Student Rudeness & Technology: Going Beyond the Business Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines how society is adapting to an invasion of personal technology. Specifically, the paper reports a pretest study about incivility and the use of personal technology. Findings from this study are useful in providing initial views on demographic differences concerning perceptions about incivility and rudeness in the workplace, religious settings and classroom settings.

INTRODUCTION

Have you been in a work, school or social setting only to have the person you are having a face-to-face conversation with stop abruptly and take a call, or read or write a text message, or even make a call? Current technology is being embedded into every aspect of our lives. Current traditional college age students have not known a life without a computer and now they have personal electronic devices with unfathomable capabilities when the first cell phone call was made in 1973 (Green 2011). Is society becoming ruder by the adoption of new technologies?

"Common civility is becoming a lost art. . . . . The new norm has been to expect some level of rudeness and disrespect in just about every facet of our lives" (Weeks 2011, p. 3). Personal technology offers many benefits to society but also is a factor affecting the lack of civility (Rashid 2005). We enjoy being able to chat with our closest friends even though they may live 1500 miles away. Movie buffs can download their favorites in a matter of minutes and enjoy the latest movie in the comfort of their own home. Technology helps individuals connect with others at a moment's notice whether it is by texting, Skype,

or email. However, the growing use of personal technology may have other implications as well. The convenience of this technology is changing how individuals communicate and the boundaries of such communication. Personal technology appears to be testing etiquette rules about not interrupting conversations. "Professors complain that students disrupt class by carrying on running conversations, texting, [and so forth]" (Weeks 2011, p. 44.). In this study, we examine how personal technology has changed society's perceptions of rudeness and redefined acceptable behavior. Specifically, we focus on the incivility in the classroom, religious settings, and workplace and use of personal technology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Incivility in the classroom, both on the part of students and on the part of faculty members, appears to have increased over the last fifteen to twenty years or so, depending on whom you read or what you hear in the media. Incivility has been defined in many ways by different researchers over the years. It generally includes rudeness, violation of behavioral norms, disregard for others, and lack of respect of others (see, e.g., Boice 1996; Carter 1998; Elder, Seaton and Swinney 2010; Porath and Pearson 2004). Reasons given for the growing incivility of our students include their involvement with technology (mobile phones, online chat rooms, social networking, etc.) that renders them less social in face-to-face encounters (e.g., see Hernandez and Fister 2001) and a greater sense of entitlement, narcissism and/or customer orientation (e.g., see Chonko 2004; Crary 2007; Delucchi and Korgen 2002; Greenberger, et al. 2008).

Academic research on incivility has grown over the last decade as educators investigate both student and faculty incivility and offer strategies for dealing with bad behavior. One of the major studies was undertaken by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University in 2000. Faculty were "asked about the extent and types of incivility respondents have experienced at IUB, their responses to incivility, and perceptions about who engages in incivility" (Indiana University Center for Survey Research 2000, p. 1). Numerous subsequent research studies have involved the use of the survey developed by Indiana, including psychology (e.g., see Lampman, et al. 2009; Nordstrom, Bartels and Bucy 2009) and education (e.g., see Caboni, Hirschy and Best 2004; Hirschy and Braxton 2004; McKinne 2008).

Clark and her colleagues have done extensive work on incivility in the nursing field (e.g., Clark and Springer 2007a; Clark and Springer 2007b). Clark developed her Incivility in Nursing Education survey (INE) based in part on the Indiana instrument. Other researchers in nursing have used INE (e.g., Beck 2009).

Bjorklund and Rehling (2010) surveyed over 3,600 students at their Minnesota state university using a list of 23 behaviors derived in part from the Indiana questionnaire and identified the top four most uncivil student behaviors: continuing to talk after being asked to stop, coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs, allowing a cell phone to ring, and conversing loudly with others (Table 1, p. 16). A simple study of cell phone rudeness was conducted across two Arkansas universities by Jensen, et al. (2009). Over 85% of those participating thought it was rude to use a cell phone in a library or a movie theater, while less than 50% thought it was rude to use a cell phone in the restroom or in a restaurant (Table 1, p. 15). Baker, Comer and Martinak (2008) suggest that "objectionable behavior is a side effect of the changing view of education, ..., as a good for sale" and that Millenials' parents send mixed messages to them (encouraging them to succeed while praising poor performance) (pp. 70-71). In addition as noted during a panel discussion named "Uncivil Gadgets? Changing Technologies and Civil Behavior," students are thinking of themselves as the consumer in the classroom rather than a learner and, with that mind set, maintaining classroom civility will be more challenging (Flood 2010).

Only one study specifically limited to the business discipline was found in a search of the literature. Elder, Seaton and Swinney (2010) surveyed accounting faculty across the U.S.A. using Indiana's instrument. Evidence of incivility was significantly higher in larger accounting classes than in smaller classes. Irresponsible student behaviors (e.g., arriving late for class, not taking notes, skipping classes, and not being prepared) were significantly higher in accounting classes at larger institutions (> 10,000 students) and in

accounting classes at schools in larger cities (> 100,000 population) (p. 97).

Furthermore, is technology the instigator of rude behaviors or has technology changed or is changing societal norms on civility? Peter Post, great-grandson of Emily Post and director of the Emily Post Institute, says, "Technology has allowed us to be busier today than we ever were and that's created a disconnect between people" (Anderson, 2006). Personal technology has allowed us to have distance, anonymity, and a lack of self censoring due to not having face to face communications. Technology allows us to multitask, to do more in less, to be available 24/7 and businesses have embraced this in today's troubled economic times (Dexter, 2010). According to an ABCNews poll, "survey respondents singled out a few reasons for apparent increasing rudeness—particularly the impact of new technology" (Libaw 2011).

Based on the review of the literature further examination of the phenomenon is needed. Therefore we offer the following hypotheses on demographic descriptors and perceptions about personal technology usage and incivility.

- H1: The perception of incivility has increased based on age and income level
- H2: The perception of incivility has not changed based on gender, ethnicity, or religion
- H3: Greater impact perceived from younger and higher income level users
- H4: Less or no impact perceived based on gender, ethnicity, or religion

METHODOLOGY

Permissions to develop a survey based on 1) the Indiana faculty survey instrument (Indiana University Center for Survey Research 2000) and 2) the student survey developed by McKinne (2008) were secured by e-mail from Drs. John Kennedy and Michael McKinne on February 7th and 9th, respectively, of this year. The authors developed and modified the survey on paper and one author then created the web survey version using *Google Apps*™ at her university. Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposals were prepared and submitted to the appropriate committee at each university. The original intent of the authors was to gain access to all College of Business students' e-mail addresses and draw random samples of 300 from each school. E-mails would then be sent with the appropriate Human Subjects/IRB statements to each student, along with the URL link to the web survey.

After clicking a participation agreement (or disagreement) box that was required, students were then given a definition for personal technology and asked a series of questions regarding how often they had observed or experienced certain rude (uncivil) questions. Then they encountered a section on perceptions in which rudeness was defined, followed by a series of questions regarding certain technology usage as being rude or not. Questions in this section addressed not only rude behavior in the classroom or during group activities, but also in other settings (work, religious services). In the next section, students were asked about rudeness trends, policies governing rude behavior, effectiveness of those policies, and role of the leader versus participant in terms of rude behavior. The last section involved demographic questions, including age range, gender, ethnicity, religious preference, income, education status (full or part-time), and employment status.

IRB approval at one university was granted in mid-to-late March, but was delayed at the other university. Two authors proceeded to acquire an Excel file list of College of Business (COB) students' e-mail addresses from the Internship Director, who also maintains the college's listserv to send out notices (internship opportunities, student club meetings, etc.). One author then went through the list and deleted all non-university e-mail addresses of the students, leaving just the university addresses. This resulted in a population size of 761 COB students at the one school. A random sequence generator was located online (www.random.org) and used instead of the website's random number generator to avoid duplication of random numbers by the website. The first 300 numbers were used to pick addresses from the Excel file. The IRB-appropriate e-mail message content from the IRB proposal was copied and pasted into e-mail messages that were then sent to the students. The author used both single and blind carbon copy (BCC) methods to send out the 300 messages from March 30th through April 6th. When using the BCC method, the

author sent the message to himself and included less than 10 student e-mail addresses, so as not to "irritate" the university's spam filters. Two of the addresses were bad, so the next two numbers in the sequence were used and the matching addresses substituted for the bad ones.

Given the delay in IRB approval at one of the two schools, the approaching end of the semester (and the late spring break), and the low response rate of 39 students, it was decided by the authors to treat this sample as a pretest. The methodology will be reevaluated to see how a larger sample could be collected at the one school, plus implement the sample at the other school, over the summer and/or fall semester.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

A total of 39 students responded to the e-mail request for participation in the study between March 30th and April 19th. The authors decided to use this data set as a pretest of the questionnaire, and collect a larger sample over the summer or fall semester. A summary of the demographic profile is provided in Table 1.

Briefly, the typical respondent was a Caucasian female of traditional college age, earning $15,000 or less working part-time in banking, accounting and/or other fields. The respondent was Catholic in religious preference and tended to be going full-time to college. Cross-tabulations and chi-square analyses were conducted amongst the demographic variables using SPSS version 18. No significant differences were found by gender and most of the other tests had significant cell size problems. The few significant differences reported in the next paragraph also suffered from cell size problems greater than 65%.

Younger respondents (17 to 29 years old) tended to be enrolled in college full-time whereas the older group (30 to 49) tended to be enrolled on a part-time basis (χ^2 = 10.035, df = 4, p = .04). Catholics and Fundamentalists tended to be employed on a part-time basis, while Protestants tended to be employed on a full-time basis (χ^2 = 20.201, df = 10, p = .027). Those enrolled full-time in classes either worked part-time or were not currently employed, while those who worked full-time either took classes part-time or were not enrolled in college at all (χ^2 = 14.666, df = 4, p = .005).

Overview of Observed Behaviors & Perceptions

The online survey contained three sections of questions in addition to the demographic questions at the end. Students were first asked a series of questions regarding how often they had observed or experienced certain rude (uncivil) behaviors. Response options ranged from "none" to "four or more times." Modal responses are provided in Table 2. The most frequently observed

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Characteristic	Modal Response	Frequency	Percentage	n
Age	17 to 23	19	48.7%	39
Gender	Female	22	57.9%	38
Ethnicity	Caucasian	32	84.2%	38
Religious preference	Catholic	14	37.8%	37
Income	$0 to $15K	14	36.8%	38
Enrolled in higher ed courses	Yes, full-time	30	76.9%	39
Currently employed	Yes, part-time	17	43.6%	39
If yes, in what industry?	Other	09	28.1%	32
	Finance	08	25.0%	

Table 2
Observed Behaviors

Behavior	Modal Response	Freq.	%	n
Technology disruptions during group activity	4 or more	22	56.4%	39
Using personal technology to cheat	None/zero	22	56.4%	39
Harassing comments using technology	None/zero	25	65.8%	38
Not paying attention due to technology use	4 or more	28	73.7%	38
Not taking notes due to technology use	4 or more	21	53.8%	39
Using technology that distracted others	4 or more	18	46.2%	39
Using technology that distracted you	4 or more	13	34.2%	38
Group members skipping activity due to tech access to materials	1 time	11	28.2%	39
Students leaving early to use technology	4 or more	12	30.8%	39
Using technology to taunt/belittle others	None/zero	25	64.1%	39
Using technology to threaten physical harm	None/zero	33	84.6%	39
Using technology during activity for non-related purpose	4 or more	22	56.4%	39

behaviors were interruptions to group activities (devices going off or being used, distracting members, members leaving early to use devices). Least observed behaviors involved using personal technology to taunt, harass, cheat or threaten physical harm. A definition of personal technology as given in the survey is any electronic device used by an individual, for example; cell phones, IPods (or equivalent devices), IPads (or equivalent devices), notebooks, etc.

In the next section, students were asked about their perceptions regarding certain technology usage as being rude or not, after reading a definition of rudeness (defined as any behavior that negatively impacts a group activity, for example; talking on personal technology when others are talking, interrupting the group when personal technology makes unexpected noises, etc.). Students were offered a four-point Likert-type scale (no neutral point but an opt-out choice, "Unsure") to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each statement. Descriptive statistics are provided (after removing "Unsure" responses) for these statements in Table 3.

As indicated in Table 3, students generally considered most behaviors to be rude (median response was 3, for "agree"), with the exception of using personal technology at school and at work. The four rudest behaviors, based on means and medians, are using technology to threaten harm, to make harassing comments, to belittle others and during religious services.

The last section of questions dealt with rudeness trends, policies governing rude behavior, effectiveness of those policies, and role of the leader versus participant in terms of rude behavior. Twenty-three respondents (59%) believe that rudeness is on the rise, compared to previous years, while 14 (35.9%) felt it was about the same. Three-quarters of those responding (30/39) indicated that their organizations have policies about rude behaviors during group activities, but only 14 out of 33 indicated that the policies were only somewhat effective (median = 3, mean = 2.52). Twenty-four respondents (61.5%) believed that the group leader's behavior "possibly" contributed to rudeness on the part of the group, while a third (13/39) said "yes." Over half (21/39, 53.8%) said that both the leader's and group participants' actions equally had an impact on the group's rudeness behavior.

Significant Differences by Demographics

Given the dominance of one or two characteristics over others for income, higher education

Table 3
Perceptions of Rude Behaviors

Statement*	Mean	Median	S.D.	n
Technology disruptions during group activity constitutes rudeness	3.03	3	0.941	36
Using personal technology to cheat constitutes rudeness	3.39	4	0.974	38
Harassing comments using technology constitutes rudeness	3.54	4	0.886	35
Not paying attention due to technology use constitutes rudeness	3.11	3	0.863	38
Not taking notes due to technology use constitutes rudeness	2.80	3	0.868	35
Using technology that distracted others constitutes rudeness	3.30	3	0.845	37
Using technology that distracted you constitutes rudeness	3.14	3	0.833	36
Group members skipping activity due to tech access to materials constitutes rudeness	2.85	3	1.034	33
Students leaving early to use technology constitutes rudeness	3.06	3	0.873	35
Using technology to taunt/belittle others constitutes rudeness	3.51	4	0.837	37
Using technology to threaten physical harm constitutes rudeness	3.61	4	0.803	36
Using technology during activity for non-related purpose constitutes rudeness	3.00	3	0.805	38
It is rude to use personal technology at work.	2.46	2	0.960	37
It is rude to use technology during religious services.	3.46	4	0.756	39
It is rude to use technology at school.	2.39	2	0.887	38

* 4-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree.

enrollment, ethnicity, and religious preference, further analyses were limited to age, gender and employment. Turning to observed behaviors and general questions about rudeness, no significant differences were identified by age or by gender. Three significant differences were identified by employment; however, they suffer from severe cell size problems (> 75%). Those employed full-time did not observe any cheating behavior using personal technology, while those either not currently employed or working part-time did observe some cheating ($\chi^2 = 15.802$, df = 8, p = .045). Those respondents who are not currently employed tended to notice some use of technology to threaten others with physical harm ($\chi 2 = 13.214$, df = 6, p = .04), and thought that participants' actions had the greater impact on group rudeness ($\chi 2 = 15.862$, df = 6, p = .015).

The 15 perception of rudeness statements and the effectiveness of policy question were analyzed using nonparametric tests (Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis) and double-checked with t-tests and ANOVA. No significant differences were identified by age or by employment. Three significant differences were identified by gender. Women respondents tended to agree with the statement that "Not taking notes due to technology use constitutes rudeness" (Means: 3.11 vs. 2.5, Mann-Whitney p = .045, t = -2.156, df = 32, p = .039). [Note: for some reason with version 18 of SPSS, only the significance value and null hypothesis decision are provided in the table. Traditional statistics are not provided.] Women participants also agreed with two other statements: "Group members skipping activity due to tech access to materials constitutes rudeness" (3.22 vs. 2.36, MW p = .011, t = -2.498, df = 30,

p = .Ø18) and "Students leaving early to use technology constitutes rudeness" (3.37 vs. 2.67, MW p = .Ø29, t = -2.464, df = 32, p = .Ø19).

DISCUSSION

Limitations

Given the low response rate, we were not able to test the proposed hypotheses. There were also item omissions on certain questions, which created problems with crosstabulations and other tests. The IRB approval delay at one of the schools limited data collection to just one of the schools. The questionnaire's length may also have deterred students from participating in our study. In addition the timing of the study may also have played a role, as students may have been more preoccupied with approaching end-of-semester projects and papers.

Conclusions

Since this was a pretest, we will summarize our general observations drawn from the findings. In general students reported observing or encountering many rude behaviors, consider rudeness to be on the rise, and generally agreed that many behaviors were, indeed, rude (with the exception of using personal technology at school and at work). It is possible that social desirability bias may be present, in that respondents provided what they assumed would be "appropriate" responses to our survey (Duh! They are asking about rudeness so I will say the behaviors are rude.). Whether this can be tested for in a larger study is something to consider. Some differences by gender were identified for perceptions of rudeness. These trends and general observations need to be assessed through a larger survey of students.

Students generally considered most behaviors as rude with the exception of "using personal technology at school and at work." What they considered the four most rude behaviors were "using technology to threaten harm," "to make harassing comments," "to belittle others" and "during religious services."

The majority of students surveyed believe that rude behavior is increasing and three-quarters of those responding acknowledged that their organizations have policies about rude behaviors during group activities. However, most of the students surveyed did not consider policies governing rude behavior as effective while supporting the idea that the behavior of the group leader could contribute to rudeness on the part of the group.

Minor gender variations in perception of rudeness were discovered with females indicating less acceptance of rude behavior.

Recommendations for Future Study

Continued research should include variations across generational groups, socio-economic groups and correlations with measures of respect. For example, variance of perceptions of incivility between faculty and students may show that different generations (divided by considerable differences in age) may have varying perceptions of what is considered rude behavior. Likewise, students from different socio-economic strata may have varying perceptions of what is considered rude or unacceptable behavior. Finally, a student's perception of respect for an individual faculty member may also affect the student's perceptions of what is or is not rude or acceptable behavior in the presence of that particular faculty member.

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