



FOR TEACHING



From the desk of the Teaching and Learning Scholar

“Two of my students are always talking and several are texting during class. I can tell this bothers the other students but I don’t know what to do.”

Although, faculty frequently encounter the opposite problem when no one wants to answer a question or participate in a discussion, faculty indeed may struggle to manage students who talk or text when they should not during class. In Merriam-Webster (2019), incivility is defined as “a rude or impolite attitude or behavior.” Although the need to manage classroom incivility is not new, what have changed recently are increased instances of incivility and heightened racial, cultural, and political tensions (Wright, 2016).

Uncivil behavior can originate in three areas: expectations for classroom behavior, grading procedures and evaluation, and course content (Wright, 2016). For this discussion, I will focus solely on minor uncivil classroom behavior. Wright (2016) lists the following examples of uncivil classroom behaviors: inattentiveness (texting or side conversations), not listening, or interrupting others who are speaking, and tardiness. Most faculty and students identify these behaviors as undesirable, potentially disruptive to learning, and could describe desirable alternative behaviors. However, faculty may lack the tools to manage minor classroom incivilities. So, I will discuss some preemptive strategies and then offer some simple management tips.

First, faculty should strive to foster a culture of civility to promote positive interactions with students. Clark (2009) notes that faculty can promote positive relationships through professional role modeling, careful planning, use of cooperative learning activities, and ongoing formative assessment. To be an effective role model, faculty need to be aware of how their own behavior such as attitude, language, communication, and attire might inadvertently contribute to incivility. Faculty can carefully communicate in their syllabus the expected classroom behaviors to convey clear expectations. On the first class day, the students and faculty could co-create some expected norms to promote a civil environment (Clark, 2009). Faculty should also make every effort to learn and use students’ preferred names. Cooperative learning activities such as student-led case studies and group projects can promote collaboration and increase engagement, which may help to reduce incivility. Periodic formative assessment of learning and the classroom environment through a one-minute paper or informal discussions can allow faculty to address problems and make changes.

When confronted with incivility, faculty are encouraged to consider the intention and motivation behind the act (Wright, 2016). Students might not recognize that talking or texting during class is disruptive to those around them. In fact, faculty and students may not feel the same about disruptive behaviors such as arriving late, leaving early, texting, or coming to class unprepared (Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, n. d.). Faculty might observe students who are not paying attention and decide that they are simply unmotivated or disinterested in the subject, when in reality they are unable to focus because of unmet physical needs (lack of sleep, hunger) or being in emotional distress (relationship or situational).



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Finally, faculty need to curb minor disruptive behaviors so students do not get the message that these behaviors are acceptable. Faculty should not allow students to interrupt others, disturb those around them, or complain during class. Some immediate strategies include moving toward the distractor(s), which will often curtail talking, and texting (Gonzalez, 2014). Faculty can also try calling on students by name to answer a content-based question. Faculty should avoid using sarcasm and embarrassing remarks. Rather than trying to use humor, “Beth... tell your boyfriend hi from us,” Gonzalez (2014) advises faculty to directly state, “Please put your phone away.” If necessary, faculty can ask to speak to an individual after class to assess their behavior (intent and motivation). If these methods are not successful, faculty should consult their Department Head, the Dean of Students, or the Center for Teaching and Learning. Faculty need to understand the dangers of not addressing incivility and attempt to maximize the learning opportunities that may present with it.

References

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