Civility in the University Classroom

Dr. Carol Ann Goff-Kfouri

Faculty of Humanities

Notre Dame University-Louaize, Lebanon

Abstract

Classroom management is generally regarded as an issue for schools; one thinks of discipline, unruly students, classroom rules that must be followed and if they are not, the consequences that a student will incur. This is no longer the case. A quick review of the literature gives evidence of the importance of classroom management and civility in the university classroom as well as the ESL preparatory classrooms. Students in today's universities have been educated in a more permissive environment; they are computer literate; they are traveled and many of them are working to pay for their own studies. This presentation will propose efficient and practical means to facilitate learning for today's students. Logical classroom rules, discussion techniques and presentation methodology will be covered.

Keywords: civility, discussion guidelines, rules, ESL

Civility in the University Classroom

When some university instructors hear the term *classroom management*, they may smile and think to themselves that this is a concept meant for high school and elementary school teachers. They remember their own school days with students getting up from their desks and walking around the classroom, talking out of turn or, other more disruptive behavior.   Up until quite recently, conversations concerning classroom management issues were rare among university faculty members. However, more and more requests for sessions on classroom civility during university orientation sessions are being made.   There is a growing belief that classroom management is an additional responsibility for faculty members (Feldmann, 2001, p. 342). During faculty meetings, issues concerning behavior, attention span, and the necessity for rules are often raised. ESL instructors are not foreign to such discussion; intensive English instructors regularly mention that there are some students who show little interest in the activities being presented, who come unprepared or without the basic notebook and pen, and who are unaffected by the fear of repeating or failing their classes.

 University classrooms in most countries today welcome students who come from all walks of life. Classrooms are full of students who have travelled and those who have yet to travel; there are those who are very internet savvy and those who are still struggling with technology to give only two examples of the diversity we encounter. Though a classroom of students with varied experience may be an additional resource for the professor, it also presents the additional challenge of ensuring a common understanding of the definition of civil behavior during the time students are in the classroom and on campus.

During a presentation on classroom management in the university classroom in 2003, it seemed appropriate to lay emphasis on means of carrying out organized question and answer sessions (Kfouri, 2003). In 2010, only seven years later, the course syllabus, general rules for the university classroom, and the means to carry out classroom discussions on controversial topics are of more interest to instructors. There are certainly many reasons that can be cited to explain the change in focus: diversity of the student body, large classes, younger instructors, and the fact that a university education is becoming an almost automatic extension of the high school diploma for many students. There is also the feeling among many university instructors that the incoming student body is more mature from certain points of view and that the more teaching-centered methods of teaching may not always respond to their expectations.   All of those reasons may contribute to a need to explore strategies that contribute to more civility in a university classroom setting.

This paper will argue that university instructors must envisage strategies for classroom management and civility. These strategies are by necessity, part of a holistic outlook on the way education and learning are perceived by the faculty member and the student. They are linked to best practice in current university teaching.

The study of modern classroom management strategies is said to have begun in the 1970's with the landmark study carried out by Jacob Kounin who video-taped forty-nine first and second grade classrooms. The findings of his study have marked the way educators on all levels look at discipline models. (Emmer, 1981, p.342). Kounin stressed that teachers must possess the characteristic now referred to as "withitness." (Cangelosi, 1997, p.22). Being "withit" supposes that a professor is aware of all the events that take place in his or her class, and that if two simultaneous off-task disruptions take place, the professor would be able to decide very quickly which one is the most negative and deal with it first. Kounin's also stated that changes between activities during a class must be handled "smoothly" so as to avoid excess waste of valuable learning time. (p.23). Kounin's work still holds true today and though his study was carried out on elementary school students, the findings are not entirely foreign to instructors on most levels.

J. Brophy (1983) has also influenced the classic studies on classroom management by asserting three additional basic principles. The first principle is that the teacher must be willing to accept responsibility for classroom control. The second is that problems must be dealt with through long-term, solution-oriented approaches rather than the "band-aid" approach often employed by teachers. The third and final principle encourages the teacher to verify if the students' behavior difficulties are due to personal problems (Brophy, 1983, in Huitt, C., 1996).

James Cangelosi (1997) in his *Classroom Management Strategies* stresses the need for classroom teachers of all levels to prevent classroom management issues from occurring as much as possible by using the Teaching Process Model. (1997, p. 6). In this model comprised of 6 steps, the actual teaching of the subject matter does not occur until step 5. The Teaching Process Model may thus imply that the four steps which precede the classroom activity itself are as important as the time used in the classroom. The four steps which precede the teaching activity are: determining the students' needs, the learning goals and design and preparation of activities (p.6). One of the main premises supported by Cangelosi is that well prepared classes will deter uncivil acts.

William Glasser (1992) and Lee Canter (1992 have also contributed to the corpus of work on classroom management in general, but the focus in this paper are those writers who emphasize the university student. Hamdan (2007) suggests that more work be done on classroom management or civility in the classroom among university instructors in the Middle East as well. In his study carried out with students at the Kuwait University College of Education, respondents

expressed the important point that classroom management is more than keeping order; the teacher is responsible for the entire classroom environment. (p.572). Teachers in high schools or elementary schools take courses in classroom management; most university instructors have access to a few workshops, but often no formal training. However, there are more universities worldwide offering certificate programs in university teaching such as the University of Saint Joseph in Lebanon.   Nilson & Jackson (2004) stated that classroom incivility on the university level is a global issue and interferes with the professor's ability to facilitate learning and the students' right to an education.   In their paper presented at the 4th Conference of the international Consortium for Educational Development in Ottawa, Canada in June of 2004, they presented a proposal to involve both students and instructors on the first day of class in the preparation of a Student Bill of Rights and a Professor's Bill of Rights.

According to the Webster's New World Dictionary (1993), civility is: "a civil or polite act or utterance." The definition given by Word Net seems to apply to the main argument of this paper in that it states that civility is not only "formal or perfunctory," but it is also "showing regard" for others (wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn).

It is especially important when discussion on classroom management or civility in the university is carried out in the classroom that respect for others include not only the professor but for the students as well. It is within this scope that the importance of the course syllabus can be seen.   One of the reasons that more and more attention is being given to the syllabus is to ensure that the ground rules are set between the instructor and the student (Albers, 2003; Seldin & Miller, 2009). A syllabus has been defined as a contract between the instructor and the students. What differentiates a written contract from a gentleman's agreement is the legality of the former and the fact that what is written must be carried out or else the other party may actually go to court.

Due in part certainly to the increased attention to international standards and accreditation, most departments provide instructors with a skeleton syllabus format. The department syllabus may not always be detailed enough to provide students with the professor's particular guidelines on assignments, weekly schedules, assessment, plagiarism and classroom policies on late papers. It is up to the class instructor to add the additional information which will set the tone for a climate of academic excellence.

A university syllabus traditionally includes the following: course description, objectives, goals and learning outcomes, assessment and evaluation guidelines, detailed weekly distribution, required textbook, additional readings, policies on paper and presentations, plagiarism, as well as particular information necessary for the course. If the syllabus is to be taken seriously it should be the first item of discussion on the first day of class. By treating the syllabus as a formal document, instructors explicitly demonstrate how much respect they have

for the subject matter and establish the beginning of a positive attitude for the entire semester. From this discussion, students should become aware of what they can expect from the class and what the instructor expects from the students. Once the expectations are clear, students and instructors are ready for work. Paper syllabi are still the norm in many universities but if the syllabus is available online, it is advantageous to project it on the classroom screen the first day and ask students to take notes. Some instructors have even suggested a quiz on the syllabus. Not only should the syllabus be emphasized on the first day of class, but an instructor may also find that referring to particular sections during the semester will motivate students to stay focused on the learning outcomes to be acquired rather than the details which may take away from the students' concentration.

The syllabus is only one factor in building a climate of civility in the classroom. Though the students in a university classroom are young adults, it is beneficial that the entire department or faculty agrees on basic rules. The following rules are suitable for most university classrooms and may be included in the course syllabus.

1. Cell phones are out of sight and on silent mode during class.
2. Lap tops are used only for class related activities.
3. Once you are in the classroom, you are requested to remain for the entire session.
4. Integrity on exams, quizzes and papers is required.
5. Respect of classmate's opinions is required during all sessions.

In discussions conducted in the author's classes during which students have been asked to comment on the rules and to suggest others, students themselves propose strict rules on respecting punctuality and attendance policies. They often emphasize how important it is to prohibit vulgar language.   According to Nilson and Jackson, (2004), these points would be included in the student code of conduct rather than the basic general rules.

It may not be enough to publish rules in a syllabus even if all the instructors of the department publish the same rules. In order for civility to be the norm, the same instructors must agree that they will consistently enforce the same rules and that in all classrooms for example, cell phones will not be tolerated, or that cheating is considered a serious offense and students will be held accountable with fair and just consequences.

In most universities, students are allowed a drop and add period after registration. If students are not able to keep up with the syllabus, rules and general requirements, it may be better if they cancel their registration in the class before the actual course work begins.   Even though instructors present the rules and students agree on a code of conduct,

some students are less civil than is required. They may react negatively to another student's opinion without recourse to evidence or facts or use fallacies in their arguments; they may also lift their voices when they feel attacked.

According to Lisa Rodriguez (www.4faculty.org/includes/108r2.jsp online), the following situations may occur in many university classrooms. Solutions to these situations are listed below.

1. Sleeping in class

- Solution one: Go to the student, wake him or her up and ask them to leave the class and see you in your office during office hours.
- Solution two: While the other students are working on an assignment, wake the student up and ask him or her to speak with you outside the classroom. State that sleeping is unacceptable and ask they come back when they can concentrate.
- Solution three: If a student has never had such an issue in the past, there may be a health problem; wake the student, ask him or her if they are ok and to leave and come back when they are well.

2. A small group of students is consistently off task.

- Solution One: Walk up to the group and remind them the work must be finished by a certain time or they will have chosen the option of earning a low grade.
- Solution Two: Ask the students if they have understood the assignment, if they have questions. Inform them that if they have understood the assignment, it must be finished by the end of class.
- Solution Three: Ask students to carry on their conversation outside the classroom and to rejoin the class when they are ready to work. Participation grades are taken away.

3. Impolite remarks to you.

- Solution One: Politely respond to the student that such language is not appreciated in this class. Pass quickly to another subject. Do not ignore the remark.
- Solution Two: Ask student to see you after class. Explain briefly your surprise and request it does not happen again.

4. Students consistently do not follow your class rules.
- Solution One: Ask student to see you in the office. Have him or her read the rules and explain their interpretation. Explain the normative interpretation and give student the option to withdraw from the course or follow the rules.

5. Cheating in class
- Solution One: Remind student of rule of doing one's own work.
- Solution Two: If student tries again, take the paper and ask student to leave. Solution Three: Student receives a zero on the assignment.
- The common situations above are consistent with the Royce Report published by

the Center for Survey Research at Indiana Research in 2000. Nilson and Jackson (2004) quote the report when they cite the more common incivilities reported by university instructors. Some of the more common include the above but also include: sending the instructor inappropriate emails, challenging the instructor's knowledge or credibility, demanding make-up exams, extensions, grade changes, or other special favors. (p.3).

Ask any student what they like best about their major classes or ESL classes and they will often say that they enjoy discussing with their classmates.   According to Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, founders of the Beyond Intractability Project at the University of Colorado at Boulder (1997), in their article entitled, *The Meaning of Civility*, there are some very simple principles that should be followed by all of us as we engage in discussions on subjects that may cause people to act uncivilly due to their sensitive nature.

1. Separate People from the Problem
2. Obtain Available Technical Facts
3. Limit interpersonal Misunderstandings
4. Use Fair Process
5. Limit Escalation
6. Honor Legitimate Uses of Legal, Political, and Other Types of Power
7. Separate Win/Win from Win/Lose Issues
8. Limit the Backlash Effect
9. Keep Trying to Persuade and Allow Yourself to be Persuaded
10. More Persuasion, More Exchange, Less Force

Even though educators must make further progress in teaching methodologies, there are notably, fewer class sessions in all specializations when students responded to lower level yes and no questions based on a sterile generic text. Today's ESL textbooks, for example tackle issues of race relations, environmental concerns, the developing world and its needs and paradoxes, gender, and philosophies among other exciting topics. More and more class sessions are thus subject to discussions which could cause unneeded tension in the classroom.

Two of the most common formulas for classroom discussions are whole class discussions during which the instructor is the discussion moderator, and small group discussions in which students engage in a focused conversation amongst themselves.

From this author's experience, whole class discussions are more beneficial when based on a text students have read and prepared rather than the professor asking a question at the beginning of the class session and asking for the students' opinions. For ESL students, the students can refer to the text for vocabulary support and can use the sentence structure in the text as a basis for formulating their own sentences and thoughts.

One of the most common difficulties that ESL or other instructors face during whole class discussions is when students make politically incorrect statements in class. Statements may be

made that do not respect gender, age or nationality. More and more Teaching and Learning Center literature is offering suggestions so that instructors may adopt strategies to benefit from such opportunities and learn from the tense moments that may mirror real life. According to Lee Warren, (Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University, online) it may be tempting to simply ignore the comment and move forward in the discussion, but if we are to encourage civility, it is necessary to not take sides, to moderate a discussion, to rephrase statements and to help students learn from the issues raised. Further tips from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University for defusing a discussion on a politically incorrect statement, or holding a class discussion on a subject which is clearly not one on which there is classroom consensus are listed below:

1. You are the adult. Do not allow personal attacks. Keep your distance from the discussion.
2. Require that all students listen to the other point of view, ask questions, and then to be able to restate or argue for that position.
3. If students are arguing, stop the discussion and ask the whole class what they might learn from this.
4. Know yourself. Know the subjects that make you upset. Devise strategies for handling such moments.

In a paper published by The Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology at Illinois State University, the following tips were suggested:

1. Set the norms for discussion the first week of class; get them talking right away.
2. Give students a complex question to consider. Have each write on this question for 5-15 minutes. Then discuss with the whole class. (McKinney, K. n.d.)

The second suggestion is one that could lead to organized, civil discussion since the students will have written their position concerning a subject and would have had time to re-read it before sharing it with the class.

Experience has shown the author that only after students are trained to take part in whole class discussions and have gotten into the habit of listening to others can fruitful small group discussions take place.   Five to seven students is an ideal group discussion size. Odd numbers will prevent people from pairing off in the discussion. In a common ESL class, fifteen minutes is a productive time limit that can be productive. Participants also need roles to play. There should be a leader, or moderator, a note taker/reporter, a time keeper. Either students should be given a task sheet or one should be on the screen in the classroom.

A sample university level task sheet is found in Appendix I. It can be adapted to suit the instructors' specific course objectives.

Writing a clear syllabus, setting rules and keeping to them, organizing class discussions certainly contribute to a civil university classroom experience.   However, as university

instructors, we also hope that our classroom sessions will not be sterile 50 minute time periods when we all avoid issues that may cause controversy. Along with the clear syllabus, and clear ground rules for discussion, it is the instructor's role as the adult to work towards establishing a positive atmosphere in the classroom, a place where students feel that their opinions, when backed up by evidence will be respected, where they can test their positions on subjects without fear of reprisal with a spirit of respect for the other.

In conclusion, university instructors may not be aware of the wider role they are called upon to play in the education of contemporary citizens. Certainly, students go to university to major in a certain area of study, to learn how to carry out research, and later on contribute to the development of a county's infrastructure and commerce. If university instructors also take the time to insist and model on classroom civility in their classrooms, not only will they be contributing to the students' academic formation. They will be contributing to the education of citizens who may be more willing to listen to others, to find consensus when there are difficulties in the work place, and perhaps to find solutions to the complex issues the world is facing.

References

Albers, C. (2003). Using the syllabus to document the scholarship of teaching   T*eaching Sociology*, 31, no. 1, 60-72. Retrieved from the Duquesne University   Center for Teaching Excellence website. www.duq.edu/cte/teaching/ teaching-tip-ten.cfm.

Burgess, G. & Burgess, H., The meaning of civility. Beyond intractability Version IV. Retrieved June 25th, 2011 from http://www.beyondintractability.org/ documents/editorials/civility.jsp?nid=6760

 The Beyond Intractability Project. University of Colorado. 2003-2010. Retrieved at http://beyondintractability.org/documents/editorials/civility.jsp?nid=6760

 Brophy, J. (1983). Effective classroom management. *The School Administrator, 40(7), 33-36* in Huitt, W. (1996). Classroom management. *Educational Psychology Interactive.* Baldosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved June 24th, 2011 from http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/manage/manage.html.

Cangelosi, J.S. (1997). *Classroom management strategies: gaining and maintaining students' cooperation.* New York: John Wiley % Sons.

Canter, L., & Canter, M. (1992). *Assertive discipline: Positive behavior management f*or *today's schools* (rev.ed.). Santa Monica, CA: Lee Canter & Associates.

Charlton, T. & David, K., eds., (1989). *Managing misbehavior: strategies for effective management of behavior in schools*, Basingstoke, Macmillan.

Emmer, E.T., & Evertson, C.M., (1981). Synthesis of research on classroom management. *Educational Leadership.* 38 (4), 342-347. Retrieved at Research Information Service. June 24th, 2011.

Feldmann, LJ (Fall 2001). Classroom civility is another of our instructor responsibilities.

   College Teaching, 49, 4.p.137(4). Retrieved June 22, 2011, from Expanded

   Academic ASAP via Gale: http://find.galegroup.com/gtx.do?prodId=EAIM&userGropName=ndul.

Glasser, W. (1992). *The quality school: Managing students without coercion (*2nd ed.).

   New York: Harper Perennial.

Hamdan, J. A. (Sept 2007). Higher education classroom management: Kuwait University students' views. *College Student Journal*, 41, 3. p.572(11). Retrieved June 23, 2011, from Expanded Academic ASAP via Gale: http://find.galegroup.com/gtx/start.do?prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=ndul

Huitt, W. (1996). Classroom management. *Educational Psychology   Interactive.* Baldosta, GA:
    Valdosta State University. Retrieved June 24th, 2011 from
    http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/manage/manage.html

Kfouri, C.(2003). Classroom management in a university setting. Paper presented at the
    Lebanese American University, Blatt, Lebanon.

Nilson, L. & Jackson, N., (2004). Combating classroom misconduct (Incivility) with

  Bills of Rights. Paper presented at the 4th Conference of the International Consortium

  For Educational Development, Ottawa, Canada.

McKinney, K. *Ideas for generating discussions on readings or other class material.* Illinois State
    University Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology.
    http://www.ctlt.ilstu.edu/additional/tips/genDisc.php.

Royce, A.P. (2000). *A survey of academic incivility at Indiana University: Preliminary   report.*
    Bloomington, IN: Center for Survey Research, Indiana University.

Rodriguez, L. (n.d.) Classroom management. Retrieved: June 24th, 2011.
    http://www.4faculty.org/includes/108r2.jsp/

Seldin, P. & Miller, E. (2009). In The academic portfolio: A practical guide to
    documenting teaching, research and service (p. 14). San Francisco: Jossey-
    Bass.Retrieved from the Duquesne University Center for Teaching Excellence
    website. www.duq.edu/cte/teaching/teaching-tip-ten.cfm
Warren, L. (n.d.) *Managing hot moments in the classroom.* Derek Bok Center for
    Teaching and Learning, Harvard University. Retrieved: June 24th, 2011
    http://isites.harvard,edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474hotmoments.html.
Webster's New World Dictionary. Available at URL
    http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn.

About the author

Carol Ann Goff-Kfouri holds a PhD degree in Education from the University of Saint Esprit in Kaslik, Lebanon. She holds a DEA, a Matrise and a Licence from the University of Montpellier, in Montpellier, France and a BA in French from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, USA. She is presently the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Notre Dame Univeristy-Louaize, Lebanon.

Appendix I

Sample Task Sheet

You have 17 minutes to complete this exercise.

Decide on a moderator, a time keeper, a reader, and a note taker.   3 minutes

The note taker will write a summary of the discussion on a transparency and present it to the whole class.

Each student reads the text and the three questions that have been given to them.   5 minutes.

The moderator asks the students to respond to the questions; the note taker listens to the main ideas suggested by all taking brief notes. 6 minutes

The moderator asks one student to make a synthesis of the answers which the note taker writes. 3 minutes

The note taker presents the groups point of view to the whole class. Other members of the group may answer questions from other students.

Appendix 2

Points I am Sure You Will Agree With

1. Instructors must be very well prepared for class and have prepared a detailed lesson plan.
2. Instructors should announce the class objectives at the beginning of the class; they should be reviewed before leaving with the entire class.
3. Students work best in a pleasant but serious atmosphere.
4. The best response for students who are not working very hard is often, "I am sorry you chose the option of not working to your potential in this class." It may be necessary to repeat this course.
5. University students need a framework of rules which must be reinforced regularly. One of the statements repeated often even in a university classroom is "Thank you for raising your hand before you speak."
6. Classes should begin on time with academic work right at the beginning.
7. Very little downtime is needed during a 50 minute class session.
8. When students work in groups, the instructor should go around and stand on the sidelines and listen. Sometimes it may be necessary to intervene and bring students back to the subject assigned.
9. Mature students do some very good work in a group setting.
10. Even mature students have a short concentration span in group work;20 minutes is an effective length of time.
11. If a student is not interested in learning, instructors should not use sarcasm.
12. A well prepared syllabus with all the details is the most efficient means of ensuring that students are aware of their rights and responsibilities.