

# Promoting Civility from a New Faculty Member Perspective

Donna West

## INTRODUCTION

As a new faculty member, you are excited about teaching. You are eager to do a good job. You spend hours preparing for a course. You begin to familiarize yourself with your new surroundings (lecture halls, faculty interactions, etc.), and about the time that trepidation and insecurity are beginning to abate and your comfort level rises, it happens.

- As you instruct the students to do a one-minute paper on the Friday prior to the week of spring break, a student yells from the back of the class, “You have got to be kidding me. This is SPRING BREAK. This is ridiculous.”
- A student is sleeping in class. You direct a question to him and wake him. The student does not know the answer and is embarrassed. You emphatically remind him that he had better stay awake.
- You are lecturing when a student blurts out, “Are you single?” The class bursts into laughter.

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- After class a student questions you about the relevance of the course to pharmacy and irritatingly states, “I had no idea that I had to sit through this crap to be a pharmacist.”

The first incident happened to me in month three of the job, and the other three incidents were provided to me by other new teachers in colleges of pharmacy. Each one caught the faculty member by surprise. New academicians are usually not expecting these events to occur when they begin their teaching career. Unfortunately, it only takes a few incidents to decrease one’s self-esteem or make one become indifferent to teaching (1).

New faculty members need to be aware of the potential for incivilities to occur, originating with both faculty members and students. Incivilities are words or actions that are disrespectful or rude (2). As illustrated above, they can be direct (e.g., verbal assault, inappropriate language) or indirect (e.g., sleeping in class, arriving late to class). The goal of this paper is to discuss methods and tools young faculty members can use to promote civility.

### ***WHY ARE NEW FACULTY TARGETS FOR INCIVILITIES?***

Incivilities seem to occur more often to new faculty members (3). It appears these incivilities can be attributed to both student and faculty causes. The students do not know the professor, and little is known about his or her reputation, grading, or exam format. Students often feel threatened by the unknown. Moreover, they want to test their limits and boundaries. When the new faculty member does not respond to these incivilities or responds inappropriately, the cycle of incivility begins.

Unfortunately, many new faculty members do little to promote civility. New faculty members often fail to establish rules and boundaries initially. For example, the new faculty member may fail to state, “No cell phones allowed in class. If you have one, put the ringer on vibrate and answer it after class.” Then the cell phone rings in class and the student answers it, perhaps offending the new faculty member, but nothing is done. Some new faculty have unrealistic expectations (e.g., the student should respect me, pay attention to me) (4). When these expectations are not met, the faculty member, feeling threatened, attempts to remind the students who has the authority, resulting in incivilities. Furthermore, new faculty members want to prove themselves. They are eager and ambitious. Initially, an enormous amount of work may be given

to students simply because the faculty member has so many ideas and wants to execute them all. Students may experience frustration and stress as a result, leading to uncivil behavior. It has been observed that some new faculty members do not assess students' prior knowledge of the subject, and, therefore, their lectures are too elementary or too advanced for the audience (3). Again, students become inattentive, bored, and frustrated. This usually leads to some form of acting out.

As stated by Dr. Berger earlier in this special edition, some professors experience incivilities more or less than others. This is true of new faculty members as well. Boice observed that regardless of faculty experience, immediacy and motivator valence seem to be major predictors of civility (3). Immediacy refers to the extent to which the professor gives verbal and nonverbal signs of warmth, friendliness, and general liking. Motivator valence refers to the use of positive (e.g., do you understand, you can do better) or negative motivators (e.g., what kind of question is that, obviously you didn't read). Professors who use positive motivators and have high levels of immediacy have fewer incivilities in their classrooms, as shown in Table 1. Successful senior teachers have learned to use positive motivators and have developed skills for expressing immediacy, while new faculty members are just beginning to develop these skills (3). New faculty members may unintentionally utter negative comments, give off condescending vibes, or become defensive, thereby fostering incivilities.

Whether incivility in education has worsened over the years is an interesting debate; however, understanding how to promote civility is more important. Young faculty members need to be aware of their own attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, they need to be prepared to foster civility as well as handle incivilities when they occur.

TABLE 1. Relationship Between Use of Positive Motivators and Level of Immediacy with Incivilities.

|  | <b>% of motivators used positively by professor</b> | <b>Mean level of immediacy on 10-point scale</b> |
|--|---|--|
| Young faculty who experience low incivility  | 81  | 6.2  |
| Young faculty who experience high incivility | 56  | 3.7  |

Adapted from Table 2 from Boice B. Classroom incivilities. *Res Higher Educ.* 1996; 37:453-586.

### **CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH CIVILITY**

As Boice concluded, professors have a great deal of influence on whether incivilities occur in their courses (3). Although new faculty members cannot change students' behavior and are not responsible for students' behavior, they can exhibit certain characteristics that seem to diminish the possibility of incivilities occurring in the classroom. Immediacy and the use of positive motivators seem to overcome the lack of teaching experience.

As defined above, immediacy refers to the professor's ability to exhibit signs of warmth and friendliness. Behaviors associated with high and low immediacy are listed in Table 2 (3, 5). The signs of high immediacy indicate that the professor is approachable and cares. The professor respects the students as people who have needs and concerns. For example, starting and stopping class on time indicates respect for the students' time schedule. New faculty members should practice exhibiting signs of high immediacy. Coming to class early and asking students how they are doing or stopping to chat with a group of students in the hall indicates that one cares. When a student is meeting with a faculty member in his office, the faculty member should forward all phone calls and avoid other interruptions to indicate to the student that he or she is important. Additionally, new faculty should identify those behaviors associated with low immediacy that they exhibit and then try to change. For example, if a new professor tends to talk too fast, he could put reminders to pause or stop and ask for questions in his lecture notes.

Not only is it important to be friendly, but it is also important to motivate and encourage students. When faculty members are positive, inci-

TABLE 2. Examples of Behaviors Associated with Immediacy.

| <b>High Immediacy</b>   | <b>Low Immediacy</b>   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Displays eye contact</li> <li>• Moves around, looks for understanding</li> <li>• Smiles</li> <li>• Says hello to students outside of class</li> <li>• Leans forward</li> <li>• Listens to questions and concerns</li> <li>• Starts and stops class on time</li> <li>• Comes to class a few minutes early and stays a few minutes late to chat with students</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talks too fast</li> <li>• No office hours—not available</li> <li>• Not attentive in office</li> <li>• Cancels class unexpectedly</li> <li>• Gives surprise quizzes or exam questions</li> </ul> |

vilities seem to decline. Encourage students by involving them in lecture, encouraging questions, providing positive comments and feedback, and being available outside of class. New faculty members have used blank index cards on the first day of class for students to indicate their pharmacy work experience, their hometown, and one concept they want to learn in the class. Other faculty members have used short surveys to learn about the students' preferences, interests, and experiences. These techniques enable faculty to involve the students and convey to them interest in their learning.

New faculty members should be aware of their own attitudes and behaviors, especially during the first couple of weeks (3). The first few weeks of the course are crucial, as the first impression is usually the one remembered.

### ***PROMOTING CIVILITY***

When preparing for a teaching position, there are four factors to consider in creating an atmosphere that promotes civility. These factors are likely to facilitate the development of immediacy skills and the use of positive motivators. The four factors are: find a mentor, prepare for classes, communicate your expectations, and get to know the students.

#### ***Find a Mentor***

One of the most important recommendations is to find a successful teacher to serve as a mentor at the university where you are employed. This mentor can assist you in learning about the students at your university. Students at different institutions have different expectations, norms, and customs. For example, during the first week of class, a new instructor passed out the syllabus that included the semester project. She had already assigned students to groups. Students immediately began complaining. After class, she sought one of her colleagues to ask about group work and discovered that the students usually select their own groups because so many students commute and work. It is difficult for some of them to meet outside of class unless it is in the community where they live. A mentor reviewing the syllabus prior to distribution may have prevented this occurrence.

As mentioned previously, students seem to test their limits and boundaries with new faculty. Having a mentor can help you gauge when you are too tolerant or intolerant. Students may challenge you on atten-

dance, grading, test schedules, or in-class time to work on projects. Having an experienced faculty member to talk to will assist you in making these decisions more reasonably. A mentor is also important when reading student evaluations that may contain personal comments (e.g., “get a new hairstyle”) and other incivilities. A mentor can remind you that even the best teachers cannot please everyone.

### *Prepare*

As a new faculty member, it is important to prepare for each lecture. Students will be wondering if this new professor really knows anything. If one seems indifferent to teaching and is not putting in the time to prepare, students will reciprocate. They, too, will become indifferent and not prepare for class, leading to boredom and incivilities. Also, the lack of preparation by faculty will not be respected by students.

Learning about different teaching methodologies and techniques is valuable. It is critical that new faculty learn how to assess students’ prior knowledge and how to get students involved. Research has shown that involved students learn more and are more civil (3, 6). Examples of how to improve student involvement include one-minute papers, case studies, quizzes, small group exercises, debates, and in-class discussions (5, 7). When using these techniques, it is critical that faculty let students know what to expect and the purpose of the activity so the students do not feel confused or threatened.

There are numerous resources (e.g., books, AACP seminars) available to help new faculty members prepare for teaching. New faculty should discuss the resources available at their institution with their department chair or mentor. For example, at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, young faculty can attend Teaching Scholars, a program that describes teaching concepts, including writing objectives, incorporating technology into the classroom, and developing active-learning exercises.

Both peer and student evaluations can also be helpful (8). It is recommended that new faculty members have peer evaluations annually. An objective outside observer can help identify areas that need improvement. Perhaps one is sending an unintended message nonverbally, talking too fast, or ignoring incivilities in the classroom. Although student evaluations often have inappropriate comments or material, there are usually a couple of “pearls” in each batch. Try to find those “pearls of wisdom” and incorporate them. For example, students continually complained about one faculty member being unavailable. This faculty

member was off campus most of the time due to her clinical obligations. She now holds study sessions before the exam and has observed a decrease in the number of complaints about her inaccessibility. She commented that only a few students come to the help session, but the perception that she cares and is willing to meet with them is now there. In other words, she has increased her level of immediacy with the students.

### *Communicate Your Expectations*

Because new faculty members are considered “unknown” by the students (What are the tests like? How does she grade?), it is important to establish and communicate class expectations, both academic and behavioral. These expectations should be stated in the syllabus as well as reviewed thoroughly on the first day of class (9). The syllabus should include course objectives, a course outline, expected academic performance, and evaluation criteria. Reviewing these on the first day of class will increase the likelihood that the expectations have been understood by the students (8). A poorly written syllabus that lacks clarity can lead to student frustration and anger.

It has been shown that incivilities increase when students are frustrated or under stress, especially during exam times or near deadlines for projects and assignments. Providing students with information about the exam format, the material covered by the exam, and the assignment parameters will help ease tensions. Providing help sessions, giving practice tests, and reviewing a preliminary draft of the report/project may also reduce incivilities.

A civility clause or other behavioral expectations should also be stated on the syllabus (8). If attendance is expected in your class, this should be stated. Again, talking with a mentor who understands the “general rules” for the college will help you understand how your expectations fit into the overall environment. With more students having electronic devices (e.g., cell phones, pagers, personal digital assistants), expectations regarding their use in your class or rotation should be stated.

It is helpful to explain why the rules exist. For example, a professor who states, “Please be on time. Coming into class 15 minutes late and crawling over others is disruptive and frustrating to me and your peers who are trying to learn,” is likely to be better received than the professor who states, “Don’t be late or else.” The first message conveys to the students that the professor cares and is not just creating rules to establish

authority. Presenting rules just to have authority can backfire and be perceived as threatening.

When communicating with students, new academicians should also be attentive to the nonverbal messages sent. How is it said? What is the tone of voice? Students may perceive certain words or actions as uncivil if the instructor is not careful. One faculty member continually snapped his fingers in class to quiet the students. The students perceived this to be demeaning and an attempt to control them, and it resulted in the students' continual chatting and uncivil behavior.

### ***Get to Know the Students***

Communicating with students is likely to improve student-faculty relations. As in all relationships, the better the relationship, the less incivilities occur. As Berger alludes to in the introduction, students may feel powerless and resort to passive-aggressive behavior and incivilities. To negate these feelings of powerlessness, provide students a way to communicate with you. E-mail the class requesting feedback, meet with representatives from the class to learn about their concerns and needs, provide feedback to students so they know how they are doing in the class, or conduct a mid-term teaching evaluation. When appropriate and feasible, compromise with the students (e.g., reschedule class time, change test).

Successful experienced teachers recommend learning students' names and getting to know them. Listed below are four examples of how to get to know students.

- One new faculty member learned the names of his 75 students in the first 2 weeks of class. Several students commented on this. They perceived that he must care if he learned all of their names, thus making it more difficult for them to objectify him.
- Several new faculty have gotten involved with student organizations (e.g., ASP, NCPA) and met the student leaders. The student leaders were able to provide a glimpse of what the class was thinking.
- One new faculty member included students by collaborating with them. She would ask students to collaborate with her on research projects. Other faculty encourage students to enter essay contests (e.g., NACDS Community Pharmacy Essay Contest) or other programs that involve both student and faculty participation.

- Some professors begin class with a famous quotation or a trivia question. These types of activities increase the interaction with students before lecture begins.

### ***HOW TO RESPOND TO INCIVILITIES***

Although new faculty can exhibit characteristics that seem to decrease incivilities, incivilities may still occur. Responding to them appropriately is the key to preventing or reducing future incivilities. As previously stated, the first few weeks are critical. Thus, responding assertively to incivilities is essential. Suggestions on how to handle incivilities are discussed in this section.

When incivilities occur, it is essential that the professor not blow up in anger but remain calm (5). Although it may be tempting, it is important not to return incivilities with incivilities. Instead, remain civil and be assertive.

In the first example provided (the student yelled that the assignment was ridiculous), the faculty member, using the broken-record technique, assertively restated to take out a sheet of paper for the one-minute paper. Most of the students were embarrassed, and when the faculty member controlled the situation calmly, the rest of the class did not contribute any other outbursts. Usually the majority of the class will disapprove of a peer's uncivil behavior, assuming the faculty member remains civil. When the students returned from spring break, the faculty member asked the student to come to her office. She expressed her disapproval of the behavior and set the rule that outbursts like that would not be allowed. If it happened again, a noncognitive (see Appendix A) would be written. The student apologized and stated he was only joking. There were no more inappropriate outbursts during the remainder of the course. The faculty member remained assertive in class but did not become angry or argue with the student. At the same time, she did not ignore the incivility. She addressed it with the person who performed the behavior. She reset the expectation. Ignoring it or laughing it off may have allowed for other types of outbursts to occur, whether jokingly or not.

Likewise, in the fourth example, the professor remained calm and assertively explained the relevance of the course. The professor was careful not to become defensive and engage this student in an argument. Instead, the professor listened to the student's concerns and then later

tried to explain the importance and relevance of the material to the student.

Successful teachers not only treat incivility with respect but they also use it to their advantage (3). For example, a teacher may observe indirect incivility during class (e.g., shuffling papers, sighing, loud whispering) and sense the students' frustration. The teacher can use this as a sign to stop and review the material.

Faculty members are advised not to embarrass students publicly. Embarrassing one student may be perceived by the entire class as rude (9). If the class believes the faculty member has not been civil, the class dynamics will change: students will chitchat more, participate in class less, and become indifferent to the course (8). In the second example, the new professor made the mistake of embarrassing the student, which haunted him on his student evaluations at the end of the semester. Instead, the professor should have indirectly addressed the problem or responded to it politely (9, 10). It is usually best to see the individual after class to address the problem directly. In class, you can use humor or politely draw attention to the misbehavior (7). Examples of indirect ways to handle incivilities include leaving the front row open for late comers, walking near the person chit-chatting, or making direct eye contact. All of these actions send the message to the student that you are aware of his or her misbehavior.

Set clear boundaries and keep them (5). A physician stated that she clearly sets the boundaries when interacting with drug representatives. Every drug representative knows his or her ethical boundaries with the physician. Likewise, it is the faculty with authority in the student-faculty relationship, and it is their responsibility to set the boundaries. In the third example above, where the student asked the professor about her marital status, the faculty member immediately informed the student that this was an inappropriate question. After class, she reiterated to the student that his behavior was unacceptable. She also informed the department chair of the situation and sought advice.

When sexist comments are made or inappropriate behavior occurs, the faculty member must be assertive and state that this is inappropriate. For example, if a student makes a sexist comment, the faculty member may state, "I have been offended and feel disrespected. These comments and/or behaviors are not acceptable." Although it is tempting to ignore the incident and remain silent, this reaction will be interpreted as assent. Additionally, nervous giggling or laughing in response to inappropriate behavior will be interpreted as acceptance of the behavior. Then it is likely that the behavior or comments will occur again. Faculty

members must speak out against inappropriate comments or behavior before the situation gets out of control.

Young faculty members must be careful not to give into pressure. Students may invite you to attend a party or grab a beer with them. Being a friend out on a Thursday night and being a teacher back in class on Friday is extremely difficult, if not impossible. It is suggested that faculty attend only the activities that are school sanctioned and be responsible. Be judicious in deciding what to attend and how long to stay. Even when attending school-sponsored activities, one should be attentive to the surroundings. One student began dancing in a provocative manner around a new faculty member at the annual college of pharmacy party. The faculty member quickly stated to the student to stop and walked away. The faculty member left the party to avoid any misconceptions.

It is important to remember that perceptions are reality. If other professors and students perceive you to be flirting with students or befriending students, it will be difficult to negate these perceptions or rumors. Often new faculty members lose the respect of many students when they attempt to become friends with some of the students and try “too hard” to be liked. Trying too hard to be liked in the classroom does not work either. Dropping the lowest grade or making the test easy to “make students happy” is only a very short-term solution to decreasing incivilities. In the end, most students do not respect this behavior.

Getting too involved with students can be professional suicide. In faculty-student relationships, mentor students and keep the boundaries clear. Students will appreciate and respect a faculty member who guides them and keeps the relationship unambiguous.

### ***PERSISTENT INCIVILITY***

It is advised that new faculty obtain a copy of the institution’s policies and procedures (11). New faculty should become familiar with the rules, specifically those pertaining to incivilities. Appendix A provides an example of an incivility policy. This policy provides an effective mechanism for faculty to handle inappropriate behavior not related to academic performance. It should be noted that this policy not only deals with responding to incivilities but also provides a mechanism for faculty to reward students for good behavior.

Faculty members are advised to ask a mentor about the policies and procedures and the chain of command. Does the administration usually

support the faculty? As a new faculty member, one wants to know that he or she is supported and that he or she is not guilty until proven innocent. After learning what the policies and procedures are, use them appropriately.

When problems persist, it is best to seek help, preferably from the department chair. Help with handling incivilities should be sought immediately, similar to the way the faculty member handled the “are you single” question and then sought the advice of the department chair in case the situation worsened. Department chairs, academic deans, and mentors can all provide guidance on how to deal with the situation (11). Following the chain of command and the institution’s policies is important.

Each new professor must act on what he said he would do. For example, if the professor states that a noncognitive will be written up the next time it occurs, then a noncognitive must be written up if the incivility occurs again. It is also appropriate to warn a student that if the incivility occurs again, he or she will be dismissed from class. If the behavior occurs, then the student must be dismissed politely from class. Not dismissing the student only sends the message that you will tolerate the incivility.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is evident that new faculty members who exhibit high levels of immediacy and use positive motivators can foster civility. New academicians should be friendly, treat students with respect, and communicate with students both in and out of the classroom. They should also encourage students and involve them in lectures using active-learning techniques. Stating the course expectations, both academic and behavioral, during the first lecture is also advised.

When incivilities do occur, new faculty members must not retaliate with incivilities. Instead, they should be assertive and communicate to the student(s) that the behavior is unacceptable. Likewise, when sexually derogatory remarks or other inappropriate remarks are made, the faculty member must not remain silent, but address the issue. Understanding the institution’s policies and procedures with regard to incivility and seeking help from mentors and department chairs can be helpful when dealing with incivilities.

New faculty members should strive to promote civility in the classroom, remembering that experience is the best teacher. In fact, it is

believed that developing a complex skill such as teaching requires approximately ten years of regular, deliberate practice before true expertise is achieved (12). When incivilities do occur, it is important to reflect, learn from the mistakes, and improve. The methods presented in this article can be used to prepare for and respond to incivilities appropriately.

Of utmost importance is the awareness of one's own behaviors and attitudes and the willingness to change those that promote incivility. Furthermore, it has been observed that faculty with an appreciation of incivility are least likely to experience it. In conclusion, the first step to promoting civility is to heighten awareness.

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## RECOMMENDED READING

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## APPENDIX A

Scholastic Non-Cognitive Performance Evaluation  
at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences-College of Pharmacy  
(As Listed in 2001-2002 Student Handbook)

Scholastic non-cognitive performance is evaluated on the basis of certain demonstrated characteristics that are important to individuals preparing for a career in pharmacy. Characteristics included in these evaluations are attentiveness, demeanor, maturity, cooperation, inquisitiveness, responsibility, and respect of authority. Students shall receive a grade of "Outstanding" or "Inadequate" when appropriate. The lack of either grade indicates that the student has been judged to possess the demonstrated characteristics or that contact with the student has been insufficient to allow evaluation. Faculty members of each course in which the student is enrolled will make evaluations.

If the student receives two (2) or more grades of "Outstanding," the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs will notify the student in writing of the fact and will place a letter of commendation in the student's file.

If the student receives the grade of "Inadequate" in two (2) or more separate situations or incidents, the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs will undertake the following action (in the case of a serious violation, a single grade of Inadequate will suffice): (1) notify the student in writing that he/she has received an excessive number of "Inadequate" evaluations, (2) require the student to arrange a formal interview within one week with the individual(s) submitting the written report(s), and (3) will forward to the Scholastic Standing Committee the results of the interview, including the student's explanation for his/her behavior. The Scholastic Standing Committee may choose any or several of the following: (1) take no further action, (2) counsel the student in writing only, (3) interview and counsel the student, (4) interview and counsel the student and place him/her on leave of absence for an interval to be recommended by the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and approved by the Scholastic Standing Committee, (5) interview and counsel the student and place him/her on scholastic non-cognitive probation for an interval to be recommended by the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and approved by the Scholastic Standing Committee, (6) interview the student and recommend the student repeat the entire academic year, or (7) interview the student and recommend his/her dismissal from the College.