Incivility\(^1\)

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PROLOGUE

Despite our best efforts or because of inappropriate efforts, incivilities between faculty and students occur. Some believe that classroom incivilities are on the rise as a result of a consumer mentality on the part of students. Others blame the problem on ill-prepared and indifferent teachers. Regardless of the reason for incivilities, when they occur they can have devastating effects on faculty self-efficacy and self-concept, hurt morale of both faculty and students, make classroom environments emotionally unsafe, and impede student learning. This manuscript attempts to define and describe incivilities between college faculty and students, identify reasons for uncivil behavior, and offer solutions, based upon research findings, of how to prevent and/or manage uncivil behavior.

INTRODUCTION

A student walks into class ten minutes late, climbs over (and disrupts) four other students, and slams his backpack down on his desk. Another student’s cell phone goes off in the middle of class and rather than leave the room, she proceeds to have a five-minute conversation. After receiving his grade on his midterm exam, a student raises his hand and states belligerently, “This exam sucks and this course sucks.” A student walks into your office without knocking, throws a class paper onto

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your desk and says angrily, “This is ridiculous. Twenty f*ckin’ points off for grammar and spelling? I didn’t know this was a f*ckin’ English class!” In the middle of a lecture, a student stands up and says, “We’re not paying you to read to us and put us to sleep!” and walks out of the class. A female student confronts a male professor in the hall and states, “Is there anything you can think of that I could do to get a better grade?” “Yeah,” he says, “Study harder.” She winks and says, “Come on now, I’m sure you can think of something else.

A professor returns a midterm exam to his class, announces that the average was 53, then states, “You people ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You call yourselves professional students? This is pathetic!” A student knocks on a professor’s office door. The professor abruptly says, “Yes?” The student steps in and politely says, “I would like to make an appointment some time to talk to you about some of the course material. I am very confused.” The professor motions her out the door and says, “See my secretary. She keeps my appointments.” A male professor pulls a female student aside and says, “Are you seriously involved with anyone right now?” “No,” she replies. “Good,” he says and walks away. On the first day of class, a professor walks into the classroom and states, “This is a hard class. I don’t believe in giving A’s and I don’t have a problem with failing every one of you if you can’t keep up.” Another professor tells his students, “If you are looking for entertainment, go to the movies. They don’t reward me to be a good teacher here. They reward me to do research! I don’t keep office hours for this course. If you have problems, see the teaching assistants.”

Those of you who have taught at the college level for any period of time have probably observed or heard about each of the above instances. What all of the examples have in common is that they represent incivilities. Incivilities are a speech or action that is disrespectful or rude(1). What should also be noted is that incivilities are inflicted by both students and teachers. In fact, research confirms that a much higher frequency of incivilities by students occur in classrooms where the teacher has been uncivil or does not establish appropriate boundaries or guidelines right away(2). Moreover, if you go back and read the examples again, they will probably stir up a lot of emotions. Generally speaking, when incivilities are discussed, situations are described, blame is often ascribed, but rarely do people discuss the emotional affect that incivilities can have on the person who has been perpetrated against. The emotional impact of an incivility can be devastating. Incivilities can cause professors to: lose self-esteem and self-confidence in their teaching, lose self-confidence in their research efforts, abandon teaching, become indifferent in the classroom, and fear for their safety (this is especially true for female faculty). For students, incivilities can cause them to: become increasingly uninvolved in a course, become increasingly hostile in the classroom, fear for their safety (this is especially true when boundaries are violated — more on this later), and lose their desire to learn(2).

Have incivilities in the classroom gotten worse or occur more frequently than they used to occur? Kathy Franklin, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Arkansas says, “Historically, what’s happening today isn’t unusual. Are students today different from students ten years ago? Probably, because of demographic changes, consumerism, K-12 experiences. But is this a new trend? No.”(3) What is different, she says is that professors are held in lower esteem today and this seems particularly insulting to many academicians. As a result, many professors “retaliate” with equally insulting behavior(3).

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 the following as a result of a study on classroom incivilities(2), “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 teachers have a great deal of influence on whether incivilities occur in their classrooms.

In addition to the above, it is obvious to many that students will also 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:

- **Irrational beliefs.** Faculty often have beliefs about students that are irrational or not based in reality. These beliefs include the following: students should be attentive, respectful, in awe of my expertise, my authority should be obeyed (blindly), students should follow (and not question) the (my) rules, don’t they know I’m trying to help them, and emotional displays are inappropriate. When students violate these beliefs, faculty often behave in ways that are demeaning to students. Students also have irrational beliefs. Some believe that classes should be fun and exciting all of the time, that exams should be “easy”, and that professors should be available at the whim of the student. Moreover, some students believe that they are “consumers” of education and therefore, they should decide what is important, how the class should be conducted, and that the professor works for them, NOT the university. More on this consumer approach to education later.

- **Inaccurate assessment of student’s prior knowledge.** This may lead to underestimating or overestimating what students’ know. As a result, class sessions may be too basic or too rigorous. In either case, frustration among students may occur and increase the probability of incivilities. Developing a brief exam to assess students’ knowledge prior to commencing a course can save a lot of headaches.

- **More incivilities occur in classrooms with teachers who are less competent and less immediate in their behaviors (of course the converse is also true).** Competence refers to awareness and engaging in prosocial behaviors. Boice reports, “…students decide to resist and misbehave depending largely on two interrelated kinds of teacher behaviors. One is a matter of whether the teacher employs mostly prosocial motivators (e.g., “Do you understand?” and “You can do better”) or antisocial motivators (e.g., threats and guilt induction). The second is about immediacy - the extent to which the teacher gives off verbal and nonverbal signs of warmth, friendliness, and liking (e.g., forward leans, smiles, purposeful gestures, eye contact). With positive motivators and particularly, immediacy, student inclinations to CI drop off dramatically. But without these skills, teachers are seen as cold, uncaring, and incompetent by their students - as deserving of incivilities.”(1) Other low immediacy behaviors included: Fast-paced, non-involving lectures, low or no involvement outside of class, ill-defined or no office hours (or office hours not honored or kept), statements indicating that they do not wish to be bothered outside of class, discouraging questions in class or in some way embarrassing or putting down the questioner (being funny or sarcastic at the student’s expense). Therefore, power and respect in the classroom is relation-
al. Development of the teacher-student relationship is critical to deterring or decreasing incivilities.

- **Both teachers and students are annoyed by:**
  - lateness;
  - early or late stopping of class;
  - cutting or canceling of class;
  - loud, disruptive talking by students in the classroom;
  - rude comments/gestures (this creates both annoyance and uncomfortableness/fear).

- **Students are more likely to exhibit incivilities before or after major exams or projects**

- **Distrust of professors:**
  - see immediacy behaviors above;
  - via surprise quizzes, tests and/or exam items.

- **Boundary violations.** “Boundaries are limits that allow for a safe connection based on the client’s needs. When these limits are altered, what is allowed in the relationship becomes ambiguous. Such ambiguity is often expressed as an intrusion into the sphere of safety. The pain of a violation is frequently delayed, and the violation itself may not be recognized or felt until harmful sequences emerge.”(4)

  We are entrusted with a great deal of power by our students because of our expertise. As a result, they are put in a very vulnerable place. We are entrusted to put their needs ahead of ours. Boundary violations are acts that breach the core intent of the professional-client relationship and as a result, violate or destroy safety. Characteristics of boundary violations include: a reversal of roles (the student is asked to take care of the profession — a professor tells a group of students he is having a difficult time at home with his spouse and asks the students to go easy on him on evaluations), a secret (some privilege given that is kept secret), an indulgence of professional privilege — a line gets crossed or blurred (a professor flirts with a student of the opposite sex or inquires about his/her dating status, or a professor goes out drinking with the students to be their "buddy" rather than their mentor — this situation can be especially confusing to both the professor and student if the students are being graded by the professor that semester and some students now expect different treatment from their new "friend"—we don’t need to be their friend…we need to be their mentors…there is a huge difference), and a double bind (a professor asks a bright student, who admires the professor, to work with him/her on a research project…the professor publishes a paper and the student gets no credit for the hard work). In any case, the safety that is needed to maintain a healthy power differential is destroyed or compromised.

  It is important to note that boundary violations can occur in both directions. That is, students can also violate boundaries through incivility, acts of aggression, physical violence, sexual innuendo, and verbal assault. What is clear is that when boundaries get violated, classrooms or student learning can become dysfunctional.

- **Student beliefs about consumerism.** A recent trend involves the student as a consumer or customer. The assumption here is that students are paying for a product — a degree, therefore, they are in the best position to know what they want and to decide whether the education they are getting is relevant and worthwhile. “The student-customer model seduces students into believing that they know what is best for them.”(5) This consumerist model fails on a number of counts. First, a customer purchase does not obligate one to be accountable to the public. Yet, pharmacists are precisely that once they are conferred a degree and pass the board exams. Unlike a consumer, paying for a degree (the product) does not entitle the student to getting one. The consumer model also assumes that consumer is already knowledgeable about the product. That is certainly not true of students.

  The mentality of this model creates problems in the classroom at numerous levels. One, students believe that they are owed something. This lends itself to uncivil behavior. It places pressure on the faculty to satisfy the consumer and thus, lower standards. It allows students to blame someone else for their failures, especially when grades become goals. It allows students to believe that they have a right to pressure faculty for better grades and in general, promotes an anti-scholarly approach to higher education(5). The important point here is that faculty need not “cave-in” to this mentality and lower their standards in order to please the “consumer.” If necessary, time should be taken to address why a college education is not the same as a commodity purchase(5).

- **Large classrooms**
  - 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
    - 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 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 box at 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 or how they will appear to classmates in a large class
    - **Weekly Evaluations,** (can be done each lecture or once a week) (see Appendix A for an example)
      - These allow for frequent feedback so that small problems don’t become large ones. Again, allows for feedback and responsiveness in order to build rapport.

  - Particularly, in large classrooms, the question comes up, when an incivility occurs, should I embarrass the student or not embarrass the student? There is no clear right or wrong answer here. Shaming or angry public embarrassment of students in a large class does have the ability or tendency to antagonize the entire class. Therefore, asking to see the student after class is one solution. “Gracious public embarrassment” can work. One professor uses this for students who arrive late to class(6). The student is asked to come down to the front of the room and becomes
part of the discussion before he/she takes his/her seat. The student is called to the front of the class, told what the discussion is about, and asked his/her opinion. The student is never shamed or chided, however, the experience has discouraged students from walking in late. It is done with humor and caring, so it works. The student’s opinion is valued. For students talking during class, one professor looks directly at the perpetrators and says, “You’re probably talking about something really interesting related to the lecture, and maybe we can talk more about this after class, but for now, let’s focus on what we’re doing here.”(6) An alternative would be to ask if the students wanted to share what they were discussing and if the answer is “no”, then to calmly say, “OK, then let’s focus on what we’re doing here.”

### TYPES OF INCIVILITY

There are primarily two types of incivilities; passive and active. Passive incivilities include inattention, lateness, mild disruptions (shuffling papers, notebooks, back packs, 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, 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**
- Make direct eye contact with the student(s) involved.
- Stop talking, don’t start until they’re with you again.
- Move to that part of the class.
- Direct a question to someone next to the student talking.
- Get students actively involved in the classroom - don’t lecture continuously without asking questions or assigning small tasks.
- 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 noticed that you were talking on a cell phone during class. I don’t like that kind of disruption in my class. It is uncomfortable for me and distracting. I would appreciate it if you make sure this doesn’t happen again.”) Do not make this a personal attack (Your talking on the cell phone in class is disrespectful and completely unprofessional. It better not happen again!).
- Ask, don’t accuse - make it a friendly conversation to find out what is wrong.

**To Address Overt or Active Incivilities**
- Listen respectfully to student complaints - don’t become defensive - reflect back your understanding of the problem - sort issues, when necessary - for example, a course that is team-taught is very disorganized. A student sends an e-mail to one of the course coordinators (and copies all of her classmates) and states, “Are we going to have a review session in this worthless course?” The faculty member e-mails the student back and sets up a meeting. At the meeting the faculty member asks the student what problems she is having in the course. The student identifies many instances where the course has been disorganized and instructions have been unclear to students. The faculty member listens carefully and then agrees that the course has been very chaotic, at times. The student says she is very angry about this. The faculty member assures the student that being angry is understandable, but makes it clear that expressing anger in hostile and disrespectful ways is not appropriate.

### 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 B).
- Consider the development of an Honor Code and Honor Board at your school that defines violations as including uncivil behavior (see Appendix C).
- Re-examine your classroom - some questions you should
ask yourself (or your students):

- “Is my classroom boring?” - do I actively involve the students or do I spend a lot of time “pontificating.”
- “Is the material covered necessary?” - is the material I cover necessary to the student’s mastery of the subject? If not, discard it.
- “Am I aloof or defensive?” - studies confirm that professors who are aloof and defensive and not respectful to students have a higher amount of incivility in their classrooms.
- “Am I complacent about uncivil or disruptive behavior?”
- “Do I get feedback from students regularly throughout the quarter or semester to address or head-off problems.” This can be done be identify 3-4 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 (see Appendix A) to see how students are doing.

SUMMARY

Incivilities can be destructive and disruptive to learning. It is vital that faculty examine their role in the existence of classroom incivilities. It is important for new professors to receive training and an orientation on how to handle incivilities in the classroom. Teaching at the college level can be an enormously rewarding experience. Incivilities can turn this experience into one that is fraught with fear, anxiety, and apprehension. It can destroy or prevent the development of a valuable faculty member. It can also harm a bright and sensitive student. It is a topic that needs to be discussed openly and honestly among faculty. It is my hope that this paper will stimulate that discussion.

References

1. Teaching Resources Center, The College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University, http://www.indiana.edu/~teaching

APPENDIX A. WEEKLY CLASS ASSESSMENT FORM

Teacher’s Name __________________________ Date ________

TOPIC ________________________________________

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree or Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

COMMENTS ABOUT THIS SESSION OR THE COURSE:

APPENDIX B

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 inconvenient 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, inconvenient 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, 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 C

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 any material 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 Purposefully 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.

Recommended Readings and Resources


11. Teaching Resources Center, The College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University, http://www.indiana.edu/~teaching