Using Classroom Civility to Enhance Learning and Promote Valuing Diversity

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ABSTRACT

The principal goal of our educational institutions is to promote student learning. To advance that goal, instructors need to take proactive steps to minimize or eliminate instructional obstacles in order to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. A common problem experienced by instructors in every discipline and at every level of the educational process is disruptive student behavior in the classroom. This problem is a major hindrance to the educational process and can have a negative affect on instructors and students. Additionally, as universities continue to attract diverse students, instructors are often confronted with the challenge of having to define appropriate student behavior while promoting diversity. Engineering and technology instructors can enhance student learning and promote the valuing of diversity by establishing a classroom environment that cultivates civility.

This paper will demonstrate how classroom civility can enhance student learning and promote the valuing of diversity. The paper will contrast and compare approaches used by different universities to establish civility. The paper will identify the major components of classroom civility and how instructors can create such a learning environment.

Keywords: Civility, valuing diversity

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, academia is confronted with the challenge of enhancing the learning process to provide students with the best education possible. The dynamic and complex nature of world events is imposing higher academic standards for all universities in order to provide students with the necessary skills to solve current and future problems (Kratz and Burke, 2007). Eliminating disruptive student behavior in the classroom is an effective way to enhance student learning (Prichard and Sawyer, 1994). Therefore, instructors need to take proactive steps to minimize or eliminate inappropriate student behavior in order to create a classroom environment that facilitates learning.

Additionally, as students from throughout the world continue to attend American universities, instructors are confronted with the challenge of having to educate students with diverse values, cultures, and races (Ocon, 2006). Therefore, instructors need to reevaluate traditional approaches for managing student behavior and establish classroom standards that facilitate the valuing of diversity. By cultivating civility, instructors can create a classroom environment that promotes the valuing of diversity.

2. WHAT IS CIVILITY

Civility requires students to take responsibility for their behavior by encouraging mutual respect and the acceptance of the consequences for inappropriate behavior (Purdue University Calumet, 2006). Given the fact that most students who attend American universities do so voluntarily and the perceived maturity level of college age students, some might question the need for classroom civility standards. However, similar to classroom civility standards, establishing standards of behavior or codes of conduct have become common with many other societal institutions, such as governmental entities and business organizations (Andrews, 2006). Instructors can use civility standards to establish and communicate guidelines of acceptable student behavior and classroom expectations.

3. BENEFITS OF CIVILITY

Civility can help to solve many challenges confronting the educational process in general, from student bullying and violence to prejudice and harassment (Prichard and Sawyer, 1994). In the classroom, civility can help to establish and communicate behavioral expectations for students to facilitate academic success. Benefits universities can derive from civility are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Benefits Derived for Civility

- Recruiting technique: Civility can help universities to attract and develop quality and diverse students
- Retention technique: Students are more incline to attend and remain with universities with positive reputations for learning and diversity
- Quality students: As academic standards continue to rise, universities are confronted with the challenge of competing for the best students available
- Enhance student learning: The elimination or reduction of disruptive student behavior will promote overall student learning
- Promote valuing diversity: A classroom environment that promotes mutual respect can facilitate the reduction of prejudice and harassment, and promote the valuing of diversity
- Promote individual responsibility: Student who assume personal responsibility for their behavior will learn to develop self-discipline and proactive behavior

CIVLITY AND ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING

By eliminating or minimizing disruptive student behavior in the classroom, civility can facilitate the educational process for both instructors and students. Civility can play a significant role in creating a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Table 2 lists how civility can facilitate the educational process for instructors and students.

Table 2: How Civility Can Facilitate The Educational Process For Instructors And Students

- Promote student learning: The elimination or reduction of disruptive student behavior will promote overall student learning
- Promote mutual respect: Civility can promote mutual respect among students and instructors
- Promote individual responsibility: Civility can help students to assume personal responsibility for their behavior and learn to develop self-discipline
- Because many business organizations have similar codes of conduct, promoting classroom civility can help to prepare students for work in the corporate world

Through civility, instructors can enhance student learning through the creation of a classroom environment of mutual respect and provide guidelines on what is appropriate classroom behavior. By establishing classroom behavioral standards, instructors can help students to succeed in college by identifying the expectations for appropriate student behavior.

CIVILITY AND VALUING DIVERSITY

Diversity in the education is not a temporary fad, but will continue into the future. Globalization is forcing people throughout the world to interact with each other on a regular basis and have made diversity an international concern (Nilsen et al., 2005). From a pedagogical standpoint, the interaction between students from diverse cultures, ethnicities and races can result in positive synergies when different perspectives and viewpoints are discussed and developed (Lockwood, 2005). These interactions can improve the quality of education received.

Civility can promote the valuing diversity by encouraging mutual respect for people, including students with different values, cultures, and races. As the diversity of students attending American universities continues to increase, instructors are confronted with the challenge of having to define appropriate student behavior. Similar to classroom civility, many multinational business organizations are developing global codes of conduct to facilitate the global management of diverse employees (Reece and Brandt, 2005). Just as business organizations are promoting the valuing of diversity to achieve strategic organizational goals, instructors can take proactive steps to advance the strategic educational goals of advancing student learning and the valuing of differences.

Consequently, diversity is going to remain a continual educational concern and require that instructors and students learn how to effectively interact with diverse people. By cultivating civility, instructors can promote the valuing of diversity by establishing classroom environments of mutual respect.

4. CONTRAST AND COMPARE CIVILITY CODES

When comparing and contrasting civility codes, the author's research focused on a random sample of ten institutions of higher education located in different geographic regions. While researching the civility codes of these universities, the author identified major similarities and differences from one institution to another. When comparing the civility codes of these universities, certain elements are common. Elements that civility codes have in common are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Common Elements of Selected University Civility Codes

- Definition of civility
- Student responsibility for their behavior
- The cost of incivility
- Examples of disruptive students behavior
- Disciplinary procedures for dealing with incivility
- Tips for dealing with disruptive student behavior
- Tips for communicating civility (i.e. course syllabus, course introduction)

When contrasting civility codes, the author identified the significant differences between codes. Table 4 lists some of the significant elements included with more comprehensive university civility codes.

Table 4: Significant Elements of Comprehensive University Civility Codes

- The civility code extending beyond the classroom and including respect for faculty, staff, fellow students, university guests, university property, policies, procedures, rules and regulations
- The civility codes stress the importance of communicating in a professional and courteous manner
- Ensure that civility didn't interfere with the student's right to freedom of expression
- Promoting nondiscriminatory behavior by respecting a student's right to be different
- Identifying categories of disruptive student behavior

5. PROMOTING CLASSROOM CIVILITY

Recognizing the importance of civility and its impact on student learning and the valuing of diversity, it's important for instructors to create such a learning environment. Civility behavioral standards should be communicated in different ways (Pomeroy, 2006) and as early in the semester as possible, preferably, the first day of class. In addition to the instructors, the university should play an active role in promoting civility. Based on the author's research and experience, promoting classroom civility requires at a minimum, the incorporation of several elements. Table 5 identifies what instructors can do to promote classroom civility.

Table 5: How Instructors Can Promote Classroom Civility

- Establish behavior standards and expectations by defining civility, providing examples of inappropriate student behavior, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and encouraging student accountability for behavior
- Provide students with written notice of civility standards (i.e. course syllabus or handout)
- Identify the benefits of civility
- Communicate the civility standards to students during the course introduction-some instructors have students sign an acknowledge or test students on the standards (i.e. a few questions on civility on the first exam)
- When inappropriate behavior occurs, instructors must immediately, consistently and impersonally enforce the civility standards
- When inappropriate behavior occurs, instructors should emphasize appropriate student behavior and deemphasize any punitive aspects of corrective action
- Maintain a written record of any corrective action taken by the instructor over the course of the semester

6. ASSESSMENT

The author used several assessment tools to evaluate the effectiveness of civility on student learning and the valuing of diversity in his courses. Beginning in the Spring semester of 2006, the author implemented his civility code with the following course, "Applied Creativity in Business and Industry" (OLS 350). Listed below are some of the assessment tools the author used to assess civility.

PRETEST/POSTTEST ON CIVILITY

Table 6 lists the results of the pretest (given to students at the beginning of the semester) and posttest (given to students at the end of the semester) on civility for OLS 350 in the Fall 2006 semester.

Table 6: The Results of the Civility Pretest and Posttest (OLS 350: Fall 2006)

Pretest:	Posttest:
Number of students: 20	Number of students: 18
Average Percent of Correct Answers: 53%	Average Percent of Correct Answers: 74%

Table 7 lists selected true/false questions about civility asked on the pretest and posttest which were given in the Fall 2006 semester for OLS 350.

Table 7: Selected Pretest and Posttest True/False Questions about Civility (OLS 350: Fall 2006)

1) Mutual respect is an important part of civility
2) The enforcement of civility can reduce harassment, discrimination and inappropriate student behavior
3) For civility codes to be effective, students should receive written notice of the civility standards
4) Civility standards are common with other societal institutions
5) The immediate and consistent enforcement of civility is important for promoting appropriate student behavior
6) When the instructor enforces civility, he/she should emphasize what appropriate student behavior should be and deemphasize any punitive aspects of enforcement
7) Understanding civility can prepare students for academic and professional success
8) Civility can enhance student learning

STUDENT EVALUATIONS ON CIVILITY

Table 8 lists the results of the student evaluations for OLS 350 from the Spring 2004 to the Fall 2006 semesters.

Table 8: Student Evaluations for OLS 350 (Spring 2004- Fall 2006)

Rating Scale: (5) Strongly Agree, (4) Agree, (3) undecided, (2) Disagree, (1) Strongly Disagree.

Year:	2004	2004	2005	2005	2006	2006
Semester	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall
Students	17	18	18	24	22	24
Avg. Rating	4.67	4.7 0	4.59	4.70	4.76	4.80

Table 9 lists selected questions asked on student evaluations concerning civility for the Spring and Fall semesters of 2006 in OLS 350.

Table 9: Selected Student Evaluation Questions on Civility (OLS 350: Spring & Fall 2006)

1) Civility is important for promoting student learning
2) Civility is important for promoting the valuing of diversity
3) Compared with courses not emphasizing civility, emphasizing civility promotes student learning and the valuing of diversity
4) I understand the importance of civility and what is appropriate classroom behavior
5) I would prefer to take courses/instructors who promote civility
6) The classroom environment is conducive to enhancing student learning
7) Understanding civility can prepare students for academic and professional success
8) I feel better about myself, my fellow students, the instructor and the course in general when people speak to me in a professional and courteous manner

7. CONCLUSION

A common problem experienced by instructors in every discipline is disruptive student behavior in the classroom. This problem is a major hindrance to the educational process and has a negative affect on instructors and students. At the same time, technological change and global competition are having a significant impact on the economic well being of every nation and are placing greater emphasis on academia to provide students with the best education possible. No university or instructor can afford to allow inappropriate student behavior to interfere with the learning process. To enhance student learning, instructors need to take proactive steps to minimize or eliminate instructional obstacles in order to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning.

As American universities continue to attract diverse students, instructors will be confronted with the challenge of creating a classroom environment of mutual respect. Instructors in engineering and engineering technology can enhance student learning and promote the valuing of diversity by establishing classroom civility.

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