

GSI

TA Talk Highlight

Managing Incivility in the College Classroom
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As educators, we want the classroom to be a positive environment in which learning and exploration can take place. As TAs and AIs we would like all of our students to treat each other and us with respect and professionalism. However, sometimes our experience with teaching has not lived up to our expectations. Historically speaking, student incivility has been a part of the college landscape, but often times, incidents have gone unreported to higher authorities for various reasons. Incidents of classroom incivility can lead to TAs and AIs feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, and unmotivated to teach course content. In extreme cases, experience with incivility can prompt a graduate student to rethink his/her chosen profession and perhaps leave the classroom entirely. The following describes what classroom incivility is, why it occurs, how you can try to prevent it, and resources available to you at UT.

What is classroom incivility?

Incivility has been defined as action or speech that is rude or disrespectful (Tiberius & Flack 1999). Incivility can take on many forms in the college classroom and can include but is not limited to the following:

- arriving late/leaving early from class;
- carrying on side conversations, reading the newspaper, doing other coursework, sleeping;
- using a cell phone during lecture;
- speaking rudely or forcefully to other students or the instructor;
- arguing or dominating the class discussion.

In its most extreme form, incivility can be threatening or physically harming to another student or the instructor. Cases of violence towards instructors and/or classmates gather a great deal of publicity even though they are less common than other forms of classroom incivility.

It is important to note that what one TA/AI considers uncivil speech or behavior might be perfectly acceptable to another TA/AI. What matters here is your individual interpretation of the events. Remembering that you have control over your own reaction in any situation is important to do especially when you are in the heat of the moment. Managing your own response will go a long way in helping you maintain professionalism in your classroom. After all, if your students see you speaking or behaving inappropriately, what incentive do they have for maintaining their own composure?

Why do some student choose to behave in an uncivil manner?

- Unclear expectations: One reason why students might act out in a classroom setting is that there are few spoken expectations for behavior (Schneider, 1998).
- Anonymity: In a university setting it is easy for a student to feel anonymous especially if he/she is in a large lecture class. Because of this feeling of anonymity, it is easy to see how a student might behave as if he/she is watching television or a movie, especially if the instructor does not call attention to bothersome behaviors (Schneider, 1998; Carbone 1999).
- Consumer expectations: Some researchers posit that another reason why students might behave inappropriately is because they bring consumer expectations into the classroom. For instance, a student might believe he/she is owed a certain grade because he/she paid for the course (Achacoso, 2002; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Schneider, 1998).

What can I do to prevent incivility when I am teaching?

- Clarify your expectations: Clarifying your expectations for behavior at the beginning of the semester will lay the groundwork for a more functional learning environment. After considering what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable to you, prepare a brief statement to go in your syllabus. Remind your students of your expectations during the first few weeks of class.
- Create a classroom civility policy with the students' help. Enlist the help of your students at the beginning of the semester and decide together on how you will interact with each other.
- Establish a method for students to air grievances: It is important to maintain the lines of communication between you and your students. There are a number of ways to allow students to be heard in a classroom context. One way to help open communication channels is to ask for feedback on your teaching through a midsemester evaluation. Due to the nature of the educational process, your students will have questions about their grades and perhaps disagree with a specific grade. Instead of taking class time or even office hours to argue about the specific grade, have your students turn in a written challenge to a grade. This allows you time to consider the request and to gather support for your decision.
- Confront the problem: It might be very tempting to not do anything about incivility in your classroom and simply hope that the incident does not reoccur. However, you could be interfering with other student's learning in the class if you allow the behavior to continue. Some TAs/AIs may be comfortable singling out a student (or a group of students) during a lecture or a discussion section. However, if you are not comfortable with this, talking with the student(s) before or after class might be a better option (Carbone, 1999).
- Be sure to document each incident. It is important to maintain good records of what occurs in your classroom. When you get a moment, be sure to write down what and when the incident occurred. If the incident seems egregious enough in your own opinion, ask other students who witnessed the incident to write down what they saw on a piece of paper, sign it, and turn it into you. Providing good documentation and evidence can be very important if you need to take the matter to a higher level of authority.

What are some resources available about classroom incivility?

- At UT, TAs and AIs generally have a chain of command they must follow when confronted with problems in the classroom. If you are unable to handle current problems with classroom incivility on your own, first contact your Supervisor for support and ideas for a solution. If the matter cannot be solved, you and your supervisor will generally contact the Departmental Chair for advice. Finally, the Dean of Students Office can be contacted if you are unable to address the matter within your department.
- Internet Resources for further information: There are sources on the Web that specifically address classroom incivility. For more information, try the following web site:
<http://teaching.ucsc.edu/tips-civility.html>.

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