

# Promoting Civility in Large Classrooms

Bruce A. Berger

## *INTRODUCTION*

The large classroom is often a venue where more incivilities occur because students can hide among the masses. The ability to be anonymous often produces attitudes and behaviors that are less than respectful, especially if these attitudes and behaviors are encouraged by other students. In addition, because large classrooms are sometimes very impersonal, incivilities are more likely to occur. When people (either students or professors) are seen as objects, they are no longer human, caring, or capable of being harmed by someone else's words or actions. As such, they are more likely to be subjected to incivilities. This is consistent with Boice's research stating that faculty who have more incivilities inflicted on them are often seen as distant, cold, less competent, and less immediate in their behaviors (1). This information should provide faculty with insight on how to reduce incivilities in the large classroom, that is, be seen as human, caring, and competent.

This manuscript examines how to promote civility in the large classroom setting. It examines the kinds of incivilities that occur and how to take preventive measures and respond appropriately when incivilities do occur.

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### CAUSES OF INCIVILITIES

While we are often quick to point a finger at students and say that they are “less respectful than they used to be,” Boice concluded as a result of a study on classroom incivilities (CI): “Clearly teachers were the most crucial initiators of CI. And, as a rule, their most telling provocations occurred during the first few days of courses. Conversely, professors who most consistently displayed immediacies and positive motivators were least involved in incidents of CI, their own or their students’” (2). What this means is that teachers have a great deal of influence on whether incivilities occur in their classrooms. More on this later.

In addition to the above, it is obvious to many that students will engage in uncivil behaviors in and out of the classroom. Specifically, the following beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors on the part of faculty and students are likely to contribute to or increase the rate of incivilities (3):

- Students are annoyed by:
  - Lateness—on the part of students and faculty
  - Early or late stopping of class
  - Cutting or canceling of class
  - Loud, disruptive talking by other students in the classroom. Unless told otherwise, students *expect* faculty to take immediate action about disruptions in the classroom.
  - Rude comments/gestures (creates both annoyance and uncomfortableness/fear) by *both* students and faculty.
- Students are more likely to exhibit incivilities before or after major exams or projects.
- Distrust of professors:
  - Those who display less immediate and caring behaviors.
  - Via surprise quizzes, tests, and/or exam items. Planned quizzes are acceptable as long they are part of announced examinations, projects, etc., in the syllabus.

### TYPES OF INCIVILITY

There are primarily two types of incivilities; passive and active. *Passive* incivility includes inattention, lateness, mild disruptions (shuffling papers, notebooks, or backpacks; wearing a headset; talking on a cell

phone; walking in and out of the class; etc.). It also includes not completing the necessary work, asking for extensions, and making excuses. *Overt or active* incivilities include direct challenges to the teacher in a nonrespectful manner, vulgar language/gestures to teacher, insulting comments or actions to other students, and physical threats.

#### ***To Address Passive Incivilities***

1. Make direct eye contact with the student(s) involved. Stop talking and don't start until they're with you again and notice that you are looking at them.
2. Move to that part of the class and direct a question to someone next to the student talking.
3. Get students actively involved in the classroom. Don't lecture continuously without asking questions or assigning small tasks. Use in-class small group exercises for brief (15 minutes) amounts of time to change the pace in the classroom and get more students involved in the discussion. Also assign outside small group activities that involve the course materials. Use the "lecture" time to have students report group findings. To keep this activity from being repetitious and tedious, have groups only add new information from the previous groups' reports.
4. Speak to students privately about their actions. This means out of the sight and hearing of other students. State specifically what happened, how you felt, and what you want in the future ("I have noticed you talking several times in class over the past few days. If you have questions about the material or are confused, by all means, please ask. Otherwise, I would appreciate it if you make sure this doesn't happen again. It is hard for me to conduct a class without distractions. Having them makes it even harder."). Do not make this a personal attack (Your talking in class is disrespectful and completely unprofessional. It better not happen again!). Simply state what happened and what you now expect.
5. Ask, don't accuse. Make it a friendly conversation to find out what is wrong ("I noticed that you were talking in class a few times today. Is there something I can help with that is causing concern or confusion?").

#### ***To Address Overt or Active Incivilities***

1. Listen respectfully to student complaints—don't become defensive. Reflect back your understanding of the problem and sort is-

sues, when necessary. Talk with the student(s) privately, but not in an isolated place. Keep in mind that just because others may treat you disrespectfully does not mean that you now have the right to do so in return. People are going to go crazy now and then . . . don't go with them! Remember, we need to stay in our mentoring role as much as possible. This means meeting disrespect with appropriate responses. For example, during class you are going over an exam and a student says, "This is ridiculous! This test was so tricky! I don't know why I even bothered studying." If you sense that this is a common concern, you may want to address it (especially if you use item analyses) and listen carefully to which questions seem to be a problem and why. This may help you write better questions, learn where problem areas exist with the material, or help you decide that some questions are confusing and may need to be discarded. If this is an isolated instance, simply tell the student you would like to talk to him or her about specific concerns after class. When class ends, ask for specific examples and simply explain your justification for the test item. If the student makes a good point, acknowledge it. However, if the student behaves rudely, simply state, "I know you are upset and angry about some of these test items and I want to discuss them with you and learn why you are upset. However, I want to be treated with respect. This means no yelling. If you can do this, we will continue, otherwise, this conversation is over until you can. What would you like to do?"

2. Reassure the rest of the class. If an incident should occur in the class in which a student is uncivil and leaves, it is important to reassure the class that you will not allow their learning environment to be disrupted. If you have behaved badly (yes, every now and then we lose it), apologize and assure them it won't happen again.
3. Be honest when something is not working. For example, you have tried a new exercise in the class, and it has bombed. Say something like, "I can tell by your responses that this is not going as well as I had hoped. How could I have done this differently?" Welcome their constructive suggestions and thank them. This could actually be an opportunity to promote a productive environment.
4. Know and use the chain of command in your school or on your campus. If you are having persistent problems with a student or students and have talked with them privately, to no avail, it is important to use the chain of command available in the school. If

there is no written procedure, it is extremely important that one be developed.

### ***For Any Incivility***

1. Don't ignore it, hoping it will go away—it won't. Everything you do in the classroom conveys meaning to the students. If you are a great teacher but allow talking and disruptions to continue, you are essentially condoning the behavior. This often creates disrespect in the classroom.
2. Don't laugh off inappropriate comments or behavior. Don't allow your need to be liked to get in the way of being confrontational when necessary. Talk to the individual after class or on a break and let him or her know how you feel about the behavior and what will be done if it continues in the future; for example, "Tom, I did not like the lewd (or sexist) comment you made in class. I was offended by it. In addition, that kind of language is a violation of the school's Honor Code. If it happens again, I will report you to the Honor Board." Permitting inappropriate comments and behavior simply sanctions them and sets the stage for more of the same.
3. Don't get in an argument, become defensive, or take it personally.
4. Don't press for immediate explanation of the offensive behavior. This will only serve to shame or embarrass the student in front of his peers and create more hostility.
5. Don't walk away from the student. Again, this is like ignoring the action, which sanctions it.
6. Don't make exceptions about assignments or for uncivil behavior. This sets you up for disrespect in the future.
7. Don't carry it all by yourself. Get advice. Talk to other (particularly, more senior) faculty for input.

### ***PREVENTIVE MEASURES***

- Make it clear in your syllabus what behaviors are not acceptable in your course. What are your expectations? Discuss these expectations on the first day of class. Also be clear about what will be done to "violators" (see Appendix A).
- Consider the development of an honor code (and honor board) at your school that defines violations as including uncivil behavior (see Appendix B). If nothing else, this should be an important

topic for faculty discussion. Often honor codes cover academic dishonesty but not professional (mis)conduct. In a professional school, it seems reasonable to identify appropriate and inappropriate behaviors.

- Reexamine your classroom. Some questions you should ask yourself (or your students) (3):
  - Is my classroom boring? Do I actively involve the students, or do I spend a lot of time “pontificating?” Can I take lecture material and make it more interactive using small group discussions, then debriefing?
  - Is the material covered necessary? Is the material I cover necessary to the students’ mastery of the subject? If not, discard it. On the other hand, if the students can read it as well as I can say it, why not use lecture time to answer questions and take the material beyond the reading? Can’t get them to read in advance? Give announced quizzes on the reading instead of midterm exams.
  - Am I aloof or defensive? Studies confirm that professors who are aloof, defensive, and not respectful to students have a higher amount of incivility in their classrooms.
  - Am I complacent about uncivil or disruptive behavior? Remember, doing nothing is consent.
  - Do I get feedback from students regularly throughout the quarter or semester to address or head off problems? This can be done by identifying three or four students in the class to meet with on a weekly basis to discuss how things are going, or an assessment can be done after each week’s class meetings to see how students are doing (see Appendix C).

### ***PERSONALIZING THE LARGE CLASSROOM***

As stated previously, students behave in ways in a large classroom they never would behave in a small class. The impersonal nature of the class allows students to hide and often objectify the teacher (objectification reduces the teacher to an object—a thing that is more open to abuse). Engaging in more prosocial and verbally immediate behaviors is important in reducing objectification.

Solutions for large classrooms:

- *Weekly Workshops*. Many professors hold weekly workshop sessions that are not required. This is a good chance for students to review the material and get to know the teacher better. Moreover, they are less likely to behave uncivilly in a smaller group.
- *One-Minute Papers*. This is a voluntary exercise that is held at the last five to ten minutes of a class period. Class is stopped a few minutes early, and students are asked to write down any questions or problems they are having. Their papers are dropped in a box at the back of room. Several of the questions posed are addressed at the beginning of the next class period or answers are e-mailed to the whole class. The responsiveness to questions creates a cooperative climate. It encourages students to ask questions without risking embarrassment.
- *Student Interest*. Get to class early and mingle with the students. Get to know their names. Take an interest in them.
- *Weekly Evaluations*. These can be done each lecture or once a week and allow for frequent feedback so that small problems don't become large ones (see Appendix C for an example). Evaluations allow for feedback and responsiveness to build rapport. Also, give weekly quizzes to assess problems before they become big. I give a quiz for each set of readings. Students are allowed to ask as many questions as they want before the quiz. Then they take a 15-minute quiz (15 multiple choice, true-false, matching questions). We go over the quiz immediately after they take it. The quizzes and the process have several benefits:
  - Students actually read the material before class. This has increased the quality of the classroom discussions tremendously and has allowed for greater participation and interaction.
  - Because students keep up with the readings, they don't have to "cram" for the final exam.
  - Students get immediate feedback about how they did. In addition, because we go over the quiz immediately, I get immediate feedback about possible confusion and problem areas. In addition, I use items analyses to detect problems with subject matter and/or framing of questions.
  - Discussing the quiz material is a natural lead-in to the discussion topic(s) for the day. Quiz discussions are a great opportunity to discuss why answers are both correct and incorrect and draw upon the reading.

### SUMMARY

Promoting civility in a large classroom setting takes planning, work, and introspection. Planning reduces the chance that an incivility will occur by letting students know what you expect up front. In addition, planning allows you to make your classes more interactive by building in small group work and extra sessions. This will also help make your classes more personal, along with arriving to class early and getting to know the students in your classes. All of this takes hard work and dedication to teaching. Finally, introspection is needed to really evaluate whether you are doing all you can to make your classes more interesting and personal. Small, but sustained efforts lead to vast improvement in large classroom settings.

### REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX A

**Classroom Demeanor: An Excerpt from One Syllabus—Example 1**

It is your responsibility to attend class. If you miss a class meeting for any reason, you will be held responsible for all material covered and announcements made in your absence. . . .

Lecture attendance is neither required nor noted. However, BE ON TIME AND REMAIN FOR THE ENTIRE PERIOD OR DO NOT COME AT ALL. This class is too large to have people crawling over each other or standing in front of the projector while trying to find a seat or leaving after the lecture has begun. Arriving late and/or leaving early is inconsiderate of your colleagues.

This class is also too large for chit-chat, please do not. You are unaware of how far your voices carry in FAV 150 and how disturbing it is to your classmates to be forced to endure your idle chatter and giggling. The students who sit near you are not interested in your romantic lives, how out-of-touch you think your parents are, how stupid you think your teachers are, etc. You may not realize how disturbing your “private” conversations are when others are trying to listen to a lecture. . . .

Everyone who registers for this class is an adult. You are legally able to marry without parental consent, buy a home, pay taxes, vote, work, budget your money, defend your country in military service, etc. You should also be adult enough not to disturb others. Mindless talking during class is immature, inconsiderate behavior. Please ask questions or make comments about the art work that will benefit the entire class, but leave the chit-chat in the halls where it belongs.

*—From a course syllabus by Professor Susanne J. Warma, Utah State U.*

**Classroom Demeanor: An Excerpt from One Syllabus—Example 2**

The course policy on class attendance and excused absences is the same as that described in the Auburn University Student Handbook. Arrangements to make up missed work (assignments or exams) due to excused absences will be initiated by the student. Only students presenting an excused absence will be allowed to make up any missed work. These assignments must be made up within one week following the date the assignment was due. Otherwise, missed work will be assigned a grade of zero.

Students will be allowed to make up any missed exams only if the instructor is notified in advance. Such absences must be for legitimate, documented purposes as indicated in the Handbook. The make-up exam will most likely be a different form of the exam. No student will be allowed to take an exam prior to its scheduled time.

Cheating, unprofessional behavior, and incivility in the classroom are all considered to be violations of the Auburn University School of Pharmacy Code of Ethical and Professional Conduct. The instructor will not hesitate to report violators of the Code to the Honor Board. It is your responsibility to be knowledgeable of the Code and what constitutes violations.

## APPENDIX B. Excerpts from the Auburn University School of Pharmacy Code of Ethical and Professional Conduct.

### 3.00 VIOLATIONS

3.01 Violations of the School of Pharmacy Code of Ethical and Professional Conduct pertaining to academic honesty **include but are not limited to:**

3.01.1 The receipt, possession or use of any material or assistance not authorized by the instructor in the preparation of papers, reports, examinations, or any class assignment to be submitted for credit as a part of a course or to be submitted to fulfill School of Pharmacy requirements. The receipt, possession or use of any aid or material prohibited by the instructor while an examination or quiz is in progress.

3.01.2 Knowingly giving assistance not authorized by the instructor to another in the preparation of papers, reports, or laboratory data and products.

3.01.3 Knowingly giving assistance not authorized by the instructor to another while an examination or quiz is in progress.

3.01.4 Lending, giving, selling or otherwise furnishing to another any material or information not authorized by the instructor which can be shown to contain the questions or answers to any examination or quiz scheduled to be given at a subsequent date.

3.01.5 The submission of papers, reports, projects or similar course requirements, or parts thereof, that is not the work of the student submitting them. Also, the use of direct quotations or ideas of another in materials to be submitted for credit without appropriate acknowledgment.

3.01.6 Knowingly submitting a paper, report, examination or any class assignment that has been altered or corrected, in part or in whole, for reevaluation or regarding.

3.01.7 Altering or attempting to alter an assigned grade on any official School of Pharmacy or University record.

3.01.8 The instructor may delineate in advance other actions he/she considers to be a violation of the Code.

3.02 Violations of the School of Pharmacy Code of Professional Conduct pertaining to professional conduct include:

3.02.1 Purposely falsifying applications, forms or records prior to admission to the School of Pharmacy, or while enrolled in the School's professional programs.

**3.02.2 Knowingly producing false evidence (or rumors) against another or providing false statements or charges in bad faith against another. Knowingly publishing or circulating false information concerning any member of the University faculty, student body, staff or community.**

**3.02.3 Contributing to, or engaging in, any activity which disrupts or obstructs the teaching, research or extension programs of the School of Pharmacy or University, either on the campus or at affiliated training sites.**

**3.02.4 Threatening or purposely committing physical violence against any member of the University faculty, student body, staff, or community.**

3.02.5 Misusing or misrepresenting one's status as a Pharmacy student or the right to use any University property and facilities.

3.02.6 Stealing, damaging, defacing, or unauthorized use of any property of the School of Pharmacy or University. Diversion of any School of Pharmacy or University property to one's own use.

3.02.7 Engaging in any facet of Pharmacy practice prior to graduation unless under the direct supervision of a licensed practitioner or otherwise allowed by law.

3.02.8 Intentionally revealing the names of the charging party, the accused, witnesses or the facts involved in an alleged violation except in accordance with the provisions of this Code, or revealing the confidential proceedings of an Honor Board hearing.

3.02.9 Failure to report known violations of the School of Pharmacy Code of Ethical and Professional Conduct.

3.02.10 Use, possession, or participating in the trafficking of illegal drugs or substances.

**3.02.11 Unauthorized accessing of information about faculty, staff, or students of the School of Pharmacy, or patients/clients, that is private or confidential.**

**3.02.12 Unauthorized revealing of information about faculty, staff, or students of the School of Pharmacy, or patients/clients, that is private or confidential.**

## APPENDIX C. Weekly Class Assessment Form.

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Teacher's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

TOPIC \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the number that describes your response to each statement below, according to this scale:

	Strongly Agree 5	Agree 4	Not Applicable or Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
1. I learned something today I didn't know.	5	4	3	2	1
2. I enjoyed today's session.	5	4	3	2	1
3. The information presented was useful to me.	5	4	3	2	1
4. The speaker was knowledgeable on the subject.	5	4	3	2	1
5. The speaker was interesting to listen to.	5	4	3	2	1
6. The speaker encouraged questions.	5	4	3	2	1
7. The speaker answered the questions respectfully.	5	4	3	2	1

COMMENTS ABOUT THIS SESSION OR THE COURSE:

=====

At midterm, ask students to write answers to the following questions.

- 1) What do you like about this course?
- 2) What do you dislike? What needs improvements and how would you improve it?

Collate the answers and send a copy to each student by e-mail or pass it out.