Communication civility codes: Positive communication through the students’ eyes

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Communication civility codes: Positive communication through the students’ eyes

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Courses: Presentational courses such as Public Speaking, Interviewing, Business and Professional, Persuasion, Interpersonal; any course where civility may be promoted in the classroom.

Objectives: At the end of this single-class activity, students will have an understanding of civility in order to: (1) identify civility and consequences of behaviors, (2) create their own communication civility code for classroom behaviors and presentations, and (3) practice civility throughout the semester.

Introduction and rationale

Student incivility has garnered interest among college faculty and administrators. While most students are not inherently unruly, there are always a few instances that leave me thinking, “Really?” This is particularly bothersome in communication courses when speakers and audience members demonstrate uncivil behaviors on presentation days.

Although civility is not something we should have to teach at the college level, students have different perspectives on behaviors associated with appropriate classroom behavior. The lack of consistency between such perspectives can create problems in our classrooms. Unfortunately, students experience uncivil behavior in class on a regular basis (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2009). Professors and students also perceive different behaviors as problematic (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2009; Ward & Yates, 2014), which make behaviors more difficult to manage when in the classroom itself some behaviors are considered uncivil and others may not be. Open discussion with students early in the semester regarding preferred behaviors will reduce incivility in our classrooms.

As a general definition of civility, I put the following in my syllabus:

Civility is “a set of verbal and nonverbal behaviors reflecting fundamental respect for others and generating harmonious and productive relationships” (Grice & Skinner, 2013, p. 33). We will be creating our own classroom civility code to promote positive communication.

Though many campuses have civility codes in their student handbooks or statements in syllabi, it is unlikely that students have them committed to memory. It is referenced when something happens rather than being used proactively. Students need to understand civility and consequences for incivility, but students and faculty both need to be vested in the discussion (McKinne & Martin, 2010). While many instructors have discussed civility in basic
courses or teacher training, not all instructors receive such training. Some enter into teaching as adjunct instructors, or teach in smaller institutions where such training may not exist. McNaughton-Cassill (2013) indicates that in many training programs, the focus is on delivery of the discipline content, pedagogical strategies, or use of technology, but training may not necessarily encompass managing interpersonal dynamics of the classroom.

The communication classroom is one that is most appropriate for discussing and demonstrating civil verbal and nonverbal behaviors, though this activity may be useful for any instructors utilizing presentations. The uniqueness of this activity also includes using the university civility code in the hope of helping students in all their academic life, including behaviors in presentation courses. Thus, if we want to curb these behaviors in our academic institutions, we need to have a dialogue with students regarding civility in our classrooms.

The activity

This activity can easily be conducted in a 50-minute class, and involves two main parts: (1) discussion and analysis of civility, and (2) development and discussion of classroom code.

Discussion and analysis of civility (approximately 20 minutes)

Although I have a statement in my syllabus, I choose a day early in the semester to discuss civility with the class, drawing from various articles (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2009; Marklein, 2011; McKinne & Martin, 2010; Ward & Yates, 2014). In presentational courses, chapters regarding ethical speaking (Grice & Skinner, 2013; Verderber, Sellnow, & Verderber, 2015) provide some foundational reading for discussion.

During this initial discussion of civility, students are sometimes uncomfortable when this topic arises—they occasionally roll their eyes (ironically demonstrating incivility) and feel they are being disciplined. This apathy quickly changes when they discover a more personal connection. To illustrate the importance of civility, I show the university’s civility statement and ask students to analyze it. Students are more invested when they are encouraged to discuss openly policies that have direct application to their academic lives. I begin the discussion with questions that include the following: Did you know the university had a civility policy? Why do you think this policy is in your handbook? Is there any part of this policy you feel is too restrictive? Why? Is there anything you would add to the policy?

We also discuss the rationale for the policy and potential long-term consequences of uncivil behaviors. Upper-class students sometimes disclose and provide examples of when they have been recipients (and sometimes producers) of incivility in their academic lives, which helps demonstrate the importance of the policy from students’ perspectives. This macro policy discussion provides the framework for linking civility to specific classroom communication behavior.

Development and discussion of classroom code (approximately 15 minutes)

After discussion of the university policy, I ask students how they want to approach communication behaviors in our own classroom and during presentations in class.
As each classroom and perceptions differ among students and faculty, it is important to identify behaviors for each class. Students get into groups of three to four people and put the following three columns on their paper to create the communication civility code:

1. Behaviors as an audience member when listening to speakers
2. Day-to-day general classroom behavior (in lectures, small groups, or open discussion with students and instructor)
3. Behaviors as a speaker when giving presentations.

I ask students to generate a list of behaviors, which may include instructor behaviors, that they want (or don’t want) to see in our classroom. Students complete the day-to-day column first, which becomes the baseline of behaviors. After students create behaviors that they would like to see in our daily classroom, I ask them to complete the other two columns. This allows them to see how some behaviors may vary by situation. Lines are drawn to other columns where behaviors cross-apply, and other behaviors are added in the respective columns.

The groups then share lists and rationale for behaviors openly; behaviors can be modified, added, or deleted at this time. I ask one group to be the recorder for a master list that I post for the class. A majority of the class has to agree on the behavior for the behavior to be kept on the list. For those who do not agree with the behavior (which seldom happens), they have to agree to respect and abide by the behavior, as it was a majority rule decision. I tell the class that if a particular behavior goes against general educational ethics or is impossible given the classroom dynamics, I have final authority to modify or veto a behavior. Overall, lists vary from using sexual orientation–free language, using credible sources in presentations, no cell phones, to the instructor giving back timely feedback during the semester. Though each class is unique, the lists are generally similar but still distinctive of the culture of a particular class.

**Debriefing (approximately 10–15 minutes)**

Overall discussion includes implications of such behaviors in this class, on their personal and professional lives, and behaviors in other classes. Parts 1 and 2 accomplish the main objectives of the assignment, but debriefing allows students to think about the implementation of the civility code throughout the semester.

Questions to ask the class include: What consistencies did you see in the groups? Why are these behaviors important for our classroom? Why are they important for public presentations? How do audience behaviors impact speakers? If you were to rank the behaviors, which verbal or nonverbal behaviors have the most impact on this class? How will you be accountable and hold others accountable for behaviors throughout the semester? Was there anything that made you uncomfortable in discussing civility? How does our communication civility code reflect the university’s policy? How will this discussion of civility apply to other parts of your lives: personal, professional, other courses? What final questions do you have regarding civility and our classroom? After discussion, the final list of behaviors is posted to remind students of the class civility code.
Appraisal

Students will always be audience members and public speakers. Instilling communication civility behaviors with the understanding of consequences early in their academic careers, and in particular in presentational courses, will help students become successful in their professional careers. As students have different perspectives on behaviors, this activity helps students to identify and understand the variety of behaviors seen as uncivil or inappropriate to a classroom audience of their peers.

During part 1, students become comfortable sharing opinions, which contributes to their willingness to participate in part 2. This also creates a “safe space” for welcoming open conversation in the classroom. Opinions about such behaviors can be strong in favor of one statement or another, but after discussion, students feel like they have been heard and come to greater understanding of civility and why such a policy is important. I have tried this activity without showing the university policy, but the outcome is less effective in the small groups and debriefing. The open discussion provides a more comfortable context for overall understanding of the impact of communication. Students have commented that reviewing the university policy helps them connect the big picture to communication behaviors in the classroom.

Developing the communication civility code allows students to consider their individual behaviors. Throughout the semester, students seem to hold each other accountable for their behaviors and will remind others to put away their phones during others’ presentations, not use particular language in class, or even to consider more recent articles for their presentations. Students have been able to identify appropriate behaviors, and become more vested in their learning. Students have commented that they remember these general guidelines in their other courses, and try to demonstrate civility in other parts of their lives.

As the instructor, one has to be willing to be included on the list of behaviors. Behaviors such as respect for the students, not calling out students in class, and treating all students equally are typically listed for the instructor behaviors—behaviors that we hopefully already instill in our classrooms. Many of the student behaviors are those I would have chosen for the class, but empowering students to generate the lists and discussing the consequences of behaviors give a greater chance of students upholding the behaviors in class. Since implementing this activity, I have seen more cooperation and less competition among students, more attentiveness from students during presentations, and less “teachable moments” with inappropriate behaviors.

Variations of this activity can easily be implemented. If instructors are not comfortable with their own behaviors being listed, a focus solely on student behaviors can be implemented. If time is short, the university policy discussion could be condensed, or different columns created based upon the course. I have used this activity with relational ethics in interpersonal communication with additional columns regarding friends, family, or work relationships, and with professional ethics in interviewing or business and professional communication.

Communication courses are prime opportunities to help students understand and instill appropriate verbal and nonverbal civility behaviors. Encouraging civility is much easier than having to address an issue after the fact.
References and suggested readings


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