

# MANAGING INCIVILITY IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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BOOKLET

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# **Managing Incivility in the College Classroom**

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# Managing Incivility in the College Classroom



At least occasionally, university teachers experience some form of student misbehavior or incivility in their classrooms. Unfortunately, few instructors are prepared to manage classroom incivilities (Anderson, 1999; Seidman, 2005). In this booklet, I will provide an overview of the concept of incivility, how instructors can develop and refine their understanding of incivility, and offer recommendations for managing classroom incivilities. Faculty may differ in their perception of uncivil behaviors; however, this booklet is intended to help teachers decide on what is considered uncivil behavior and how to respond to it appropriately.

## Defining Incivility

Acts of incivility may differ in form and content, such as sleeping in class to harassing an instructor. However, incivilities are, in the broadest sense, classroom disruptions. More specific definitions emerge from incivility literature and help explicate this classroom behavior. One definition identifies incivility as “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). This definition may seem irrelevant for the classroom because students may not consider their behavior as being intentionally harmful or malevolent. However, given its disruptive nature, one may consider incivility to be harmful to the learning experience in the classroom. Andersson and Pearson’s (1999) conception of incivility is similar to Feldman’s (2001) notion that incivility is “any action that interferes with

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a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom” (p. 137). Taken together, these two definitions suggest that classroom incivilities as either intentional or unintentional behavior and that they are disruptive and detrimental to the classroom learning experience. This perspective is broad, but it provides a solid starting point for identifying specific incivilities that may interfere with teaching and learning in university settings.

To identify behaviors considered uncivil in the classroom, Indiana University’s Center for Survey Research (2000) sampled professors and graduate teaching assistants to identify what these teachers deemed as acts of incivility and the relative frequency of their occurrence in the classroom. Some of the respondents reported behaviors such as chewing gum, eating, not taking notes, sleeping, and arriving late as being acts of incivility. However, respondents did not always agree on precisely what constitutes uncivil behavior: For example, 16% of the sample believed that missing class is an incivility in any context whereas 39% reported that this behavior would never be considered an act of incivility. The findings from the study highlight the existence of disparities in teachers’ perception of incivilities.

### Incivility Philosophy

Given that professors differ in what constitutes incivility, it is nonetheless important for individual instructors to clearly determine what they consider as an act of incivility in order to identify and manage student misbehavior in the classroom. In doing so, instructors may develop a clearly articulated philosophy of incivility. Similar to a teaching philosophy, an incivility philosophy will help instructors develop a supportive classroom structure and positive interactions with students. The first step in developing this philosophy involves defining incivility within the terms of the instructor’s teaching philosophy. For example, an instructor may incorporate the two definitions noted above into their philosophy of teaching, or elaborate upon one’s own teaching philosophy to include how incivility impacts their positive classroom environment. Second, instructors should identify specific behaviors that meet fit definition of incivility. Instructors may benefit by referring Indiana University’s Center for Survey Research survey and selecting specific behaviors that it cited as being acts of incivility. Instructors may also consider including behaviors that are disruptive and uncivil to both instructors and students. For example, Rehling and Bjorkland (2010) examined similarities and differences in behaviors considered uncivil among students and professors. They found that students and professors agreed on 9 of the top 10 categories of incivility:



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- Continuing to talk after being asked to stop,
- Coming to class drunk or high on drugs,
- Exhibiting nonverbal disrespect for others,
- Talking loudly with others,
- Making disparaging or disrespect remarks,
- Using profanity,
- Using Mobile telephones,
- Texting during class,
- Sleeping, and
- Using computers and other technologies for non-class activities.

Faculty and students also noted that arriving late to class was considered an incivility; however, students ranked this student misbehavior higher than faculty did. Students and faculty were also disagreed on the extent to which behaviors were considered uncivil, with faculty generally rating the behaviors as more uncivil than students. Obviously, many of the classroom incivilities listed above not only impact faculty teaching but also student learning. Given that students perceive similar incivilities as faculty, it may be in the instructor's best interest to plan how to address these incivilities and minimize their possible causes.

### Causes of Incivility

In general, faculty and students agree on the disruptive nature of incivilities, but who is responsible for incivility as it unfolds in the classroom. Student-created incivility may stem from factors beyond the classroom setting. For example, Nordstrom, Bartels, & Bucy (2009) identified that some students' consumer orientation—their belief that they should receive a high quality education while putting forth little or no effort in their quest for a university diploma—and narcissistic tendencies (e.g. preoccupation with self, lack of empathy for others) as two predictors of student incivility. Although these causes exist beyond faculty control, faculty may be able to shape the classroom environment to minimize the contribution of these factors to the occurrence of incivility. For example, faculty may promote greater student involvement in the classroom by using active learning techniques and creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere that encourage discussion and collaborative

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learning. These techniques encourage student engagement in their studies, thus facilitating student interest learning the subjective matter and reducing the likelihood of incivility.

Another cause of incivility is the students' misperception of incivility: Students who do not perceive their behavior as uncivil may be more likely to continue engaging in behavior that disrupts the classroom environment. This misperception is actually a stronger predictor of classroom incivility than students' consumerist attitudes and narcissistic tendencies (Nordstrom et al., 2009). What cause this misperception? It may stem from students' failure to recognize that their behaviors are disruptive to others and hindering classroom learning for students around them. For example, students who engage in conversation while their instructors are lecturing may not realize that their talking is interfering with the ability of students sitting next to them to hear, and thus understand, what their instructors are saying.

Clearly, to reduce these sorts of disruptions, indeed, any type of classroom disruption, it is important that faculty address classroom incivilities rather than ignore them.

Although students may cause incivility via their consumer orientations, narcissistic tendencies, and misperceptions, faculty may also be responsible for causing some forms of classroom incivility. For example, unfair and inappropriate teaching practices such as biased grading, inappropriate comments to students, and showing disrespect towards students may promote student frustration and incivility within the classroom. Similarly, instructors who ignore or other fail to stop student incivility may suggest to students that their engagement in uncivil behavior is acceptable (Meyers, Bender, Hill & Thomas, 2006). To minimize such ineffective teaching behavior, instructors should continue reflect on and refine their teaching styles, as well as receive feedback from their students and colleagues. This reflection and feedback process may allow faculty to identify and prevent problematic teaching areas that contribute to classroom incivility.

### Preventing Incivility

The first step in actively managing classroom incivilities is addressing potential misbehavior problems from the first day of class. One initial step to prevent incivility is through the establishment of a positive classroom environment when you first meet your students at the beginning of the academic term. A positive classroom environment is best characterized by the faculty's enthusiasm for the material, as

well as enthusiasm and genuine interest for their students learning and academic achievement (Meyers, 2003; Sorcinelli, 1994). One way to demonstrate a genuine interest toward students includes showing respect for each student (Wilson & Hackney, 2006), and instructors may demonstrate this respect by possessing an open interest in every student's contributions and questions, which indicates that the instructor welcomes the participation of all students, without students having to fear of judgment or embarrassment (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). Other ways to demonstrate genuine interest include learning students' names, smiling at students, and acknowledging them outside of the classroom when you see them on campus or at the mall.

Outside of building a positive classroom environment with students, another way to prevent the occurrence of incivilities is through an "incivility contract". An incivility contract begins with a brief discussion between faculty and students regarding behaviors that they both agree are disruptive to the classroom environment. Following this discussion, faculty may draft a contract that outlines these disruptive behaviors and describe the consequences for engaging in them. The contract may also emphasize the learning and educational goals shared by students and teachers in the classroom and requires faculty to treat "students respectfully despite disagreements" (Meyers et al, 2006, p. 185).

The contracts may become useless if no repercussions occur to those students who break the contract. To enhance the contract's utility, faculty may discuss with students possible consequences for violating the contract. For example, either faculty or students may be responsible for mobile phone disruption. Students and faculty may work out an agreement such that if either party's mobile disrupts the class, the violating party would receive some sort of punishment. That is, if the professor's mobile disrupts the class, all students receive a small amount of extra credit to their class grade/next exam/etc. If a student's mobile goes off, all students incur a small removal of extra credit. Overall, this example provides one tactic for enhancing the collaborative relationship between student and faculty in maintaining a civil classroom environment. A similar stipulation may be applied for tardiness (both faculty and student tardiness) or lecturing beyond the designated class time.

In addition to emphasizing the impact of classroom incivility on student learning, faculty may also prevent incivility by minimizing their behaviors that may contribute to incivility (Gonzalez & Lopez, 2001). For example, behaviors such as cultural faux pas, interrupting students, discrediting students' points without explanation, or disinterest and disengagement with students may promote student hostility and

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incivility. These behaviors will likely damage classroom rapport, and constitutes one important reason why faculty should continue to monitor and receive feedback on their teaching throughout their teaching careers.

Certain teaching practices may also contribute to the development of incivility in the classroom. For example, instructors who do not use active teaching methods may disengage students from learning course content, resulting in students losing interest in the lecture material and becoming inattentive to the instructor. Instructors may minimize this occurrence by avoiding using lecture-only teachings and instead, incorporating group work or discussion questions into their teaching. As Fulford (2001) noted, students' attention to a lecture may last up to 20 minutes, and students are unlikely to maintain their attention for an entire lecture unless the lecturer is very engaging and the students are extremely motivated. Thus, using lecture-only approaches may disengage students during class sessions as well as throughout the semester. Instructors who use active learning techniques are also less likely to incur incidences of classroom incivility (Meyers et al., 2006).

### Responding to Student Incivility

Despite promoting a positive classroom environment and making every effort to minimize the occurrence of incivilities, instructors will have to deal with these disruptions at some point in their teaching careers. It may be important for instructors to prepare for how they may react to various incivilities in the classroom without feeling personally attacked. As Damour (2006) noted, instructors may "feel personally offended," but must avoid reacting on these hurt feelings and "humiliating an offending student" (p. 229). In order to avoid immediately reacting to these hurt feelings, instructors may benefit by first taking a deep breath and remaining calm (Feldman, 2001). After this brief pause, instructors should address the incivility immediately. Ignoring the incivility (a common strategy) may foster continued acts of incivility, create dissatisfaction among students towards the instructor (Meyers et al., 2006), and ignoring the incivility may suggest to the students that such behavior is acceptable. Finally, instructors must ensure that they are consistent in how they respond to various classroom incivilities. Inconsistent responding may suggest favorability for some students, create additional dissatisfaction among students in the class, and also lead students to question the instructor's discipline practices. Thus, it is important that faculty develop strategies to address various incivilities. The following section provides a variety of strategies for handling specific incivilities.

### Side Conversations

Students may hold private conversations during class that revolve around course related material or topics unrelated to the class. These private conversations may be particularly easy to ignore; however, they may be disruptive to other students nearby the students who are having the side conversation. There are several ways instructors can address this disruption. While delivering a lecture, instructors may walk throughout classroom, eventually positioning themselves near the talking students (Damour, 2006). If an instructor is unable to position himself near the talking students, instructors may want to consider asking a nearby student a class related question in order to draw attention to the talking students, without putting them on the spot (Sorcinelli, 1994). Alternatively, the instructor may ask the disruptive students if they had a question or a particular point they would like to share with the rest of the class. Instructors may also make eye contact with the offending students or, if the talking continues, pause until the talking ceases (Davis, 2009; Nilson, 2003). Finally, if the disruption continues, instructors should speak with the students outside of class (Nilson, 2003).

### Mobile Phone and Inappropriate Laptop Use

With the advances made in technology, mobile phones and laptop computers are becoming more and more common among college students. These tools may enhance students' academic performance by allowing them to access greater resources for their studies. However, students bring their laptops and mobiles into the classroom, student may use them for nonclass related activities such as texting a friend or shopping on like while listening to a lecture. Students and faculty agree that mobile use disrupts classroom lectures (Burns & Lohenry, 2010; Campbell, 2006). Faculty and students are also similar in their endorsement of a formal policy for managing mobile use in the classroom (Campbell, 2006). One such formal policy may include mobile etiquette section in both the syllabus and incivility contract, and this policy should be communicated to students at the start of the semester (Burns & Lohenry, 2010). Fortunately, when such instances of incivility occur and disrupt the college classroom, similar techniques to those for addressing side conversations may be utilized. For example, walking around the classroom while lecturing will allow the instructor to identify if students are using these devices for classroom related purposes. If an instructor finds that these tools are becoming disruptive, it may helpful for the instructor to pause with the usual lecture and introduce group work or begin a class discussion.

### Arriving to Class Late and Packing Up Early

Damour (2006) emphasized that instructors should begin class on time, thereby reducing the perception that the instructor will wait until the majority of students arrive before starting class. Starting class late may reinforce late arrivals and these students may not perceive any disadvantage for arriving late. In addition to starting on time, instructors may want to consider scheduling extra credit opportunities or short quizzes at either the beginning or end of classes (Nilson, 2003). It may be beneficial to vary when the quizzes or extra credit are given out (i.e. alternating between beginning of class and end of class). If students consistently arrive late, instructors may address this problem with the student after class. Students may have legitimate reasons for arriving late (e.g. coming from another class on the other side of campus) and reasonable solutions may help minimize the disruptions caused by this tardiness.

### Sleeping Students

Factors like late-night socializing, studying all night, or poor sleep habits may hamper the alertness of college students in their studies. As such, some students may have difficulty staying awake during lectures and may fall asleep during an instructor's lecture. Although sleeping during class may be considered disrespectful toward an instructor, faculty must remember that their reaction toward the sleeping student will impact the entire class. However, ignoring the student, as with other incivilities, will not resolve the problem. Carter & Punyanunt-Carter (2006a) asked students to rate the acceptability for the following responses to a sleeping student sleeping: ignore the student, make a loud noise to wake up the student, ask a nearby student to wake up the student, ask the sleeping student to leave the classroom, and speak with the student privately after class. Of the responses, students indicated that speaking with the student privately was the most acceptable, followed by asking a nearby student to wake up the student, and make a loud noise. The least acceptable included ignoring the student or telling the student to leave the classroom. These findings illustrate that students perceive sleeping in the classroom as distractible behavior, and reinforce the notion that instructors are responsible for handling classroom incivilities. However, the instructor's response should be done without publicly humiliating the sleeping student.

### Academic Dishonesty

Similar to the previous acts of incivility, handling academic dishonesty is another responsibility of instructor. Academic dishonesty may occur in the classroom (e.g.

copying off a peer during an exam) or outside the class (e.g. plagiarizing a paper). Davis (2009) recommended dealing with the problem immediately (rather than ignoring the problem) and following the institution's policy on academic dishonesty. It is imperative that instructors are familiar with their institution's policies on handling cases of academic dishonesty, as some institutions have strict protocols for handling dishonesty. Departure from this policy may bring unexpected and unpleasant consequences on the instructor. Carter & Punyanunt-Carter (2006b) examined the acceptability of instructor responses to dishonesty (i.e., cheating during an examination). Students rated "speaking with the student after class" and "giving the student a failing grade for the exam" as more acceptable than "tearing up the exam immediately" and "failing the student in the course". These findings suggest that students expect the instructor to deal with dishonesty immediately, rather than ignoring it, but in a civil manner that does not draw further attention to the violating student.

### Argumentative and Hostile Students

If a student is being hostile or aggressive, or attempts to argue disrespectfully with the instructor, it may be best for the instructor to listen to student's points in a respectable manner, without encouraging or reinforcing the complaining behavior, and utilize basic reflective listening to ensure that the complaint is being heard correctly (Meyers, 2003; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). Svinicki and McKeachie (2011) noted that instructors should reflect the problem back to the class, in order to lessen some of hostility and present the problem as a class related issue, rather than belonging entirely to the complaining student. Unfortunately, occasionally, these solutions may not work and the hostility may escalate. In such cases, the instructor may ask that student to speak privately outside of class (Davis, 2009).

### Preparations and Rehearsals

Although some of the suggestions I offered above will provide a successful means for handling classroom incivilities, they may not always succeed. Instructors may benefit by being mindful of approaches that succeeded and those that failed in their classes, as well as the context of the problem (e.g. class size, type of incivility, student's reaction to responses) Instructors may also benefit by preparing themselves for specific incivilities via rehearsal of these strategies, given that some incivilities may be novel occurrences in the classroom, even for an experienced instructor.

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One means for practicing these strategies may include the assistance of a teaching development program. These programs, such as those offered by the Deanship of Skills Development provide feedback on an instructor's teaching skills and may also help instructors foster their skills in managing incivilities.

### Beyond Incivilities

Despite minimizing the occurrence of classroom incivilities, certain incivilities may not be easy to address in the classroom. For example, severe acts of incivility such as physical violence or verbal assaults may warrant the intervention of higher authorities, such as departmental chairs, campus deans, faculty supervisors, or campus security (in the event of immediate danger). In the interest of safety, instructors should not attempt to address these matters singlehandedly. Many universities have developed a protocol for handling these more extreme incivilities, and instructors should familiarize themselves with these policies. Instructors may need to consider keeping records of the situation if the threats or extreme acts of incivility occur over an extended period of time (e.g. saving e-mail exchanges with the student, making notes after interactions with the students). Keeping these records will help if a higher authority (such as a college dean) becomes involved with the situation.



### Summary

The points listed below represent the primary “take-home” message I’ve made in this booklet:

- Incivility can be either intentional or unintentional hurtful behavior that disrupts the classroom environment.
- Managing incivilities is considered the responsibility of the instructor, and both students and faculty agree on a number of behaviors that are uncivil as well as the disruptions these behaviors cause.
- In order to prepare for managing incivilities, instructors may benefit by developing an incivility philosophy that allows them to define what they consider uncivil classroom behavior as well as how to address these behaviors in their classes.
- Student’s self-entitlement, narcissism, instructor’s inappropriate behavior, and lecture-only teachings may cause incivility in the classroom.
- Instructors may minimize the occurrence of classroom incivilities by enhancing student interest in the class, creating an incivility contract, and establishing a positive classroom environment by showing their genuine interest and respect toward students.
- Instructors can address specific incivilities in a variety of ways that maintain a positive classroom environment and do not involve humiliating or berating the offending student.
- Preparation is key to handling incivilities and instructors may be better equipped to handle incivilities if they have rehearsed their responses to various incivilities.

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### Annotated References

- Davis, G. B. (2009). *Tools for teaching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- This guide provides instructors with teaching tools that can be used in any college classroom, starting with the inception of the class to its' last day. The book covers a number of key issues related to teaching, such as managing classroom environments, holding discussion in large and small classes, and incorporating technology into the classroom. The suggestions and recommendations are presented clearly and succinctly, and the author provides the reader with recommended follow up readings.
- Meyers, S. A., Bender, J., Hill, E. K., & Thomas, S. Y. (2006). How do faculty experience and respond to classroom conflict? *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 18, 180-187.
- This empirical study examined incivility in the college classroom and its associated correlates. All participants in the study were faculty members who reported on levels of conflict they experienced as an instructor, as well as their strategies for managing the conflict, and their teaching styles. The authors reported that conflict in the classroom was unrelated to instructor demographics; however, incivility was related to teaching methods and how the instructors responded to the incivilities.
- Nilson, L. B. (2003). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- This teaching toolbox provides instructors with a breadth of material to assist college instructors in fulfilling their roles as teachers. The content covered in the book is broad, but each point is fleshed out with enough detail to provide the instructor with tools that will improve their teaching. The book is also a handy guide for instructors who need assistance in a particular area of teaching, such as tools for managing incivility, promoting classroom discussion, and welcoming technology into the classroom.
- Svinicki, M., & McKeachie, W. J. (2011). *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (13<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Now in its 13<sup>th</sup> edition, this book may be considered a staple in the college instructor's library. The authors' passion for teaching is evident in this book and

it provides instructors with sage advice from some two of the most respected instructors in college teaching. The book's ability to convey the simplicity of good teaching techniques serves as an excellent resource for improving one's teaching skills. Its timelessness allows instructors to revisit various chapters of the book for reminders on teaching practices that will help instructors succeed in the classroom at any stage of their career.

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