AC 2009-795: PREVENTING AND MANAGING CLASSROOM INCIVILITIES

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Preventing and Managing Classroom Incivilities

Abstract

Classroom incivility can be defined as a student behavior that interferes with the expected flow of the lecture or disrupts the learning atmosphere in the classroom. Examples include talking in class, packing up early, arriving late, dominating discussions, making sarcastic remarks or gestures, asking argumentative questions, showing disrespect, and asking for extensions and missing deadlines.

This paper describes classroom management techniques which prevent student incivilities from occurring such as greater interaction with students, specific body language, types of lecture delivery, and behavior outside of the classroom. This article also gives advice on how to deal with these incivilities when they are happening. The author stresses that it is important to stay calm and respond immediately to any disruptive occurrence. Specific advice includes responding to disruptive students by walking over to them while still teaching, including dramatic pauses and stares, and being stern with the students after the lecture. Direct intervention and public embarrassment are not recommended in this case.

1 Introduction

Instructors try to create classroom environments that are conducive to learning. However, it is quite common to encounter disruptive student behavior which interferes with the learning atmosphere we are striving to achieve. Examples of classroom incivilities include: students talking with other students during class; students arriving late, leaving early, or even just packing up early; students showing disrespect toward the instructor or other students; students eating in class, acting bored, sleeping in class, working on an assignment for a different course, sending text messages on a cell phone; students making disapproving sounds, sarcastic remarks, gestures, and comments; students challenging the instructor’s knowledge or credibility, etc. Some students may also repeatedly ask for extensions on assignment due dates or try to pressure the instructor to postpone examinations. These examples may seem to be minor misdemeanors; however, they can have a potentially devastating effect on the instructor and students motivation.

Students learn better in an environment which is respectful, non-disruptive, and engaging. They tend to notice even minor classroom incivilities and are very affected by them. Even only one troublesome student can change the atmosphere of the whole class. Classroom incivility disrupts the learning environment of the class, hinders students involvement in learning, and causes tension. Classroom incivility can also negatively affect the instructor and may prove disruptive to his/her career. Bad teaching experiences early on may discourage the instructor from seeking more teaching assignments and even cause him/her to quit the profession entirely. Questions about dealing with disruptive students are one of the main concerns of new faculty. However, this topic is usually
not a part of faculty development workshops offered at most institutions [1]. In this paper, techniques that prevent classroom incivilities and methods of dealing with incivilities when they are happening are presented.

As shown in literature, female faculty, faculty who look younger, faculty of color, adjunct faculty, and those with backgrounds that are noticeably different from the students tend to experience disruptive classroom behavior most [2, 1]. This paper includes special tips on preventing classroom incivility for these groups of instructors.

This paper starts with a review of the existing literature on the topic of classroom incivility in Section 2. Next, advice on how to prevent classroom incivility is presented in Section 3, followed by advice on how to manage disruptions when they occur in Section 4. Conclusions are drawn in Section 5.

2 Literature Review

There has been significant research on the topic of classroom incivility in recent years. In what is probably the most influential and eye-opening work on this topic, Boice [1] gives a thorough overview of the history of classroom incivility in a higher education setting and follows with a description of the study he performed over the span of ten years. Boice points out that in-class disruptions are increasingly frequent but at the same time are rarely discussed. He concludes that instructors themselves are often guilty of either committing classroom incivilities themselves or causing such incivilities to be performed by students.

Both preventing and responding to classroom incivility is discussed by Nilson [2]. A whole chapter is devoted to practical tips for reducing and handling typical classroom disruptions. Braxton and Bayer concentrate on the theory of classroom incivility with some practical advice that is based more on institutional fixes than on changes in faculty behavior [3].

Brown lists numerous Internet resources that include tips on how to prevent and deal with classroom disruptions and how to set up expectations of civil classroom behavior at the beginning of class [4]. Morrisette [5] and Rodriguez [6] present thorough reviews of the causes and remedies for classroom incivility. Disruptions are discussed in numerous other papers [7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17]. More extreme cases of classroom incivilities, referred to as classroom terrorism are considered by Kandlbinder [18] and by Huston and Koth [19]. A mock letter published by Adams [20] offers some humor on the topic of classroom incivility.

3 Preventing Classroom Incivility

This section presents strategies and tips on how to prevent classroom incivilities. Note that these tips may not stop disruptive incidents from re-occurring in the same semester/quarter. Many of these techniques work best if they are implemented at the beginning of the semester/quarter since they set the stage for the atmosphere of the class. Techniques for dealing with existing classroom incivilities are listed in the next section.
According to Boice, the attitude of instructors influences the occurrence of incivilities. Positive motivators (such as the creation of safe and encouraging learning environments) and signs of friendliness (such as leaning forward, smiling, making purposeful gestures, and maintaining eye contact) from instructors go a long way in reducing students’ tendency to disrupt the lectures. Teachers who are perceived as uncaring and cold invite incivilities. Faculty members are often surprised to learn that student disruptions are most likely caused by the behavior and attitude of the instructor. According to students, instructors’ incivilities includes distant, cold, and uncaring behavior, late arrival to class or cancelation of class, and administration of test material not covered in class [1].

Students are likely to develop habits that mirror the behavior modeled by the instructor. For example, if the professor is often late, students are more likely to develop tardiness. Similarly, if the professor often lectures past the end of the class period, students may develop the habit of packing up early. Negative comments toward students may solicit a similar response from the students.

There are many changes that a faculty member can make in his/her attitude and classroom strategies to prevent incivilities from happening. The following tips have been compiled from the literature, the author’s experience, and conversations with other faculty members.

**Set up reasonable expectations at the beginning of the class [1].** Boice notes that classroom incivilities get established during the first days of the class. Students often test how the teacher responds to their playful incivility at the beginning of the semester or quarter. Instructors with a very negative attitude confirm students’ skepticism about the course and essentially invite disruptive behavior.

Avoid alienating and distancing yourself from your students during the first days of class. Instructors with too much of a businesslike attitude may come across as not caring about the students. On the other hand, an instructor who is too friendly and appears too lenient may invite the perception that he/she will not be able to handle the class [1].

Set ground rules at the beginning of the semester or quarter by telling the students that disruptive behavior will not be tolerated and include these rules in your syllabus. Explain that the expectations include arriving on time and not leaving early [1]. Take the time to set the right stage for the class. According to Boice [1], a small investment of time at the beginning of the class to reinforce positive motivators helps to reduce classroom incivilities.

**Create a warm and inviting atmosphere in the classroom [1, 21, 5].** Many students find the start of a new quarter or semester very stressful. Creating a comfortable atmosphere that is conducive to learning goes a long way toward alleviating some of their stress. Try to strike a balance between professionalism and friendly social skills such as warmth, approachability, accessibility, and empathy. According to Boice, the presence or absence of classroom incivilities during the very first lectures is a strong predictor of how successful the faculty member will be in his/her teaching career [1].

**Create a challenging but supportive environment.** It is important to keep students occupied and interested in the course. If they are not challenged or if they are lost in the class, students are more likely to display disruptive behavior. A challenging but supportive environment can be
created by varying the type of homework and other assignments and including challenging extra-
credit questions. At the same time, it is essential to let the students know that they are supported
in their learning with frequent feedback, personal attention, and office hours that are scheduled for
a time that is convenient for most students.

**Show enthusiasm for the class topic.** Students can sense when the instructor is bored with
the lecture topic, and they become bored with it too. Bored students are more likely to commit
incivilities. It helps to show enthusiasm about the subject by either connecting it to the faculty
research or to everyday life.

**Show genuine interest in helping students learn.** We all care that our students learn, otherwise
we would not be in this profession. However, quite often, because of our busy schedule, we forget
to show it in our teaching. There are many ways to check if students are learning, in addition to
scheduling frequent exams and assignments. Muddiest point exercise at the end of the lecture [22],
mid-semester survey about the course, and interactive problem solving during the lecture are just
a few examples.

**Show respect for different learning styles.** It is important to reach out to the students who
display different learning styles. For example, many students assimilate a new topic best if they can
immediately practice what they have just learned. For those students, in-class, hands-on exercises
work really well. Other students need time to digest the new information and work better on their
own, at their pace, and in a peaceful environment. Including frequent extra-credit, take-home
exercises or even take-home exams proves very helpful to these students. The instructor should
explain to the students at the beginning of the class why different types of activities are included
in the course. Students appreciate when professors care about their individual learning style.

**Involve the students in their learning.** Students need and want to take ownership of their learn-
ing. Morrissette concludes that we should be talking with the students instead of at them [5].
Active, cooperative teaching has been shown to be more conducive to learning than passive lec-
tures. Creating an inclusive and respectful learning environment is an important step on the way to
preventing classroom incivility.

**Make the lectures interesting and worth coming to.** Students should not feel that they are
wasting their time in class. Otherwise, they will not pay attention and most likely will talk in the
class [1]. Lectures should be interesting and, if possible, different from the textbook. For instance,
the author of this paper tends to solve many examples of circuits in her introductory circuits course
that are different from those presented in the textbook. In addition to making the lecture worth
coming to, students are more likely to read the textbook since they know that they will see even
more examples of the theory being covered.

Making lectures interactive is another way of boosting the attendance. In the author’s intro-
ductive MATLAB course, students sit in front of a computer and immediately practice what they
learn in the lecture. The attendance in this class is usually very high since students feel that they
are learning a lot.
Make sure to use visual aids effectively. It is practically impossible to keep students’ interest directed at PowerPoint slides for the whole class period. Design your slides so they accommodate frequent and short breaks such as simple questions or in-class pen and paper activities.

Arrive early so there is time for an informal chat with the students before the start of the lecture [1]. Informal chats with the students show that the instructor cares about them as individuals. It helps to establish rapport with the students by eliminating some of the distance between them and the professor.

Practice moderate lecture pace [1]. Fast-paced lectures do not involve students and tend to distance them from the instructor. Lecturing too quickly may also come across as a lack of control over the topics of the class and a lack of organization. An instructor who lectures at a rapid pace may seem anxious and uncomfortable in a classroom setting. These lectures often alienate students and make the students think that the instructor is indifferent to their comprehension of the material. If the lecture is too fast, students will most likely stop paying attention and the whole class period is essentially wasted [1]. Students are aware of this wasted time and will tend to respond with outbursts of classroom incivility.

Practice good presentation and effective speaking skills [1]. Use your voice effectively in terms of volume, clarity, enunciation, and pace. Use your body effectively: smile, employ natural posture and movement, frequent gestures, varied facial expressions, make only occasional glances at notes, and maintain frequent eye contact with the audience (especially with the students in the back of the classroom). Present at least some of the lecture as you walk around the room. While speaking, try to project relaxed confidence, enthusiasm and passion for the topic, honesty, concern for the students, openness, warmth, and a sense of humor. Try to minimize distractive behaviors such as leaning against a wall or a board, repeating "you know what" or "uhm", and repetitive movements [2].

Include breaks in lectures. Do not lecture for more than 20 minutes without some sort of a student-centered break. Students cannot pay attention for a long period of time. Such a break may consist of standing up and doing stretches, working on a problem, or just answering the instructor’s question.

Pay attention to the students’ note-taking [1]. Remember to pause so students can finish their note-taking. Be aware that their way of note-taking reflects comprehension of the lecture. An instructor who follows where the students are in their note taking shows that he/she respects the students and cares about their comprehension.

When meeting with students outside of the classroom, listen patiently and do not show signs of impatience [1]. Again, being patient with students demonstrates that the faculty member respects them and cares about their learning.

Moderate classroom incivilities. Tips on managing classroom incivilities are listed in Section 4, however, it is important to mention here that one classroom incivility begets another classroom incivility. Therefore, it is essential to always respond to any class disruption. The instructor should
react to students talking, coming late, or leaving early. If the instructor ignores disruptions, students get the impression that he/she is not able to handle the class. Not reacting invites classroom incivility from other students [1].

**Do not pander to the students.** Boice cautions against trying to curb student incivility by pandering to them through easy assignments or extensions on deadlines. He claims that in such situations, incivility disappears only temporarily [1].

**Spend time getting to know the students.** Students know when the instructor cares about them as individuals and about their learning process. Allocate some time to get to know them at the beginning of the course. Talk about yourself and introduce the course topics. Explain why the material is important and why you care about it [1].

**Decrease anonymity.** Personal relationships between the students and the instructor as well as between two or more students help to reduce classroom incivilities. Try to be available to the students outside the class as much as possible. Answer their emails and phone calls promptly. Design in-class exercises that require students to work in small groups so they get to know each other.

**Design the class to be collaborative instead of competitive.** Competitive courses tend to alienate students and make the learning environment tense and unfriendly. Collaborative setting is inclusive and teaches students important skills such as teamwork, taking responsibility for their work, and respect for other students’ capabilities and style of learning [5].

**Do not fraternize with the students.** It is important to keep some distance from the students. Otherwise, students may lose respect for the professor. For example, it is advised to dress professionally or at least in a way that projects leadership and professionalism [5].

**Avoid tricky problems on exams.** Do not make surprise tests or exams with problems that are too hard or tricky. Students perceive it as unfair [1]. Instead, challenge students with difficult extra-credit problems that they can solve at home.

**Reinforce positive motivators around the midterm and final exam time.** Boice observed that the stress just before and just after the midterm exam can produce an increase in classroom incivilities. His advice is to take a proactive role by preparing students for the exam (distribute practice exams, provide review sessions, and explain what material will be covered on the exam) [1].

**Offer opportunities to ask questions outside the class time.** It is important for the students to have frequent contact with the faculty member outside of the class. This way students get to know the instructor and are more reluctant to give him/her a hard time during the lectures.

**Design the class to be interactive.** Students who are involved in their own learning do not commit classroom incivilities. Keep the students busy by assigning in-class problems to practice what they have just learned in the lecture.
Be consistent. Do not arbitrarily change assignments or classroom rules such as grading or attendance policy. They should be set at the beginning of the quarter and never changed in the middle of the class. Students perceive the class syllabus as a contract and get very uncomfortable when they do not know what to expect because the rules and expectations keep changing.

Invite student feedback. Collecting mid-quarter or mid-semester class evaluations from the students is an important step toward reducing classroom incivility. Students appreciate being given the chance to influence the course content and delivery methods. It makes them feel more connected to the class. Techniques of classroom assessment are discussed by Cross and Angelo [22].

Learn to respect yourself. Low self-esteem tends to invite classroom incivility. Work on improving your self-worth and confidence by realizing that you know much more than the students about the topic of the class.

Counteract your predisposition to classroom incivility. Nilson addresses the question of who is more likely to experience classroom incivility [2]. She concludes that instructors who challenge the traditional stereotype of a professor (mature, white male with a deep voice)—such as non-white, or female faculty members, those who look younger, are physically small, or speak with a high voice—are more likely to encounter disruptive student behavior. Nilson provides the following tips to deal with that natural predisposition: stand up in front of the class, move around the room, employ broad gestures, deepen your voice, dress more formally, make sure that the students address you by your last name and your title, and talk about your research to establish authority in your field.

Consider creating a handbook of conduct or mutual bills of rights and responsibilities. Braxton and Bayer suggest creating a handbook of student and faculty conduct that details expectations about classroom behavior [3]. This handbook would not only spell out the responsibilities of instructors and students but also their rights. Nielson and Jackson suggest that the students and the instructor together develop a bill of rights and responsibilities during the first day of class [23]. They also give an example of such a bill.

4 Responding to Classroom Incivilities

This section contains advice for faculty dealing with existing classroom incivilities. If preventive measures do not succeed and classroom incivility still happens, the instructor must react to it constructively. When facing classroom incivility, Nilson advises to try to stay calm and in control to keep credibility [2]. At the same time, it is imperative to respond to the disruption immediately.

Students talking in class. Approach the talkers while still teaching or use long dramatic pauses and stare at the offending students. Address these students with a comment on how they should be paying attention since this topic is going to be on the test, or that they should stop talking because they are annoying other students [2]. You can try a humorous comments for the first couple of times. If the students keep talking, try a serious comment about other students trying to learn.
**Students packing up early and/or leaving early.** Keep some important topics and announcements for the end of class period. Ask students to turn in assignments at the end of the class [2]. Explain how disruptive their behavior is to you and to other students.

**Students absent from the lecture.** Take attendance even if it does not count toward the final grade. Mention the student’s absence when you meet him/her next time. Do not help them to catch up on missing material [2]. Announce in class that students are expected to notify you in advance if they are going to miss a lecture. Explain that this is a professional behavior that will be expected from them when they graduate and work in the industry. Include short extra-credit activities in the lecture to reward those who are present.

**Students arriving late.** Draw attention to late students by pausing the lecture (i.e. stop in mid-sentence and wait for the student to sit down) or by making comments such as “nice of you to drop in.” It makes the student realize that you have noticed him/her being late but in a non-confrontational manner. Schedule some important announcements for the beginning of the class [2]. If a student is consistently late, talk to the student outside of the classroom to try to find out the reason for his/her tardiness. Explain how it disrupts the lecture.

**Student showing disrespect toward the instructor or another student.** Talk with the student outside of class. Tell the student that his/her behavior prevents other students from learning and enjoying the class [2]. However, if a student is making an offensive comment toward another student, the faculty member should address it in front of the class. Students need to know that abusive behavior and personal attacks will not be tolerated. They should feel safe in your classroom.

**Students refusing to participate in class.** When the students stop paying attention to the lecture, move toward them and show with your body language that you notice their inattention. Do not start talking until you have the full attention of the class. When students are not willing to answer even simple questions posed in class, jokingly tell them that if nobody answers the question, you will keep asking it and the lecture will not proceed. Keep waiting; the uncomfortable silence will most likely force somebody to answer your question.

**Students challenging the instructor about course content.** Do not become defensive. Calmly explain the instructional objectives of the course, how the assignments address them, and why the material that is being covered is important. Ask to continue the discussion outside of the classroom.

**Students using a computer in class for non-class purposes.** Refer to the rules for computer use established during the first class. If possible, walk around often to check what students are doing. Keep the students busy by giving them only a short amount of time to complete each task. Ask the students to work in groups with only one computer [2]. Use software that lets you see the students’ screens.

**Students asking for a grade change at the end of the quarter.** Set a policy that any grade change has to be requested in writing. Schedule an appointment in your office for a day or two later. Try to disassociate the grade from the student’s worth as a person. Do not be intimidated into changing the grade [2]. Clearly explain the student’s performance in the class and contrast it
with the class average: "The average score for all homework assignments was 75%. Your score was 60% which is below the average. The average score for midterm exam I was..., etc."

**Students laughing in class.** It may be very intimidating for a new engineering instructor to see students laughing during the lecture. The tendency is to assume that they are laughing at you which is most likely not true. A strategy that works well is interrupting the lecture and saying "We could all use a break now. Would you like to share your joke with the rest of the class?" Confronting the students and explaining how you feel may also be a good idea. Ask them to imagine how they would feel if they were giving a presentation and somebody in the audience was laughing.

**Students sleeping in class.** Wake the student up and ask him/her to step outside with you. Let him/her know that it would be better for everybody if he/she came back to the class when he/she feels better and can become an active participant in the lecture.

**Students demanding make-up exams or extended deadlines for assignments.** Allow a single, documented late assignment but do not accept a second one. If students ask to move an exam to a later day, respond that you can do it but there will be more material covered on the exam. If they ask for an extension on a homework assignment deadline, agree but say that one problem will be added for each day the deadline is extended.

**Students confronting the instructor with sarcastic comments.** Ask the student to stay after the lecture to talk about the issue. Be calm but make sure to react and do not ignore the comments. Let the other students see that you are reacting to the disruptive behavior.

**Students coming to class unprepared.** Explain why it is important to prepare for the class and keep doing in-class exercises that require students to be prepared. Give extra credit for solving problems in class. An extreme action that may change the students’ attitudes could be to postpone the introduction of a new topic for one class period or even to dismiss the class because students were not prepared. Explain that it is a waste of their time and yours to stay and try to continue the lecture.

Another solution but probably one that is not going to be very popular with the students, is to start quizzes on the material they were supposed to prepare. You can also remind the students of the university expectations with respect to the time they should be spending outside the class learning the subject matter of the course. The usual assumption is that students are spending two hours studying the material for every hour of lecture. It is the impression of many engineering instructors that this expectation is too low for engineering courses.

### 5 Conclusion

In this paper, the author discusses possible reasons for classroom incivilities and gives advice on how to prevent such disruptions from occurring and how to manage them when they happen. Classroom incivilities disrupt the flow of the lecture and make everybody uncomfortable. As research shows, the faculty can take simple measures especially at the beginning of each quarter or semester to prevent incivilities from occurring. Methods discussed in this paper include creating a warm and
inviting environment that is conducive to learning, practicing good public speaking, showing enthusiasm for the course topic, and caring that the students learn. If such methods fail to prevent incivilities from happening, the author presents techniques to deal with disruptive students. It is imperative to always react to incivilities. For example, if students are talking instead of paying attention to the lecture, the simple act of walking toward them or pausing the lecture and staring at the talkers will usually work. It is the author’s hope that the set of tools presented here will enable new engineering educators to manage or even entirely avoid the most common classroom incivilities.

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References


