

Promoting Civility and Professionalism in the Classroom

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Abstract

At UNC Charlotte, civility in the classroom, mutual respect, and student professionalism are expected goals. Faculty and students should work together to foster the best learning experience. Establishing classroom rules and expectations early in the course promotes civility and helps students develop professional skills. In this chapter we examine ways to encourage civility and promote professionalism in the classroom. We begin by clearly defining classroom civility and introduce faculty to the philosophy of civility. We then offer management strategies for faculty to build into their curriculum and encourage in everyday classroom practices. Campus resources are also offered to assist faculty who need to be aware of the potential, and management of, threatening behaviors. Promoting professional behavior is also discussed.

Introduction

“If we can invite ourselves and our colleagues, our students, staff and administration to participate fully in this community of learning, learning to acknowledge and value all the different ways of contributing to it, then civility and common good will surely follow.” -Anya Peterson Royce

“Civility costs nothing, and buys everything.” - Mary Wortley Montagu, English writer

Part of UNC Charlotte’s Vision and Values statement articulates a commitment to equip students with “ethical principles” and “professional skills.” Encouraging civil behavior and promoting professional skill development in our classes are important ways faculty can help fulfill this vision. From a variety of perspectives, civility is seen as a key component of a successful community. Most instructors would agree that civility is essential to a positive learning environment, although faculty may differ in what they perceive as uncivil behavior. By setting clear guidelines, faculty can play an active role in promoting civility among students and discouraging negative behavior. In addition to enhancing the learning environment, promoting civility will also help our students develop professional skills that employers value. Indeed, recent studies and government reports highlight the array of interpersonal and “soft skills” (i.e., professional skills) that employers hope college graduates will possess. In this chapter, we build on the [University Mission Statement](#) by providing practical tools and resources for promoting civility, managing incivility in the classroom, and helping students develop professional skills.

Defining Civility in the Classroom

Simply defined, civility is polite and courteous behavior within social situations. It requires individuals to be patient, attentive, and to observe the agreed-upon rules of social exchange. However, civility is much more than a simple definition. Professor P.M. Forni, co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project, describes civility in this way:

“Civility means a great deal more than just being nice to one another. It is complex and encompasses learning how to connect successfully and live well with others, developing thoughtfulness, and fostering effective self-expression and communication. Civility includes courtesy, politeness, mutual respect, fairness, good manners, as well as a matter of good health.”(P.M. Forni, *Choosing Civility*)

College instructors will agree that civility in the classroom is key for a successful learning experience. However, complete consensus as to what civility looks like in the classroom is a complex matter. A recent survey of faculty at Indiana University, for example, found that few faculty see chewing gum in class as “always” uncivil (5 percent) and nearly all faculty (over 95 percent) see harassing comments or threats of physical harm as “always” uncivil. Responses are much more mixed, however, when it comes to whether sleeping in class or arriving late constitutes uncivil behavior ([Center for Survey Research 2000](#)). As a result, it is important that faculty are clear about expectations regarding classroom behavior.

Despite these variations, we have taken an approach that looks at what civility is at its very least and what civility is at its very most. From there, we have formulated a baseline that is in concordance with UNC Charlotte’s policies. This approach required careful consideration of the ways in which we define civility, a critical survey of recent literature on civility in the classroom, and consideration of real-life scenarios. From

there, we crafted classroom management strategies that stymie incivility and promote courteous and respectful exchanges within and outside the classroom.

A Philosophy of Civility

The word politeness derives from the Greek word *polis* which means city. Similarly, the word civility derives from the Latin word *civis* which also means city. Both words, politeness and civility, are connected to the notion that a community's very existence, survival, and growth are dependent upon harmonious relationships between citizens, relationships which serve as positive life propagating forces.

These understandings of civic virtue are not limited to the West but can be found in one form or fashion in multiple cultures. Eastern philosophies such as Confucianism greatly stress civility as a foundational virtue for a harmonious society. Master Kongfuzi (Confucius) understood civility as the ability "To subdue oneself and return to propriety (*li*)... Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement that is contrary to propriety..." (*Analects* XII:1). Master Kongfuzi understood propriety as conforming to a set of standards as well as cultivating right relationships. He cited five such relationships and one was the relationship between teacher and student. Teachers have a set of responsibilities to their students and vice versa. When these responsibilities are met, harmony ensues and spills into the greater society.

Indigenous societies also stress the importance of mutually respectful relationships between all persons within a community. Each society has created unique codes of conduct that aim to sustain reciprocity and balance within the community.

However, the common thread within indigenous lifeways is an insistence that each person within a community has value, power and place, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Adherence to those roles and responsibilities keeps chaos at bay. The Navajo concept of *hozho* illustrates this belief: *Hozho* translates as the “beauty way” but it also means the order of the cosmos, peace, balance, and wellbeing. *Hozho* also requires a person to be part of the world outside one’s own self by appropriately linking the self to community. To walk in *hozho* is possible only when people show the appropriate forms of respect to each other and in this way maintain the balance of the universe. The alternative to *hozho* is *hocxho*, which means the “ugly way.” *Hocxho* manifests itself in various forms of chaos when relationships are not properly respected. As we can see, civility is a perennial concern, ubiquitous in cultures past and present; it remains a core component for any well-functioning community.

Why Do We Have Incivility in the Classroom?

Media, The “Me” Generation, and Hyper-Consumer Mentality

Many media outlets promote or are perceived by viewers to promote uncivil behavior. In the age of Facebook, Instagram and other social media outlets which are instantly accessed with a smart phone, many people are increasingly disconnected from face-to-face interactions where politeness is always crucial for appropriate engagement.

Boredom

The average student will begin to lose focus and attention after about twenty minutes of lecture. Breaking up lecture material with short class activities can make all the difference as to whether you will lose this student for the remainder of the class.

Class activities can also deepen student engagement and in that way re-direct the student back into a lecture once it is resumed.

Subject-Object Relationship Between Instructor and Student

Instructors often present themselves as the subject (the one doing something, as in lecturing) and perceive students as objects (those being lectured to). Although no one in the classroom may be fully aware of this presentation and perception, the effects can be palpable. Students can easily sink into the role of a passive object and not feel connected to the class. This lack of connection may contribute to instances of incivility. A class that promotes the agency and value of everyone in the class may be better protected against rude behaviors. Using an active learning, team-based approach creates interconnected relationships where the subject-object role is interchanged.

Instructor Rudeness and Apathy

Let's face it: sometimes instructors answer student rudeness with a rudeness of their own. It is imperative for instructors to model civil behavior. At other times, instructors may find themselves discouraged with the direction of their classes and may inadvertently project apathy towards students and even about their class material. For a variety of reasons, most, if not all, instructors at some point will feel jaded or unenthusiastic with the classroom experience. It is important for instructors to self-reflect and re-group on a periodic basis.

Lack of Clear Directives

When students are not clear about what is expected of them, their frustration may manifest into uncivil behavior. Instructors also lose credibility when directions for

assignments are unclear. Faculty should be mindful that directions that make perfect sense to them may not translate successfully to students.

Strategies to Prevent and Manage Incivility

Prevention Strategies

Familiarize yourself with UNC Charlotte’s classroom policies. There are a variety of resources on campus, including documents from UNC Charlotte’s Legal Office, that address issues related to classroom management and student conduct. The list below includes some of these resources.

- [Civility in the Classroom: Practical Advice for Faculty Members ...](#)
- [Basic Legal Guidelines for Setting Classroom Policies | Office of ...](#)
- [Classroom Policies and Practices | Office of Legal Affairs | UNC ...](#)
- [Guidance on the Enforceability of Classroom Policies and Practices ...](#)
- [Relevant Cases on Academic Freedom in the Classroom | Office of ...](#)

Introduce the importance of civility during the first days of class. Let students know that the UNC Charlotte community also understands the importance of civic virtue. In terms of promoting civil and ethical behavior, the Dean of Students Office defines the characteristics of a “[Noble Niner.](#)” This list of virtues was created by UNC Charlotte students to promote a culture of integrity. Faculty might consider how they can encourage students to develop and exhibit integrity, respect, accountability, compassion, etc. In particular, modeling such behavior for new college students and helping them aspire to these standards is an important part of new student induction.

Explicitly establish roles and ground rules on the first days. Let students know what types of behaviors they are expected to exhibit. Be specific and create documents or tip sheets that they can reference on Moodle and within the syllabus. Likewise, let them know what they can expect from you. The UNC Charlotte Legal Department has created a number of [Suggested Standard Syllabus Policies](#) to include in your syllabus. They are statements on a wide variety of classroom expectations and behaviors on the part of instructors and students alike. Included are policies that address tardiness, notification of class expectations, prevention of mobile device misconduct, mutual respect, the integrity code, etc. Each policy opens with a statement of a position endorsed by UNC Charlotte on the requisite topic and then outlines possible consequences for violations of the policy. Adopt or adapt the appropriate policies for your class and share them with students through the syllabus and your Moodle page. Also check with your own college or department about specific policies and practices they endorse. Many, such as the College of Education, offer specific guides which are available online. Be sure to highlight the policies you choose during the first days of class.

Provide students with real life examples of unacceptable behavior. Give students real life examples of incivility and share with them how you have dealt with such situations in the past. This way, they will know that you are serious about appropriately dealing with incivility without having to find out first hand. You may also include a sense of how civil behavior may be rewarded.

Model civil behavior. Show students what civility looks like through your own behaviors.

Implement active learning, team-based approaches and diversity within the curriculum. Keep students interested and engaged with a diverse curriculum and an active learning, team-based style of teaching. Diversity and team activities will foster a sense of inclusion and class community and curb student boredom. The Center for Teaching and Learning offers periodic workshops and seminars and a host of printed materials that help instructors re-craft their class pedagogy.

Management Strategies

Know how to effectively deal with classroom disruptions. UNC Charlotte offers a [Classroom Disruption tip sheet](#) that inventories disruptive behaviors and groups them into three levels of seriousness. This classroom disruption flier also provides instructors with advice about responding to the disruptions as well as the directive to document such events. Although the tip sheet is for instructors, sharing it with students may impress the seriousness of incivility upon students as well as the consequences of such behaviors. Knowing that instructors are expected to document student disruptions will also discourage incivility.

Use non-verbal cues. With certain uncivil behaviors (e.g., side conversations, use of cell phones) a non-verbal cue may be enough to arrest the situation without disrupting the class. Establishing eye-contact, standing next to the offending student(s), or pausing the lecture or activity may be all the situation requires.

Use verbal cues. When non-verbal cues fail, quickly and patiently say something. Keep an even tone, free of anger, and ask the student(s) to desist from the disruptive behavior. You may remind them of the importance of civility in the classroom. Keep your comment short and move on. If the behavior continues, ask the students to leave. You may add that they will not be allowed to return to class until they meet with you during office hours for a conversation.

Be consistent and follow through. Without consistency and follow through, you will lose credibility. Students will assume that you are not serious and will push boundaries. If you keep letting negative behaviors slide, you may find yourself imploding when you reach an internal breaking point. By taking control at the onset of uncivil behaviors you will be better prepared to respond with patience and civility. UNC Charlotte offers examples of scenarios that you may encounter while managing incivility here: [Managing Incivility: 10 Video Scenarios](#).

Do not take it personally. Most of the time, uncivil behavior on the part of students is not about you. Taking things personally may inspire resentment and bitterness within yourself which will make modeling civil behavior more difficult. If you believe certain behaviors have personal intentions, simply ask to speak with the student during your office hours. Patiently ask the student if they have a problem with you as an instructor. If they respond in the affirmative then engage the student in a conversation about their perception of you. Assess whether or not their problem is legitimate and whether or not changes can be made to accommodate the student's perceptions. Point out that instead of personal attacks, a conversation during office hours is more

productive. If they respond in the negative then specifically point out why their behavior was construed as a personal attack. Have a conversation about the situation. Most reasonable students will understand that they will need to engage in civil behavior if they expect to remain and succeed in a class, especially after a conversation with their instructor.

Encourage student emotional and physical well being. Students that consistently act out in class may be manifesting serious emotional or physical problems. If you are able to gauge that a student may be experiencing such problems, you may want to ask the student after class if everything is okay. If they reveal that they are experiencing real personal problems, direct them to the Counseling Center and let them know that counseling can make a world of difference. You are not expected to provide counseling and may not be qualified to offer such help. Simply leave it to the professionals. At the very least, the student will know that you have a genuine concern for their wellbeing. Knowing this may encourage more respectful exchanges in class with you and fellow students.

Be mindful of your wellbeing. At the same time, you may be experiencing personal problems. Be mindful of your own humanity and the possibility of unintentionally projecting your own problems within the class. UNC Charlotte offers an [Employee Assistance Program](#) with counseling possibilities as well as resources for personal problems through the [UNC Charlotte Counseling Center](#).

Promote and participate in UNC Charlotte's Civility Week. Beyond discouraging harassment and other negative behaviors, faculty can play a role in promoting civility

among students. Participating in campus events related to [UNC Charlotte Civility Week](#), sponsored by the Multicultural Resource Center, may be especially beneficial for new college students. In addition to Civility Week, the Multicultural Resource Center has other resources that promote understanding across the types of social differences that often contribute to incivility on campus and in the classroom

Management Strategies for Common Uncivil Scenarios

Silence side conversations. Immediately let the offending students know that the behavior will not be tolerated through non-verbal cues. Looking directly at the students may be all that you need to do. If not, using "the Look" that many of us remember from our childhood may do the trick. "The Look" is often accompanied by a sigh, a period of silence, and crossed arms. Walking towards the students and standing next to them may also be an option if you can easily move around in the classroom. When non-verbal cues do not work, take a breath (or a few breaths) if your heart rate begins to increase. It is essential that you stay in control and politely let the students know that you and the rest of class would appreciate it if they stopped talking out of turn.

Disallow abuse of communication devices. Politely tell the student to put away the mobile device. If the same student continues to inappropriately use the mobile device, gently let the student know that you will have to jot their name down and start a tally of how many infractions they incur through out the semester. A set number of infractions may result in a loss of participation points.

Discourage sleeping in class. If sleeping in class bothers you, then gently wake the student. You may allow the student to leave the room, to grab a coffee or other caffeinated beverage, or to visit the bathroom to freshen up with a splash of water on the face. The embarrassment from being woken up may stymie future episodes. If it becomes a continual problem, you may let the student know that consistent sleeping will result in the loss of participation points.

Address consistent tardiness. Simply ask the student why they are consistently late. The top two reasons will be a long commute and trouble waking up in the morning. Despite the fact that the solutions to these problems are obvious, offer them to the student. You may respond with a measure of sympathy (without sarcasm) and then the solution: "It seems that the only way to get here on time is to leave your home earlier" or "You may want to consider going to bed earlier or changing certain aspects of your lifestyle that may cause difficulty with waking up." Hearing the solutions verbalized may have an actual effect on student behavior. At the very least, the student knows that you have taken notice of their lateness. You may also point out that this kind of tardiness may result in the loss of participation points.

Prohibit profanity. As a general rule of thumb, it is best to disallow profanity within the classroom. Some instructors may allow it since we are all adults in the classroom. The fact of the matter is that many adults find profanity to be offensive. Furthermore, allowing profanity within discussions may signal to students a lack of boundaries within the class and serve as a gateway for a whole host of other incivilities.

Effectively cease offensive language and comments. Many times students inadvertently say things or use words without intending to cause offense. We all come from different places and some of may not be aware that things we learned or phrases that were used in the home may be offensive to others. **Do not react** but do question such comments. Explain how the comment may sound to someone else. Use the instance as a teaching moment.

If a student is intentionally belittling a specific identity (racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, etc.) ask the student to desist immediately and to see you during your office hours. Remind the student of [UNC Charlotte's statement on mutual respect](#):

"I will conduct this class in an atmosphere of mutual respect. I encourage your active participation in class discussions. Each of us may have strongly differing opinions on the various topics of class discussions. The conflict of ideas is encouraged and welcome. The orderly questioning of the ideas of others, including mine, is similarly welcome. However, I will exercise my responsibility to manage the discussions so that ideas and argument can proceed in an orderly fashion. You should expect that if your conduct during class discussions seriously disrupts the atmosphere of mutual respect I expect in this class, you will not be permitted to participate further." ([Suggested Standard Syllabus Policies | Office of Legal Affairs](#))

Beyond Incivility: Threatening Behaviors

Communication of Threats/Sexual Harassment/Violence

A variety of campus resources and statements clearly outline behavioral expectations for UNC Charlotte students. Faculty can play a role in helping students understand and upholding standards of conduct. At the very least, students should be aware of the [The Code of Student Responsibility](#) and understand the definition and consequences of sexual harassment as well as grievance procedures for those subject to harassing behavior. Particularly for new college students, understanding these guidelines may help them avoid making mistakes with devastating consequences.

The Counseling Center also offers an [Interpersonal Violence Resource Guide](#) that defines stalking, sexual assault and other forms of such abuse. The guide also provides assistance to victims of such acts. Finally, any threatening behaviors need to be documented and reported to the appropriate campus officials. UNC Charlotte's [Fighting Words Harassment](#) policy offers guidance in such matters. The following links have more information regarding threatening behaviors:

- [Stalking Awareness Fact Sheet | Police & Public Safety](#)
- [Sexual Harassment Policy and Grievance Procedures](#)

Promoting Professionalism in the Classroom

In addition to cultivating civil behavior in the classroom, we also want students to develop professional skills that will serve them in the workplace and throughout their lives. As mentioned above, UNC Charlotte's Vision and Values Statement includes

"professional skills" as something we strive to help students acquire during their college experience.

The importance of professionalism receives considerable media attention when the Center for Professional Excellence at York College of Pennsylvania releases the results of its [National Professionalism Survey](#) each year. Based on the 2013 survey, for example, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that many new college graduates lack basic professional skills such as "appropriate appearance, punctuality, regular attendance, honesty, attentiveness and sticking with a task through completion." Many of these skills remain implicit in the college curriculum, but there are ways faculty can intentionally promote professionalism in their classes. There are a number of resources on campus that address the range of professional, or "soft," skills that will help students find and keep employment after graduation.

The Career Center

The Career Center at UNC Charlotte offers a variety of services to help students connect with jobs, volunteer opportunities and internships. Helping students become acquainted with those services is an important part of new student induction. In addition, the Career Center offers workshops aimed at developing skills that will enable students to demonstrate professionalism as they transition to graduate school or the labor force. The Career Center maintains a [blog](#) that addresses a variety of employment issues. One blog post directly addressed the [professional skills that employers desire from our graduates](#). Among the most important are the communication skills—

speaking, listening, and writing—that our courses routinely cultivate, but key professional competencies also include:

- Teamwork skills
- Interpersonal skills (i.e., able to get along with others)
- Work ethic
- Time management
- Skills in multitasking
- Ability to meet deadlines
- Professional/business etiquette
- Problem-solving skills
- Ability to teach/train others
- Professional attitude and demeanor
- Analytical skills

Many of the professional skills on the list include things that are a routine part of the classes faculty teach. Helping students see how their course work is connected to skills that future employers value may motivate students to develop those skills in college.

Additional Resources

There are many resources available to help students think about the types of skills they will need on a job. In addition to the University Career Center, some colleges on campus offer additional career services to their majors. Some professional associations also provide information about the skills college graduates should focus on developing. For example, the [Association for Psychological Science](#) lists skills such as:

- Monitoring one's own emotional expressions and responsiveness (e.g., showing interest in and motivation toward the task at hand)
- Maintaining composure when challenged
- Speaking and writing in a manner appropriate to the audience (e.g., different levels of formality in different contexts)
- Being receptive to feedback and constructive criticism (e.g., a willingness to learn and improve)
- Being aware of personal responsibility as a listener or audience member
- Respecting others' professional position, particularly those in authority (e.g., referencing people formally unless instructed otherwise)
- Being on time
- Being prepared for the task at hand
- Being courteous to everyone, regardless of rank or position
- Appreciating services received and expressing that appreciation
- Making proper introductions
- Dressing appropriately

Our classes can be designed to encourage students, particularly in their first year, to practice and improve on these skills. The online workshop below provides faculty with clear ideas about how to define, assess, and help students reflect on their professionalism. It offers concrete suggestions for making professionalism part of the curriculum in college courses based on the [US Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills \(SCANS\)](#).

Helpful Publications

In addition to resources that help faculty build professional skills into their courses, there are a number of publications that target students. For example, Staley and Staley's (2015) *Focus on College and Career Success* encourages students to focus on the professional skills they can develop during college rather than viewing it simply as a hurdle to clear on the road to their future careers. In the book, they focus on ten things that employers hope students will learn during college (Staley 2015: 322-324):

- Develop reliability, diligence, and consistency *today*.
- Make knowledgeable decisions.
- Develop a problem-solving mindset.
- Polish your communication skills.
- Be a team player.
- Follow the “unwritten rules” as well as the official ones.
- Respect those research skills you’re learning.
- Maintain your math skills, too.
- Be willing to go the extra mile.
- Develop discipline.

Conclusion

As we have discussed, civility in the classroom is of the utmost importance for encouraging a healthy, peaceful learning environment for students. By utilizing the available resources, faculty can do their part to ensure that students understand the importance of civility in the classroom. Instructors can also examine themselves and

their curriculum to determine how they can better promote civility and professionalism in the classroom and in UNC Charlotte's community.

References

Staley, Constance. 2015. *Focus on College Success* (3rd edition). Wadsworth Publishing.