

The Pedagogy of Civility: Innovative Strategies to Create an Engaged Learning Environment

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“Civility is not another piece to be added onto the plate of an educator, it is the plate upon which all else is placed.” — P.F. Vincent

For many nurse educators, the start of a new semester beckons and thoughts turn to preparing for classes and welcoming a new group of students. For some, this is an exciting and much-anticipated experience, for others — dread begins to set in as the joy of teaching wanes. Let’s take a moment to consider your motivation for teaching. Do you consider teaching a calling? Do you teach because you've been doing it for such a long time that you can't imagine yourself doing anything else? Are you teaching for the pure joy of it? Or is it a combination of many factors? To reflect, please rate your “joy index” for teaching; consider the list below and choose your response.

Rating Your “Joy Index” for Teaching

1. I look forward to teaching every day; it brings me immense joy
2. I enjoy teaching most days
3. I enjoy teaching sometimes
4. I find teaching a chore
5. I think about leaving teaching altogether

As you consider your “joy index” for teaching, to what extent has academic incivility impacted your response? Again, select from the list below.

Rating the Impact of Academic Incivility on Your “Joy Index” for Teaching

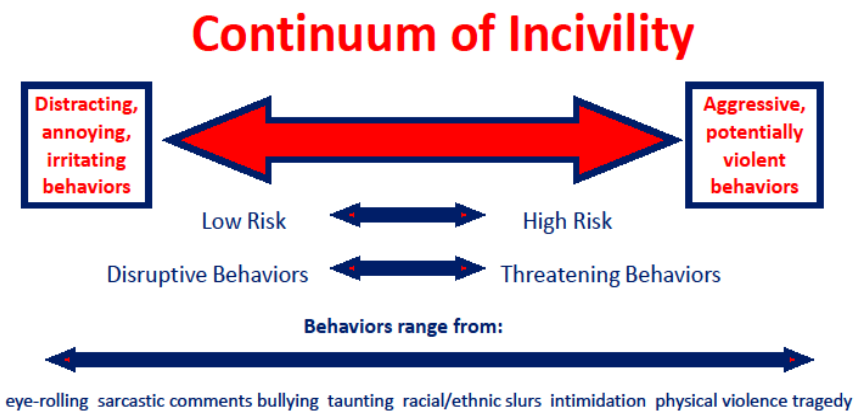
1. Academic incivility has significantly lowered my joy index
2. Academic incivility has somewhat lowered my joy index
3. Academic incivility hasn't impacted my joy index at all
4. I have not experienced academic incivility

Perhaps academic incivility has not impacted your joy index, for others, maybe it has. In either case, creating a safe, civil, engaged teaching-learning environment is important for students and faculty alike. However, many faculty lack formal education and training on ways to prevent and address academic incivility. This is not something we grasp without instruction and practice. Consider the following example.

EXAMPLE: Imagine you are teaching a pharmacology course; do you expect students taking the class for the first time to have a deepened understanding and practical application of drug classifications and schedules, pharmacodynamics, pharmacokinetics, neurochemistry, drug administration, interactions, and potential side effects? Of course not, because if students came to our class with this level of knowledge, they would not need to enroll in the class. The same is true for faculty who have not been educated to effectively address academic incivility.

So what is **academic incivility**? Feldman (2001) defines it as rude and discourteous speech or behavior that disrupts the academic environment — yet, this definition begs the question as to what constitutes the “academic environment?” In nursing, the academic environment includes myriad venues including the “live” and virtual classroom, laboratory and clinical setting, simulation center — essentially anywhere that a “teachable moment” or learning opportunity exists. These “teachable moments” often occur in informal settings such as hallways, the student lounge, parking lots, faculty offices, and campus coffee shops (Clark, 2013). Academic incivility is a multifaceted phenomenon that includes student-to-faculty incivility, faculty-to-student incivility, student-to-student incivility, administrator-to-faculty incivility, faculty-to-faculty/administrator incivility, and incivility occurring with nurses and other healthcare workers in the practice setting. Regardless of its configuration, academic incivility often results in a negative impact on wellbeing, self worth, confidence, and commitment to nursing. Incivility often results in psychological or physiological distress for the people involved, and if left unaddressed, may progress into threatening situations or result in temporary or permanent illness or injury (Clark, 2009, 2013).

When placed along a continuum as depicted below, uncivil behaviors range from low risk to high risk, from disruptive to threatening, and from distracting or annoying behaviors to aggressive and potentially violent behaviors (Clark, 2013).



Clark © 2009, revised 2012

Stress plays an integral role in displays of incivility, as individuals are more likely to behave in an uncivil way when they are stressed and have an accompanying inability to cope. Some of the stressors facing nursing students are included in the table below.

Nursing Student Stressors

- Demanding workloads and meeting deadlines
- Juggling family, work, school, and personal responsibilities
- Financial concerns
- Academic incivility (faculty and student)
- Competition for grades, high passing threshold, NCLEX exam
- Dealing with ineffective or outdated teaching strategies
- Finding a job, fear of failure or harming a patient

These stressors can manifest in an attitude of entitlement where some students believe they are owed an education and because they paid for a course that they should receive an “A” in return. In addition, some students engage in disruptive behaviors such as texting in class, participating in side conversations, making rude remarks, pressuring faculty to agree to student demands, and showing intolerance for others. Nursing faculty members are also stressed by a number of factors (see the table below).

Nursing Faculty Stressors

- Dealing with constant change
- Juggling a heavy workload
- Managing home, work, and family responsibilities
- Meeting demands for publication, external funding
- Achieving promotion, tenure, advancement
- Keeping pace with technology in an ever-changing academic environment
- Maintaining clinical or practice competence
- Coping with problematic students and faculty incivility
- Dealing with low salaries and financial pressures

In response to high stress levels, some faculty demonstrate an attitude of superiority by exerting position and power over students, setting unrealistic expectations, or threatening to fail or dismiss students. In addition, since the teaching-learning environment includes clinical settings, the stress associated with the dynamic and rapid pace of the healthcare environment presents additional challenges.

Beginning at the Beginning

Students at the very beginning of their nursing education need to know what is expected of them regarding professional behavior and what they can expect from others (Clark, 2013b). Formal orientation is vital to helping students understand what civil, professional behavior is and how to

integrate it into their nursing practice. Civility awareness for incoming students can be done during general student orientation and during a more focused orientation once students enter the school of nursing. Before classes officially begin, newly admitted nursing students can participate in a full-day program to discuss what it means to be a nurse, professionalism, ethical conduct, and the importance of civility.

Civility: A Shared Responsibility

It is everyone's responsibility in the school of nursing to reinforce civility, professionalism, and observance of the mission, values, and norms of the school. Most importantly, these initiatives need to be "lived" and openly discussed throughout the duration of the program — not just at new student orientation — but intentionally and deliberately threaded throughout the program curriculum.

Before Classes Begin

In addition to student orientation, nursing faculty can implement several strategies prior to the first day of class to set a positive tone for a successful academic term. Professional role-modeling and demonstrating civility are great ways to begin. Consider sending a "welcome" e-mail message to students one to two weeks before classes start to brief them on the agenda for the first day — include a greeting, where class will meet and when class begins, materials needed for class, and the day's objectives. Include the syllabus and course calendar, and suggest that students review both before attending class. See the example welcome e-mail for students at right.

Taking a Look in the Mirror

"If you want to know why people aren't performing well, step up to the mirror and take a peek."

— Ken Blanchard

What a powerful quote! To me, it speaks to the force and potency of professional role-modeling and being the best example we can be to our students, patients, coworkers, and anyone with whom we interact. First impressions matter — and we have scant time to make one. In fact, first impressions are often made at lightning speed. During the precious nanoseconds when our students meet us for the first time, they register myriad impressions. Believe it or not, many of these impressions are made (and often kept) in a matter of seconds.

Dear Students,

Welcome to a brand new semester filled with collegiality, learning, and personal and professional growth. I trust that you each enjoyed a restful and rejuvenating break. Before you know it, we'll be back on campus and attending classes. [class title and section number] will commence on [date/time]. The online course site (with syllabus) will be available to students on [date]. Please bring a copy of the course syllabus (in hard copy or e-copy) to class on [date/time]. Be sure to purchase the text, review the course syllabi, and get excited for a great semester. If you have any questions, please contact me at [e-mail address] or [phone number]. I am very excited to meet all of you and to share an exciting semester together.

Sincerely, [name]

Student Initial Impressions of Faculty

- Do we assume goodwill and think the best of others?
- Do our behaviors and appearance convey professionalism and credibility?
- Are we approachable, open, and competent?
- Are we skillful communicators and active listeners?
- Are we inclusive, respectful, and open to other points of view?

Therefore, it's critically important to make a positive, professional impression.

Positive Role-Modeling Behaviors

- Pay attention to detail, encourage collaboration, and admit mistakes
- Self-reflect, appreciate and embrace diversity on myriad levels
- Foster an atmosphere of collegiality and respect
- Inspire others to be the best they can be

In a nutshell, a positive, professional role model “walks the talk” and is mindful of the impact of his or her behaviors on others. So take a look in the mirror and smile, open yourself to others, and be yourself!

The First Day of Class

The greater the effort we make on the first day of class to prevent uncivil and disruptive behavior from occurring, the better it is for everyone. This investment can pay lasting dividends over the course of the academic term and beyond. Preventing incivility from occurring in the first place contributes to a safe, civil learning environment focused on student and faculty success. Plan to arrive early on the first day of class (and every day after) to set up your classroom and materials, and to be ready to welcome students as they come through the door.

During the first day of class, engage students in an introductory exercise. Keep introductions brief, but meaningful by using fill-in-the-blank questions. See the example below.

Example of Student Fill-in-the-Blank Introduction

Have students stand, state their first and last name, and complete a fill-in-the-blank question related to the course. For example, if you are teaching a Behavioral Health course, you might ask, “When I hear the term mental illness, I think _____ (fill in the blank).”

These probing questions are excellent vehicles to provide a window into how students think and what each believes about a particular course-relevant topic. Introductions are also a good time to take roll or check the class roster — and to have students create their name tents.

Students can create name tents by folding a large index card lengthwise, and using markers to write their preferred name on both sides of the index card. If feasible, you can arrange the students in a manner (such as semicircles) that allows for the name tents to be visible to all class participants. This technique builds respect, collegiality, and an esprit de corps among faculty and students. Name tents help all of us learn each student's name quickly (including guest presenters) and remove the embarrassment of forgetting a student's name — or worse, addressing them by pointing or using impersonal statements.

The primary reason for using name tents is to show respect by getting to know students by name and recognizing the uniqueness that each student brings to the learning environment. There are other effective ways to learn students' names — for instance, some educators ask students to select the seat of his or her choice on the first day of class and keep it throughout the term. That way, the instructor can create a seating chart with corresponding names of students and can get to know them by using the seating chart to associate the student's seat with his or her name. Getting to know students by name, learning something unique about each one, and asking students about their lives can go a long way in creating a respectful relationship.

Teaching Philosophies

Teaching philosophies represent ideas, beliefs, and assumptions about teaching, teaching strategies, ways to put these beliefs and strategies into practice, and goals for student learning. Brookfield (1990) describes a teaching philosophy as an organizing vision — a clear picture of why we teach, for what purpose, and the effect we hope to have on student learning. The structure and formatting of teaching philosophies vary, but most statements are personal and reflective and provide a unique description of our perspective on teaching and our professional commitment to learners (Clark, 2013).

Teaching philosophies can be lengthy, but for the purposes of communicating them with students, share an abbreviated version of your teaching philosophy. Consider publishing the abbreviated or distilled version in your course syllabus to use as a “talking point” (Clark, 2013).

Example of a Condensed Teaching Philosophy (Clark, 2013)

I thoroughly enjoy teaching, interacting with students, and engaging students in the learning process. I believe that all students are experienced adult learners, capable of deep learning and achieving substantial personal and professional goals. I believe each student brings a wealth of life, work, and educational experience to the learning environment; thus, each student adds value and meaning to the educational experience. This course is designed to prepare nursing students for leadership and management roles in a variety of health care environments. As such, I am intentional about practical application and relevance of the material to nursing practice and to real life.

As teachers and learners in higher education, we are charged with fostering debate, challenging ideas, engaging students in intellectual inquiry, and advancing discovery. These stimulating and important discussions require all of us to bring civility to discourse and respect to our conversations and encounters. Therefore, co-creating classroom norms on the first day of class is an essential component to the leadership course. I am deeply committed to fostering a classroom environment conducive to student learning, meaningful engagement, and evocative dialog. As a professor of higher education and as a nurse leader, I take seriously the importance of professional role-modeling, as well as the intentional socialization of students into the nursing profession.

Sharing our teaching philosophies with students and being clear and explicit about our values and beliefs help create a safe, civil learning environment. When students understand our views, methods, and rationale, they are more likely to feel engaged in, and part of, the learning process.

Co-Creating Norms

Civility does not mean we all agree. In fact, faculty in higher education have a responsibility to create teaching-learning environments where lively debates and spirited discussions flourish. Our job is to foster social discourse, to question, and to pose critical arguments. Yet, to do this effectively, we must create safe spaces for all members of the campus community to express their views and beliefs.

Co-creating class norms is one of the most important activities to accomplish on the first day of class. Establishing, implementing, and reinforcing classroom norms are foundational for a respectful and civil teaching-learning environment. When faculty and students work together to craft classroom norms, all parties are more likely to abide by them. Begin by explaining the value and importance of co-creating norms, describe how doing so is closely aligned with the mission and values of the university and the school of nursing, and emphasize how these values provide a basis for desired classroom behavior.

Co-Creating Classroom Norms

Engage students in the process by asking:

- What behaviors do we want to see in our learning environment?
- What behaviors do we NOT want to see in our learning environment?
- How will our norms be enforced? And who will do the enforcing?
- What will the consequences be if the norms are violated?

As students and faculty identify and agree upon expected behavioral norms, a student volunteer can type them up and then e-mail them to the instructor so they can be disseminated. It is everyone's responsibility to reinforce and monitor adherence to the norms, and to periodically evaluate how the norms are working. Norms are living documents that provide a civility touchstone for students and faculty — and provide a framework for working, collaborating, and learning together.

The Power of the Course Syllabus

The course syllabus is a “contract” with students and can be used as a guide to discuss what we expect to accomplish together as faculty and students throughout the course of the term. Syllabi can include a number of important topics, links, and “talking points” which serve as a foundation for co-creating behavioral norms and creating and sustaining a civil, safe learning environment (Clark, 2013). An ambiguous or poorly constructed syllabus can contribute to student resentment and anger, whereas a well-developed and thoughtfully discussed syllabus can be a catalyst for civility and co-creating classroom and clinical norms (Clark, 2009). A well-constructed syllabus should include critical “talking points.”

Critical “Talking Points” for a Course Syllabus

- Institutional Vision and Mission Statements
- Codes of Conduct and Statements of Shared Values
- Conflict Negotiation and Academic Dishonesty Policies
- Professional Standards, Behaviors, and Expectations
- Team and Individual Teaching Philosophies
- Clear Learning Objectives and Assignments (with rationales and objective grading rubrics)
- Discussion of Responsible Social Networking and Online Etiquette

A meaningful and direct faculty-student conversation is a powerful combination for improving behavior expected of a nursing student and a professional nurse.

Active and Engaged Teaching-Learning Activities

The more we engage students in active learning exercises, the less likely the potential for uncivil and disruptive behavior. Involving students in active learning strategies minimizes disruption by promoting cooperation and collaboration (Clark, 2009), and helps students stay focused and motivated. Making learning meaningful and applicable by using stories, real-life examples, case-based scenarios, and group discussion minimizes incivility. Because significant learning takes place outside the classroom, faculty can encourage students to practice and apply what they have learned in class to their lives outside the classroom. These strategies and interventions help to create safe, civil teaching-learning environments (Clark & Davis-Kenaly, 2011).

Designing and implementing active learning strategies require a paradigm shift for both students and faculty. Students must move from a more passive listening and note-taking role to a more active problem-solving and discovery role. Students must also learn to work in teams and communities, to collaborate with peers, and to view faculty as facilitators of learning, rather than simply as imparters of knowledge and information. The faculty role must change as well. The primary goal is to shift from being the “expert” to becoming the facilitator of student learning and engagement.

There are several teaching-learning strategies that faculty can use to minimize academic incivility, foster faculty-student relationships, and enhance student engagement and learning. However, all suggested active learning strategies are contextual and situated within the individual academic culture and nursing program. They are also largely reliant upon each educator’s unique teaching philosophy, style, technique, and delivery methods (Clark, 2013).

Examples of Active, Engaged Teaching-Learning Strategies

- Think, pair, square, share
- Narrative pedagogy and story-telling
- Unfolding and emerging case studies
- Use of “live” actors and simulation exercises in “real time”
- Structured academic controversy
- Flipping the classroom — engaging the Socratic method
- Problem-based learning
- Use of YouTube, podcasts, smartphones, clickers
- Anticipatory activities
- Invite students to teach a topic or part of a class
- Ask students about books read recently — relate to class
- Talk about your own intellectual journeys
- Move around and be present
- Ask lots of questions — pause long enough for a response
- Tell stories and read book passages
- Try something unique to your subject — music!
- Use humor if it works for you
- Bring relevant books to class — build a reading list

For a more complete discussion of active and collaborative teaching strategies, see “Just Tell Me What is on the Test: A Case for Student Engagement” (Sportsman, 2013).

Conclusion

Incivility is minimized when students are engaged in the learning experience, rather than being “talked to” or “talked at.” Therefore, nurse educators must adopt and master teaching strategies that ignite lifelong learning, promote efficient problem-solving, and foster clinical inquiry in nursing students who are practice-ready. It is imperative that nurse educators prepare the next generation of nurses to lead the health care revolution by understanding the need to create and sustain cultures of civility and respect by implementing strategies to encourage student engagement.

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