Classroom Decorum: What's Happening and Does it Matter?
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Civility or Chaos?

Historically, there are convincing reports and descriptions of problems in the classroom suggesting that incivility is not a new trend. However, there are also indicators that student behavior is somehow different from what it was years ago. What accounts for the observed change in student behavior and the increase in incidences of classroom incivilities? The outside world necessarily intrudes upon what was once the sanctity of the classroom. Rudeness and incivility are increasingly common in the real world, as demonstrated in the workplace, on our highways, and in the public schools. Regardless of faculty attempts to minimize the impact of the "real world" in the college classroom, students are raised on multiple modes of stimulation, multitasking, and instant gratification that promote immediate and interactive feedback. The classroom of old, based primarily on lectures and devoid of technology, has become obsolete. Is there more to the demise of classroom decorum than changes in teaching styles and the infringement of technology and societal norms into the classroom?   The following section will include a brief history of classroom etiquette before we take a closer look at current issues.

The Current Status of Decorum

Is the college classroom simply a microcosm of society and a place where nothing should come as a surprise? What behaviors are occurring there that are of concern to many faculty and are interfering with effective teaching? As educators, we read about and share experiences in the college classroom that suggest an increase in rudeness and a demise of basic civility. Is common courtesy no longer expected? Is it that classroom rudeness is associated with a generalized decline in respect for authority? Perhaps incivility is a cultural phenomenon that is being created and perpetuated by ineffective child rearing skills and poor parenting. It is possible that current difficulties with classroom etiquette and decorum involve not only the problematic students but also problematic parents. This situation might also be exacerbated by faculty and their sometimes ineffective management of the classroom.

Some educators take the position that current problems in the classroom are a relatively recent development. Others are convinced that classroom difficulties are a continuation of old ones, extending back hundreds of years. Whether new or old, dealing with issues involving classroom etiquette is present throughout the system of higher education. Faculty is more often asking for assistance in how to deal with rude and disruptive students because these occurrences interfere with teaching and learning.

In addition to issues associated with basic etiquette and courtesy there are also more frequent behaviors that include breaches in classroom rules via intrusions of technology including cell phones, text messaging, ipods, and computer browsing. Intrusions related to use of those devices exist in addition to the reading of newspapers, chatting, sleeping, or eating that all preceded the more recent electronic intrusions. Effective teaching and learning are dependent on the transmission of information and discussion requiring listening, thought, and active discussion. Those activities are very difficult to accomplish in combination with technological interruptions, ineffective classroom management, and rude or discourteous behavior by students.

"Misbehavior" is not a new thing!

A review of the literature related to classroom decorum and student etiquette provides convincing historical information establishing the fact that problems on campus and in the classroom have existed for hundreds of years during which professors have complained about student rudeness and incivility. However, many of today's students tend to demonstrate an increased lack of respect for not only each other but especially for authority and it is this lack of respect that often causes the most concern. Might this change be just a normal progression along the continuum of acceptable societal behavior?

Historically, there is a variety of reports describing student conflict in response to their anger with their educational institutions as well as descriptions of acts of disrespect and incivility directed at faculty. Holton (1995) wrote that "conflict in the classroom has been a part of higher education since its inception" (pg. 11) and provided examples of behavioral prototypes of incivility dating back to Rome. There are also reports that in the 13th century the University of Bologna was established in response to conflicts among

students, faculty, merchants, and politicians (Holton, 1995; Schneider, 1998). Holton (1995) referred to recorded instances that described students who physically attacked the professors when their grades did not meet their expectations. Also during the 13th century a bishop in the Episcopal Court of Paris was quoted as describing his students the following way: "They attend classes but make no effort to learn anything!" (Holton, 1995, pg. 13). That was over 800 years ago and we hear the same comment being made today.

Adding to the historical record describing student incivility in the classroom, Dechter (2007) added, "Of course, bemoaning the ill-mannered antics of college students is a tradition as old as academia itself" (pg.3). In the mid-16th century, the president of the Bavarian University of Ingolstadt and a future saint, Peter Canisius, complained to Rome of "barbarian packs of students…roaming the streets.... blowing horns and acting like a bunch of drunken madmen" (pg. 2). These remarks resemble those currently made of students describing their celebration following an athletic victory!

Holton (1995) reminded the reader that Yale was founded in 1701 because of student driven conflict. Over a century later, in the 1820s, records describe the Bread and Butter Rebellion at Yale which started over dissatisfaction with food in the dining hall and resulted in students' refusal to attend classes. Holton (1995) reminds us that "Open discussion, free thought, and critical thinking – all hallmarks of the academy – also are precursors to conflict. And so conflict in institutions of higher education is inevitable" (pg. 16). Dechter (2007) noted that when compared with the past, "the difference today is that faculty complaints are not about acts of intentional rebellion, whether political sit-ins or post-adolescent partying, but about being treated as mere service providers in a consumer transaction, neither automatically feared or revered" (pg. 3). Perhaps student behavior has changed in that "rebellion" has been placed by mere "incivility" and disrespect. Or, instead of rebellious behavior directed at the institution we now have rude behavior directed at faculty.

In his memoir "Teacher Man" (2005), Frank McCourt, after thirty years teaching high school in New York City, wrote about his first day of school as a new teacher and the warning that he was provided about the students he was to face:

> "The professor at New York University warned us about our teaching days ahead. He said first impressions are crucial. He said, the way you meet and greet your first class might determine the course of your whole career. Your whole career. They're watching you. You're watching them. You're dealing with American teenagers, a dangerous species, and they'll show you no mercy. They'll take your measure and they'll decide what to do with you. You think you're in control? Think again. They're like heat-seeking missiles. When they go after you they're following a primal instinct. It is the function of the young to get rid of their elders, to make room on the planet. You know that, don't you? The Greeks knew it. Read the Greeks". (pgs. 39-40).

That scenario occurred over a half century ago describing a New York City high school!   If misbehavior and incivility are not new, perhaps it is the cause or source of incivility that is different. Change is inevitable. One needs to examine some of the possible etiological reasons for a decline in civility and an increase in rudeness as examined from a 21st century perspective.

The Decline of Decorum: Are Students Less Civil?

According to Young (2003) there is a "culture clash" between faculty and their students that includes differences between the two groups in attitudes and expectations. Perhaps what professors expect of students, in terms of effort and behavior, is not consistent with what current students expect, both in terms of faculty and of themselves. If this is the case there are bound to be problems in the classroom. Differences in attitudes and expectations in academia are one thing but where do rudeness and disrespect fit into this problem? Are there significant differences between the generations in terms of manners, decency, and sense of community? If rudeness begets rudeness then civility should beget civility. If one demonstrates good manners and common decency then why do we see so much rudeness and a decline in classroom etiquette? Our society, our culture, has indeed changed in the past twenty years or so. Let's examine some of the changes.

There appear to be a combination of societal variables that have resulted in the decreased value put on manners and respectful interactions.   It takes minimal effort and little time to observe the decrease in values and moral behavior in this country. There is a documented increase in TV violence and the increasingly amoral nature found in all types of entertainment; TV, videos, electronic games, music, etc.   Our children consistently bombarded with these media based influences.

One can readily observe a generalized decrease in respect and courtesy towards one another, and for authority in particular. There also appears to be a decrease in the sense of responsibility for oneself and one's behaviors.   The generalized lack of individual responsibility is then conveyed to our children. Our overcrowded urban environment and the pace of life make it easier to become "anonymous" in a crowd, in the community, and on the highways. Anonymity makes it easier to behave poorly. We have been experiencing a decreased sense of community and no longer have the benefit of neighbors who keep an eye out for our children and help maintain certain standards of behavior.

Although an increase in population density increases anonymity, that alone is not sufficient to explain our tolerance for incivility. To feel a sense of anonymity allows one to become increasingly self centered, which is even easier today given the isolation one can obtain via use of technology. Our materialistic society seems to place an increasingly greater importance on "things" than on people. A consumer mentality shared by many current students and even their parents, along with the high cost of college, combine to

place expectations on university professors to act as service providers, delivering what has been paid for by the student or parents. The fast pace of American life discourages thoughtfulness, patience and tolerance for one another. Expectations that students take time to reflect in the classroom, to take time to thoughtfully listen, think, and discuss, are counter to society's fast pace and desire for instant gratification.

Clayton (2007) suggested that parents are obsessed with the self esteem of their children and are overly tolerant of behaviors that simply were not acceptable in the past. There is a decreased emphasis placed on teaching etiquette and personal responsibility to our children. What we are seeing in the classroom is a reflection of our society; fast pace, a lack of civility, and tolerance for rudeness. Add to that the differences in attitudes, motivations, and expectations that exist between the faculty and the students and we have the formula for significant classroom differences and conflict.

The Impact of Incivility

Any textbook that is used by education majors will no doubt have a chapter on classroom management and another on behavioral theories of development. The reason is that teachers have to be able to effectively manage a classroom before teaching and learning can occur. Teaching cannot be effective in a classroom that is in chaos or, to a lesser degree, where there are frequent problems with decorum and civility. Behavior problems and incidents of incivility negatively impact both teaching and learning. When this happens, student grades, learning, and achievement will be adversely affected.

If one is inclined to believe that the college classroom is a reflection of societal norms, then one can expect students to treat it as such. That is, if rudeness and incivility are present in the home and community they will resurface in the class room. As noted by Feldman (2001) "Classroom incivility is any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere" (pg. 137). A lack of classroom decorum impedes and interferes with the cooperation that is needed between faculty and students in order for learning to occur effectively.

No doubt faculty sometimes contributes inadvertently to their own classroom management difficulties by simply trying to ignore incidents of rudeness or incivility. As Feldman (2001) noted, faculty erroneously tend to overlook some of the low level acts of classroom incivility in the hope they will go away. However, failure to address these actions appears to condone them, sending a message that these behaviors, this incivility, can be repeated. Faculty difficulties managing classroom etiquette fall along a continuum from those who seldom have any difficulties to those who have problems with nearly every class. Feldman (2001) describes the "BWOM (big, white, older, male) influence" (pg. 139) suggesting faculty who meet those criteria will experience fewer problems with classroom management than those who do not. He noted, "If you do not have any of these four characteristics, you are not predestined for a challenge. However, the dice are loaded against you" (pg. 139). Unfortunately, even some BWOMs experience problems with classroom management.

Students who choose education as their major are taught that the best predictor of learning is "engagement time" which occurs only when the student is actively involved in processing information. The likelihood that this will occur when there are ongoing classroom management problems is extremely slim. To learn effectively students must be able to focus their attention and to think without interruption. However, too much classroom time is spent by the teacher addressing behavior problems rather than teaching.

Some Civil Solutions to Incivility

This writer supports the recommendations of Feldman (2001), who advocates use of basic behavioral principles to increase civility and effectively manage a classroom. For example, "catch them being good" and use positive reinforcement to indicate appreciation and expectation for appropriate decorum and behavior. Establish a strong and confident presence from day one and be proactive rather than reactive. One can be both pro-student and still be in charge of the classroom and this is established from day one, as students walk through the classroom door. Maintain high standards and expectations for politeness and civility and include a statement on the syllabus about decorum, etiquette, as well as academic integrity. If academic standards and expectations are clear and high, most students will strive to attain them. One can anticipate that high standards might be met with resistance but we also know that mediocrity breeds mediocrity. We dare not risk setting goals so low that everyone is happy and no one complains about an easy grade. A teacher needs to set clear and attainable goals for each class, each lesson, and for the semester. So, why are these activities not a routine part of the college classroom? Perhaps it is because very few college profs have any training in classroom management. The vast majority were not education majors where they would have been introduced to the teaching and behavioral strategies that are know to be effective in maintaining order in the classroom. They have risen through the ranks because of their expertise with course content but not typically because of their knowledge of how to teach effectively or how to manage a classroom.

Over a decade ago Emerick (1994) wrote that it is the responsibility of the professor to contribute to prosocial and civil classroom behaviors. That can be accomplished only by modeling appropriate etiquette, reinforcing behavior that is acceptable, and responding when it is not. As noted by Dechter (2007), we facilitate and perpetuate misconduct when we fail to discipline it. Students want and expect a college classroom to be an environment that is conducive to their learning. If it is not, the students might choose to transfer to an institution whose standards are more civil, higher, and compatible with those of the student. Seidman's (2005) research demonstrates that a learning environment that is not satisfactory for learning has been linked to students leaving a university prior to graduation.

Parents are too focused on their children "feeling good" about themselves and have lost sight of setting high but realistic expectations, teaching responsibility, and that self efficacy goes hand in hand with self esteem; that is, learning that one's efforts lead to

what one "earns". We must strengthen self esteem via accurate feedback which should begin with the parents and maintained in elementary school. Many of today's young college students have learned that "it's all about me" and are hooked on individualism, but this narcissism will not get them satisfactorily through an environment that requires working as a team in an atmosphere of civility and respect.

Bringing it all together

Faculty and college administrators are capable of addressing the "crisis of authority" that can be observed in public schools, on college campuses, and in the community. Expectations and standards for acceptable behavior need to be made clear to students and consistently reinforced. Mutual respect between faculty and students serves as a solid foundation for a civil classroom and effective teaching and learning.

Rudeness and classroom incivility are impediments to effective teaching but decorum can be restored via effective implementation of the basic principles of behaviorism. Modeling respect, reinforcement for acceptable behaviors, and consequences for classroom incivilities will allow effective teaching to occur. Establishing a classroom environment that is reflective of mutual respect and high expectations improves attitude and increases academic motivation.

Collegiality and a sense of community, rather than a focus on individualism, can be achieved in our homes, classrooms, and community as students, parents, employees and citizens. The "millenials" are the offspring of the Baby Boomers and our most recent group of students is the offspring of Generation X. They expect and enjoy collaboration and group work. Many have been overprotected, over indulged, and are expected by their parents to not just be successful, but to excel (McGlynn, A. (2005). The classroom is indeed a microcosm of our society where problems with intolerance and incivility flourish. But, the classroom environment can be different when clear expectations, standards, and behavioral parameters are established, modeled, and maintained. Each professor has the capacity, opportunity, and responsibility to establish appropriate decorum in his/her own classroom. When this occurs, effective teaching and learning will naturally follow.

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