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Handling Classroom Incivility

by Emily O. Gravett

In the wake of events this past semester, many faculty members have been wondering how to handle incivility, angry students, or hot moments in the classroom. These are not new questions, of course, though current events have a way of reminding us just how challenging classroom management can be.

Classroom incivility is a broad category and has been used to label a wide range of student behaviors, including verbal outbursts; physical aggression, routine absences, tardiness, cheating, sleeping in class, grade negotiation, missed appointments, inappropriate use of technology, and lack of participation.

While faculty are inclined to attribute incivility to student behavior, students often attribute it to faculty. Fortunately, the literature (such as [this piece](#)) suggests that there is much we can do to preempt or mitigate classroom incivility. This list may be useful to keep in mind when planning for next semester:

- Create a strong sense of classroom community (e.g., by learning students' names, getting to know students as individuals via questionnaires, co-creating classroom conduct norms, etc.)
- Set clear expectations, criteria, and responses that are fair and grounded in a transparent rationale, both in the syllabus and, especially, early on in the course
- Incorporate participatory and interactive opportunities in class (e.g., discussion, case studies, problem solving, team-based learning, peer review, etc.)
- Engage students in a respectful and supportive manner
- Adopt what are called "nonverbal immediacies" (i.e., eye contact, smiling, gesturing, open posture, movement) and "prosocial behaviors" (i.e., positive rather than punitive remarks)

But what can we do when (the perhaps inevitable) "hot moments" do occur? Freely available handbooks such as [these](#) can help us better navigate "difficult dialogues" with our students. And there are abundant resources available online through other faculty development centers, such as [Boise State University's](#) and [Oakland University's](#), many of which recommend the "Open the Front Door to Communication" approach:

- **Observe:** Make concrete, factual observations about the situation (e.g., "I'm observing some shaking heads and crossed arms")

- **Think:** Share thoughts—yours and theirs—based on what was observed (e.g., “I think some people may be reacting to the video we just watched and its assertions”)
- **Feel:** Express emotions using “I statements” (e.g., “I would feel uncomfortable if we continued class without unpacking what folks are experiencing”)
- **Desire:** State a specific request for a positive desired outcome (e.g., “I hope some of you will be willing to share what you’re experiencing right now so that we can have a productive conversation”)

President Alger also recently passed along a “Faculty Checklist: Steps to Respond to Classroom Incivility” (available online [here](#)). It covers how to prepare ahead of time to address hot topics, but also what to do if a discussion becomes intense/threatening or if you receive an official complaint. The bottom line: “Faculty should consistently remember to rise above the situation and not get pulled into debates.”

I hope winter break is relaxing and restful for everyone. See you in 2017!

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