Understanding Incivility in Online Teaching

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of incivility in online teaching and learning. Incivility is defined within the context of face-to-face and online learning environments. Certain acts of incivility are explored as well as methods for prevention and reduction. Because academic dishonesty is becoming more prevalent, cheating and plagiarism are examined. Finally, the concept of developing and maintaining online culture is explored.

Introduction

The history of higher education has been threaded with instances of deception, incivility, bullying, bias, harassment, discrimination, inequity, and inequality (Twale & De Luca, 2008). According to Nilson (2003), incivility has increased because "the academy has changed in many ways over the last 20-plus years that have probably exacerbated behavioral and disciplinary problems" (p. 56). The diversity of the students is a major cause. Today's students do not share "the traditional academic values, norms, and communication styles" (p.56). Nilson suggests that the college student and college teacher relationship has become more impersonal, thus "generating an atmosphere of distrust and indifference" (p. 56). As a result, a significant amount of attention over the last two decades has been toward the prevalent problem of incivility within the

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classroom (Amada, 1999; Boice, 1996; Braxton & Bayer, 2005; Carbone, 1999; Davis, 1993; Delucia & Iasenza, 1995; Eble, 1988; Feldman, 2001; Galbraith, 2008; Galbraith & Jones, 2008; Gonzalez & Lopez, 2001; Nilson, 2003; Rowland & Srisukho, 2009; Royce, 2000). The incivility issue has been extended into a different direction with the rapid growth and increase of distance education and online teaching and learning. Along with this endeavor come new unanswered questions and unsolved issues as it relates to online teaching (Galbraith & Jones, 2009).

This article examines the issue of incivility in online teaching. Defining acts of incivility are explored. In addition, acts of uncivil classroom behavior in face-to-face settings are compared to online situations in an effort to determine if these types of incivility have as much validity and meaning when teaching online. How to prevent and respond to acts of incivility are examined as well. Because academic dishonesty is becoming more prevalent, a detailed discussion on cheating and plagiarism is presented. A discussion is offered on the importance of how to develop and maintain an online cultural setting.

Defining Incivility

According to Galbraith and Jones (2009), the term incivility has been defined and interpreted in different ways. Some definitions place an emphasis on only the student, while others incorporate the teacher into the equation. Galbraith (2008) suggests that incivility occurs when the rules of conduct are broken by students and teachers. Feldman (2001) defined incivility (2001) as any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere. Ferris (2002) indicates that the lack of decorum, manners, deportment, and politeness indicates the presence of incivility. He states that civility and incivility are filtered through culture as customs, folkways, mores, and other sociocultural expectations. These things can be present in classroom settings, and with time can be created in online situations.

Other authors such as Morrissette (2001) and Phillips and Smith (2003) focus their definitions on the intentional behavior of students to disrupt the teaching and learning encounter of others. Finding an acceptable and uniform definition of incivility seems like a daunting task since little has been directly focused toward online teaching and learning. Clarification of a definition can perhaps be generated after an

examination of some acts of incivility. These acts of incivility will be presented in an effort to determine if these acts are indicative only of classroom settings, or if they can be applied to the online setting as well.

Incivility Acts

Barash (2004) states that the interpretation of what is civil and what is uncivil is in the perception of the receiver, not the sender. In response to Barash's perspective, Twale and DeLuca (2008) remark,

> That is what makes the behavior so insidious, because the meaning behind the interaction could be anything from complete sincerity to sarcasm to flagrant manipulation. It could also be harassment, incivility, passive aggression, or bullying as translated by the receiver. The intent of the sender is insignificant. (p. 3)

In a number of surveys with college instructors to determine what they considered acts of incivility, Boice (1996), Ferriss (2002), Royce (2000) and Rowland and Srisukho (2009) found very similar findings concerning what student behaviors were unacceptable and/or annoying:

- eating in class
- using a cell phone during class
- talking in class
- arriving late and leaving early
- packing up early
- acting bored or apathetic
- challenging the instructor's authority, knowledge, or credibility
- demanding special treatment
- an "I paid for this mentality"
- making offensive remarks/gestures
- missing deadlines
- prolonged chatting in class
- reading magazines/newspapers in class
- sleeping in class
- reluctance in answering question
- using a computer in class for non-class purposes
- taunting or belittling others
- cutting class
- making physical threats to the instructor
- engaging in academic dishonesty (cheating and/or plagiarism)
- dominating discussion
- making harassing, hostile, or vulgar comments to the instructor in or outside of class
- sending the instructor inappropriate emails

There are several things that must be considered when reviewing the previous list. First, not all of them may be considered major issues by some faculty. That does not mean that they are any more acceptable. It does mean however, that some college instructors believe that the above list constitutes some behaviors that are uncivil, while others may simply be more of a simple annoyance. Ferriss (2002) believes that what is proper and uncivil in one place or time may be proper and civil in another place or time. This basically depends upon the college instructor's philosophical orientation to teaching.

Second, many of these behaviors listed are obviously not relevant to online courses. The following list may constitute incivility in the online teaching and learning process:

- challenging authority
- demanding special treatment
- an "I paid for this mentality"
- making offensive remarks
- missing deadlines
- reluctance in answering questions or participating in online discussion
- challenging the instructor's credibility
- taunting or belittling others
- challenging the instructor's knowledge
- making physical threats to the instructor
- engaging in academic dishonesty (cheating and/or plagiarism)
- making harassing, hostile, or vulgar comments
- sending the instructor inappropriate emails.

Galbraith and Jones (2009) discovered that the primary uncivil behaviors associated with online teaching and learning were in the arena of demanding special treatment such as extending assignment deadlines, missing deadlines with no explanation for the lateness, as well as expressing the "I paid for this" mentality in a manner that is assertive and disrespectful. Another is the attitude of students that they are in control of the teaching and learning situation; therefore, they will announce to the instructor what they are going to do and when. Yet another behavior to consider would be the informality of communication from students to instructors. For example, some students believe it is appropriate to address the instructor by their first name instead of using more formal professional titles, such as Dr., Professor, Ms., Mr., and such. Perhaps because the internet has created an impersonal milieu, it is much easier for well-mannered learners to become belligerent or informal. Saying

something directly to a person seems to be much easier on the computer because no attention is paid to pace, resonance, enunciation, volume, body language, facial expressions, voice tone, word pronunciation and so forth. Perhaps this is one explanation for such online uncivil behavior.

An area that has the most potential for incivility in the online teaching and learning process is academic dishonesty, including cheating and acts of plagiarism. It is important to remember that every college and university has a policy concerning "academic dishonesty" that stipulates consequences for violating students.

Preventing Incivility

The most effective way of preventing acts of incivility in online courses is to detail in the course syllabus those behaviors that will not be acceptable. In addition, instructors may wish to provide an explanation of why these behaviors are not acceptable. It is imperative to have a formalized record of the associated consequences of engaging in these uncivil acts of behavior.

The value of the syllabi for online learners cannot be stated enough. However, there are other things that higher education faculty can do to assist in the prevention of incivility. According to Rowland and Srisukho (2009), "administrators can assist by providing workshops and forum for new faculty members regarding issues of incivility…and appropriate measures to deter the behavior" (p. 125). Instructors with more experience can also provide important information to new faculty members by sharing their experiences with issues that have occurred and how they handled them, including how they documented the incidences in writing. A detailed syllabus, as well as faculty training, are essential in helping to prevent incivility.

Academic Dishonesty and Cheating

A major part of the incivility spectrum is academic dishonesty. Cheating and plagiarism are the two primary factors associated with academic dishonesty. Cheating is the deception of the truth. Submitting a paper that was secured from some internet outlet that sells term and research papers, or working collaboratively with fellow students to complete an online test are examples of cheating. Technology has increased the opportunity to engage in some form of cheating. It is

therefore essential for online instructors to become more knowledgeable and informed about the many ways online learners can engage in cheating schemes.

Plagiarism is another dimension of academic dishonesty. It is part of cheating but from a different perspective. Submitting work and taking credit for it, although in reality the work is someone else's, is a form plagiarism. To help prevent plagiarism, provide examples of it in the online course materials and give learners an opportunity to discuss what is and is not plagiarism through a chat room activity. In addition, there are numerous online plagiarism tutorials which students can complete, including knowledge tests, in order for both the student and instructor to ensure that the concept of plagiarism is fully understood.

Online instructors can utilize online services such as *www.turnitin.com* or *www.mydropbox.com* to help identify papers containing unoriginal materials. Student should be encouraged to utilize these services as well.

Responding to Incivility

Responding to incivility is a human relations activity. No single approach will work for every uncivil behavior problem encountered. There are four things to do in every incident. First, you need to stay calm and focused. Second, respond to the problem immediately. Third, do not lose your credibility by wavering on what was indicated as the consequences of the actions. Fourth, instructors need to be prepared to be action-oriented when it comes to administering the consequences for uncivil behavior.

When dealing with a learner that has engaged in some form of incivility, it is imperative to be consistent in the approach to the situation and maintain behaviors that are polite, respectful, gracious, considerate, kind, courteous, and cordial. Sometimes the online instructor and the student responsible for the uncivil behavior can work out the situation through a face –to-face meeting, and come to an agreement of the consequences that will be initiated. At other times that is not possible. When the situation cannot be resolved, it moves to other officials in the institution who will determine the consequences.

As suggested, there are approaches to help prevent and reduce acts of uncivil behavior. Twale and De Luca (2008) postulate that "civil/incivility has been interpreted as a semantic differential. This

continuum configuration calculated the position of civil versus uncivil by factoring in the culture setting, which dictates how well the civil response is accepted or tolerated…" (p. 5).

Developing an Online Culture

Galbraith (2004, 2008) posits that a conducive environment is essential for effective teaching and learning. Comprising the environment are elements such as values, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as a guiding vision or philosophy. In addition, the environment is grounded in authenticity and credibility. Cranton (2001) found that a learning environment is "organized and spontaneous, caring and critical, structured and flexible, calm and enthusiastic, challenging and supportive, firm and empathic, warm and disciplined, collaborative and questioning, reflective and charismatic, practical and innovative…" (p. 27). Conducive environments constitute a variety of learners and a diversity of associated characteristics. When teachers and learners accept the factors that determine the teaching and learning environment, they are forming a cultural setting.

Eagleton (2000) defines culture as the values, ideologies, and beliefs that determine a group's way of life, and embodies perceptions held by those in the group who interpret those values and beliefs. Although "culture is presumed to be unifying, it also supports subgroups or subcultures and, often, a counterculture" (Twale & De Luca, 2008, p. 94). Gould (2003) suggests that cultures are provocative and full of dangerous ambiguities. Basically, a culture is not a culture until it is shared.

Instructors of online courses attempt to develop a cultural setting in which learners will accept and share the basic beliefs and values of the teaching and learning environment. When these beliefs or values are not accepted, a counterculture is present. These expressions become overt in nature and are played out in various forms of uncivil behavior by online learners.

The importance of developing a cultural setting that positively contributes to student learning is paramount. It therefore becomes the responsibility of the instructor to be proactive in this endeavor.

The course syllabus tends to be the first and most significant piece of information that learners encounter which pertains to the class. Instructors need to develop the syllabus with culture in mind and with the

goal of detailing the desired setting. By explicitly detailing what actions or activities are prohibited, and providing information concerning the consequences for such actions, the instructor will take this first vital step in establishing leadership within the course.

As technology continues to cause a certain aspect of evolution in the modern educational setting, one cannot discount some of the negative consequences that this modernity will cause. When considering communication, for example, the shift in communication style of the student population is evident. We have gone from a world of face-to-face dialogue to the cell phone and now to text or instant messaging. Instructors need to be more willing to navigate towards these more culturally accepted forms of casual conversation; however, they have the responsibility to mandate more academically appropriate discourse within the online classroom setting.

Another consequence of technology that can be perceived as negative by some would be the expected timeliness of responses. It is important to be mindful of the current generation of students who are sharing responses, results, and discussion at levels that are nearly instantaneous. Within the syllabus, the timeline for e-mail responses, grading, and such should be noted. If you check e-mail once per day, let the students know that. If your turn-around time for grading is 3 days, again – let them know. This will help develop the desired culture within your online classroom, and will set a standard which students can become accustomed. Students may become frustrated in having to wait for an instructor response, and frustration is one of the causes of incivility. By eliminating student expectation of receiving the instant response to which they have been accustomed, then you are being proactive in your efforts to reduce or eliminate incivility.

Concluding Thoughts

Socialization is the mechanism by which teachers and students learn the cultural patterns of the educational setting. Participation and observation informs the environmental setting through acts of civility and incivility. It is essential to engage in more inquiry and research that address the online teaching process. Incivility will be a major issue confronting online teaching. Becoming cognizant of what constitutes acts of incivility, how to address incivility, and how to prevent it are essential if the teaching and learning process is to be effective and successful.

Perhaps the most imperative step that can be taken is the implementation of a conducive cultural setting.

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