intimidate faculty" (p. 4).

Additionally, faculty might consider adopting a student-developed code of conduct. On

the first day of class, the professor holds a discussion with students about uncivil behaviors they

frequently see other students performing. The instructor takes notes on the discussion, then compiles a document that all students will review and sign at the next class session. By signing the code of conduct, students agree not to engage in the behaviors outlined in the document. Nilson and Jackson (2004) find that students who develop such a code end up patrolling their own behavior to a large extent.

According to Morrissette (2001), faculty can exercise certain communication skills, such as active listening, to deal with disruptive and problematic students. Specifically, Morrissette recommends that faculty engage in the following practices: 1) using civil language, 2) maintaining inclusive attitudes, 3) teaching students how to disagree with one another (and the instructor), 4) listening to students in a respectful manner, and 5) modeling respectful and empathetic behaviors. Students can often learn which behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate simply by observing faculty role models. Further, Morrissette recommends that faculty speak *with* students, instead of speaking *at* them. Faculty who exercise good listening and interpersonal skills can decrease the chances of encountering uncivil behavior from students in their classroom.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Clearly, incivility in higher education takes many forms. What exactly constitutes uncivil behavior depends on whether the behavior is disruptive to the learning environment. Incivility experts (e.g., Nilson, 2003) make the case that uncivil behavior in the classroom has been an increasing problem over the last two decades. In recent years, advances in technology and its availability to students (e.g., cell phones, laptops) have arguably fueled the increase in classroom incivility. Such devices often serve as distractions to the students operating them, and negatively affect the learning processes of other students. Moreover, the consumerism mentality that many

modern college students and their families seem to possess has likely contributed to the rise in incivility. Some students believe they are entitled to a degree because of the tuition they pay; therefore, they reserve the right to challenge and defy the authority of their professors, especially in regard to grades.

Additionally, research (e.g., Clark, 2008) has shown that faculty contribute to a climate of incivility just as much as students do. In fact, students are more likely to display uncivil behavior in courses taught by faculty members who have demonstrated some form of incivility toward students. Further, faculty who possess certain characteristics that do not match the traditional professoriate stereotype may be particularly vulnerable to incivility in their classrooms (e.g., instructors who are young, female, non-White, or of international descent). However, various prevention strategies have been put forth to combat classroom incivility. In particular, a student-generated code of conduct has been employed with success in an effort to target incivility. In sum, the rise in classroom incivility has many potential causes. With careful management and planning, techniques can be employed to reduce disruptive behavior and promote an atmosphere of civility and mutual respect. Colleges and universities should continue to acknowledge incivility within their institutions, and should continue to seek and develop innovative, effective ways to target the ever-growing problem.

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