

Resource Guide

Identifying the Instructor's Role in Classroom Civility

Classroom civility is a unique concept that is more nuanced than “civility” in the broader sense. Clark et al. (2022) analyzed the concept of classroom civility as defined across a wide range of disciplines and arrived at this definition:

Choosing to authentically engage in respectful, welcoming, and inclusive ways to foster equity, belonging, community, and connection, including instances when opposing views are expressed (p. 266)

This definition includes choice as a key component, suggesting that civility behaviors are often intentional in nature. Civility has also been shown to be associated with academic engagement, as students who performed more classroom civility behaviors with their instructors and peers reported greater learning and motivation. These correlations were strongest when the classroom environment was perceived to be welcoming and the instructor showed personal interest in students by developing rapport (Myers et al., 2016). These findings emphasize the foundational role instructors have in driving classroom civility. Yet, when asked if faculty contribute to classroom civility, 92% of students reported “yes” while only 21% of instructors surveyed responded “yes” to the same question (McKinne & Martin, 2010).

This raises a challenge for students, as each instructor brings their own expectations about what civility looks like, but many may not recognize their own role in establishing and maintaining a civil classroom. Here are some tips to help you foster a civil learning environment in your classes.

- **Reflect on your non-negotiable expectations.** Even with a shared definition of classroom civility, each instructor has behaviors they consider disrespectful or unwelcoming that might be ignored or non-issues to other instructors. The individual nature of civility expectations makes it important to recognize what civility behaviors you are particularly focused on in your classroom. By identifying your non-negotiable civility expectations (e.g., attendance, no technology) you can help students understand why you hold these expectations and how they can contribute to civility in your classroom specifically.
- **Invite students to share their civility expectations.** Just as you have your specific ideas about what civility looks like in the classroom, students bring unique expectations about civil instructor and peer behavior. Instructor behaviors that are often labeled as incivility include lecturing too fast with no interaction, acting aloof and distant, treating students as a burden, surprising students with unannounced assessments, arriving late or cancelling class without notice, grading that seems unclear or unfair, and expecting students to blindly accept instructor authority (Braxton & Mann, 2004; Knepp, 2012; McKinne & Martin,

2010). Inviting students to share their expectations can help demystify what they expect from you and from one another.

- **Plan for co-creation of civility norms.** Early in the semester, you can move beyond simple sharing of expectations to a co-creation of norms in which you accommodate student expectations and preferences where it fits but also clarify your non-negotiable expectations. When sharing these, be sure to clarify the reasoning behind them so students understand your decision, even if they disagree with it. In fact, this openness in dialogue around expectations sets an example of civility that reflects the definition proposed by Clark et al. (2022). Encouraging students to contribute to the establishment of civility norms, while being clear about your own expectations, is especially helpful to students since they can't be expected to guess which behaviors matter to you and not to their other instructors.
- **Set an example: follow established norms even when responding to incivility.** In McKinne & Martin's (2010) survey of students, students repeatedly stated that instructors should show the same courtesy and respect for students as they expect from the students. Even in classrooms where norms are set collaboratively, there will be instances where students violate them. When responding to these instances of incivility, remember that how you respond may reinforce or undermine the foundation of civility in the classroom. Students and instructors alike rated "role-modeling professionalism" and "taking personal responsibility and standing accountable for actions" as essential strategies for addressing incivility (Hudgins et al., 2022). Remember that student behaviors are not necessarily reflective of their personal character and addressing behavior in the context of the jointly created civility norms while showing empathy can demonstrate the very civility norms you're enforcing.

Civility in the classroom is strongly related to classroom disruptions. If you're interested in how to prepare for and respond to classroom disruptions, see our resource guides on [acute disruptions](#) and [preparing for classroom provocations](#).

References

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