Civility in the College Classroom

November 01, 2008

You are teaching an upper-level undergraduate course of about 90 students. Each day, one particular student arrives to class late, sits front and center in the class, and proceeds to send text messages on her cell phone. Instead of trying to make her texting less obvious by holding the phone where you can't see it, she boldly holds it above desk level, practically right in front of your face. Deciding that this behavior is not too detrimental to the learning environment, but determined to address it when you get a chance, you let the behavior continue until one day another student takes matters into her own hands and during your lecture whispers to her texting neighbor that her behavior is distracting and asks her to stop. Shockingly, the neighbor responds by loudly cursing out the other student for daring to impinge on her "right" to do as she pleases in class.

Unfortunately, the preceding scenario is a true story. We would like to believe that when students enter our college classrooms they come prepared to learn and will exhibit behaviors conducive to learning. After all, they are adults, and unlike their previous schooling, their attendance is both optional and (usually) more expensive. Why is it then that so many college instructors report having difficulties with classroom behavior?

The Problem of Incivility

Recent studies have shown that classroom courtesy is declining (Schneider, 1998). As a result, the mood of the college classroom has changed. Today it is common to hear college instructors, both tenured and untenured, lamenting the misbehavior of students in their classes, at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Feldman (2001) characterized four general types of classroom incivility: annoyances, classroom terrorism, intimidation of the instructor, and threats or attacks on a person or person's psyche. These four types of incivility range from arriving to class late (annoyances), to monopolizing classroom time with personal agendas (labeled as classroom terrorism by Feldman), to threatening to go to the department chair with complaints or give negative course evaluations (intimidation), to threats of physical violence or even physical attacks. Clearly, the impact of each of these types of incivility on learning varies greatly. However, each of these types of incivility can disrupt the learning process. This article focuses on the impact of incivility on learning and offers suggestions for addressing issues of incivility, including an example of the method used by the authors in the classroom.

The problem with even minor forms of classroom incivility is the negative impact on learning and even student retention (Seidman, 2005). When students engage in annoying behavior, like talking on their cell phones, not only do they miss valuable learning time, they also may interfere with the learning of those around them. Engaging in classroom discussion allows students to connect with course content in meaningful and relevant ways. When students engage in classroom terrorism, however, they may make other students less likely to participate in class discussions. This can result in less productive dialogue

and thereby less learning.

General Suggestions to Promote Civility

Although many of us consider ourselves teachers, few of us have had the training necessary to deal with the problem of incivility. Unless we have a background in K-12 education, it is likely that the majority, if not all, of our training focused on methods and content in our discipline, and less on how to teach and manage a learning environment. Therefore, it is useful to integrate information on teaching from not only higher education, but also from the area of K-12 education and psychological research. What follows are some general suggestions on how to promote civility in the college classroom.

Be proactive. Classroom norms for behavior can develop quickly, and without guidance, may result in behavior you do not want in your classroom. The old adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is certainly true in this case. Expectations for behavior, such as attendance and cell phone policies, along with academic expectations, should be included in your syllabus and revisited as necessary. The consequences for violating your policies should be specific and consistently delivered. The university code of conduct and consequences for serious infractions should also be included so all students are aware of university policies and what is expected from them in all circumstances as citizens of the university community.

Be specific. Many of us assume that by the time a student reaches college they have learned how to behave appropriately. Unfortunately, this may not always be true. Despite continuing conversations in K-12 public education about "building character" (Kidron & Fleischman, 2006; Miller & Pedro, 2006), it seems that not enough has been done to ensure that once students leave that arena they are capable of exhibiting civil behavior. Therefore, it is necessary to specifically define your expectations. What you mean if you expect students to "be respectful?" Does this mean that they cannot disagree with others in the classroom, including you, or does it mean that they must do so in accordance with certain expectations? If so, be explicit about these expectations.

Be a model. Research has shown that people learn social behaviors, both good and bad, through watching others (Bandura, 1986). Your behavior serves as a powerful representation of how you want students to treat you and the other students. Unfortunately, research indicates that many faculty members do not treat students in a civil manner (Boice, 2000). You cannot demand respectful behavior from students if you are not respectful of them.

Ask why. It is also important to consider the reasons *why* students display inappropriate behaviors. If behavior is purposeful, instructors who understand the purpose of the behavior will be able to address the behavior more effectively (Dreikurs, Cassel, & Ferguson, 2004). When we put the behavior in context, we can modify the conditions that support the behavior, and thus reinforce a more appropriate method of communicating. Students are still held accountable for their behavior, but in a way that can potentially assist them in improving their social competence and adaptability.

Have a plan. When the unexpected arises, have a plan of action already in mind. What happens if a student curses at you or makes a derogatory comment to another student? How will you handle this situation? Immediate action is required in these instances, but without a plan you may act on instinct and not how you would have acted in ideal circumstances. By studying university policies and thinking

through possible problems you can develop plans of action. Although you cannot anticipate all occurrences, you can develop plans that will help in many different instances.

Follow through. When necessary, take immediate action on your plan. Although ignoring inappropriate behavior is an effective tool to decrease some behaviors, in many instances immediate action is necessary to demonstrate that you have control of the classroom and are maintaining a safe classroom environment. The specific action taken will depend upon the infraction and can range from asking the student to see you after class to asking the student to leave the classroom. Most universities have policies that outline the procedures you need to follow in instances of severe misbehavior, such as threats of violence. You should carefully review these prior to the semester and report any serious behavior problems to your department chair, who can assist in determining the most appropriate course of action.

Document incidents. Although students rarely make direct threats against instructors or their classmates, they may engage in a series of other misbehaviors that can cause significant problems for the class. Incivility should be carefully documented along with how you handled the situation and the student's response. If the misbehavior continues and further action against the student becomes necessary, you can then share your documentation with your department chair or other university official as evidence.

Our Strategy: Group Contingency

Having backgrounds in psychology and special education, we are familiar with the aforementioned strategies to deal with certain types of behavior, and we use them in every class we teach. However, we also use group contingency plans not only as a tool for increasing student civility, but also as a way to demonstrate how the strategy works in real life. In courses that focus on dealing with behavior (e.g., classroom management courses), using a group contingency plan allows us to demonstrate how these plans are set up and their effectiveness and pitfalls, and, as an added bonus, they get students to display the desired behaviors.

Group contingencies are used when a common consequence is given to an entire group contingent upon the behavior of one member of the group, part of a group, or the entire group (Cooper, Heron & Heward, 2007). In the case of our classes, a reward is chosen by the class and is given if the entire class engages in appropriate behaviors. Our classes usually have 20-30 students. On the first day of class, we typically break the class into small groups and allow 30 minutes for them to generate their version of the system. This avoids having long discussions about minor points with the whole class and allows for some variations in what they generate. As a whole group, we then review each component of the system with input from the groups on specifics.

There is generally agreement on many components of the system. Students usually agree on the same expected behaviors and best reinforcements. For example, they typically agree that cell phone use in class and late arrivals to class are distracting, that conversations need to be kept on track, thereby avoiding one person's monopolizing the discussion, and that they need to be respectful of each other (often operationally defined as responding to others in an appropriate manner, listening to others' ideas, and using appropriate language). Any disagreement is addressed democratically through a vote. However, we always let them know that we have final veto power. This avoids many difficulties by keeping students realistic and allows us to remove any flaws that would disable the system entirely. We

sometimes also leave some flaws that the students miss so that we can work through them as we use the system during the semester. In this way, students get an idea of how group contingencies really work.

In designing a group contingency system, it is important to note that decisions must be made about the following components:

Select whether the contingency will be based on the behavior of an individual, part of the group, or the entire group. For small classes you can use the entire group, but for larger classes you may decide to break the class into several groups and reward each group on their behavior instead of on the behavior of the whole class.

Select behaviors that are observable and measurable. If you decide to use the behavior of the entire group, make sure to build in some room for error. For example, if you decide on five behaviors to monitor and one of them is to arrive on time, realize that emergencies happen. To avoid problems with the class ostracizing an individual student for something that could not be helped, you may choose to require that only four of the five behavioral goals be met on a given day.

Collect data on how extensively students are currently engaged in the problem behavior. By knowing how many students are late to class, for example, you can decide on the criterion that needs to be met in order for the class to be given the reward. Typically, we set the criterion for punctuality at 100%, knowing that only four of five goals need to be met on a given day. This ensures that all students attempt to make it to class on time as they do not know if they will meet the other four goals.

Decide on the reward. The class suggests the reward, but we retain the right to decide that a given reward is not appropriate if it is too costly, too difficult to dispense, or requires too much time.

Provide feedback via a monitoring system. Feedback to the students not only facilitates cooperation, it lets the students know how they are doing and allows them to alter their behaviors as necessary to meet their goals. In our classes, one student is given the responsibility of monitoring the class' adherence to the expected behaviors each class period and maintaining the record of this behavior. This record is passed to the student responsible for the next class period. Again, we claim veto power if we do not agree with their assessment of the class' behavior, but this instance is rare.

Civility in the Real World

The importance of expecting civil behavior cannot be overstated. In most current work settings, individuals are expected to fulfill their individual roles while participating as a part of a team, showing respect for others, and operating productively in work environments. A lack of civility, even in someone with exemplary skills, can lead to failure in the classroom and later in the boardroom. To assist professors in the classroom, we have offered a general discussion of the issue of civility in the college classroom and have provided one specific group contingency example. The goal for the instructor is simple and straightforward, daring and sometimes difficult — to help students expand their current knowledge base in a classroom community where all students have opportunities to contribute to the learning environment and to help them recognize when their behavior interferes with the achievement of this goal. As professors, we are key players in developing and maintaining the classroom dynamic. With more professors addressing classroom civility, we believe that the number of situations like the one

described in the opening scenario can be decreased or avoided altogether. ?