CHAPTER FIVE

DEALING WITH INCIVILITY IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

What Is Classroom "Incivility"?

What do we mean by *incivility* when describing student behavior in the college classroom? Richardson (2000) says the term is an ambiguous one. He argues that the difficulty in defining "incivility" is rooted in people's differing personal expectations about appropriate behavior.

Although Richardson's point is well taken, there does seem to be a growing consensus that the term "incivility" generally refers to the following kinds of behaviors:

- Being consistently late for class.
- Talking while the instructor is speaking.
- Drawing pictures in a notebook or doing crossword puzzles during class.
- Wearing headphones in class to listen to music.
- Allowing cell phones to ring during class.
- Talking on cell phones while class is in session.
- Walking in and out of the room while class is in session.
- Walking in late and passing in front of the teacher.
- Reading newspapers or magazines in class.
- Doing work from another course during class.
- Passing notes or playing games.
- Engaging in other behaviors that most people consider insolent, challenging, and intimidating.

Kathy Franklin, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, has been researching the history of undergraduate life for years. She says that students have been making mischief on college campuses from the first days of higher education. She cites as one example thirteenth-century students at the University of Bologna who beat their professors if they didn't like their grades. At Yale University in the 1820s, meanwhile, students rebelled against classes they saw as too demanding by throwing food and plates at professors in the dining hall. What's happening today in college classrooms is not unusual, Franklin notes. But she does point out that students today are different from students ten or more years ago because of demographic changes, consumerism, and their K-12 experiences (Schneider 1998).

There are many well-documented cases of students who have challenged and harassed their professors. In some cases, the gender or race/ethnicity of the faculty member may have been a factor that contributed to the student's rudeness. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Schneider (1998) reported the case of a black, female professor who tried to speak to students after class because they had engaged in very disruptive behavior during the class session. The students had been reading newspapers, talking loudly, and passing around a game of tic-tac-toe while she was trying to conduct class. When she spoke to the young men after class about their behavior, one of them responded with an extremely vulgar gesture. The teacher interpreted the act as a defiant one, with sexist and racist components.

Hopefully these kinds of incidents are rare. Many of us who have been teaching for two or three decades, however, believe that problems of incivility are much worse these days than they were in the past. The incidence of incivility seems much more widespread in our classes. One of the big differences seems to be that professors are not receiving the same levels of respect they enjoyed decades ago.

On the other hand, I don't want to overstate the problem. Most students are respectful and well behaved. In fact, many of these students are complaining about the disruptive students. The problem is that it takes only a few students — the disruptive ones — to damage the teaching and learning environment for everyone.

If there has been an increase in disruptive classroom behavior, to what can we attribute it? There are many theories that attempt to explain the increased prevalence of incivility in today's classrooms. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Peter Sacks believes that incivility is rooted in the new "consumer" attitude among many students. In his book, *Generation X Goes to College: A Journey into Teaching in Postmodern America* (1996), Sacks sug-

gests that many students see themselves as "customers" of higher education. They believe that, since they're paying money for a degree, they're running the show. Their attitude is, "I'm the customer, and I'll behave any way I want to." Their behavior reflects their attitude of *entitlement*.

Add to this notion the crisis of authority in this country that many scholars are writing about. Many students are suspicious of the rules set by adults in general. Since their professors generally aren't held in high esteem by the American culture at large, many of today's students simply don't respect their professors or think much of them. Many students, in fact, seem to feel their teachers ought to "give" them the information they're paying for. Additionally, many students want to be entertained in class. And many are studying less, paying less attention in class, preparing themselves less for college, and being less disciplined as compared with students of the past.

Lest we totally blame students and their life circumstances (these are often children of divorce, latchkey children, and children of MTV) for this increase in incivility, let's examine the role of the educational institution, as well as the role of faculty members, in encouraging disruptive behavior among students.

What can we say about the culture of the college/university in this era? First, there is much greater diversity in our classes than there was decades ago. While this diversity — of ethnicity/race, age, and social class — makes for a richer classroom environment than the one of yesteryear, it may also create a diversity of student expectations for what ought to take place in class. For example, returning students — our older college population — may bring to class a seriousness of intent to learn; they may have certain expectations about how class will be conducted. Some Asian students, meanwhile, might expect a straight lecture format and remain quiet and attentive. These students may come from a model of education in which that type of behavior is expected of them. To ask questions in class and to participate, in their educational culture, could be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. Students from public high schools in America, on the other hand, may come to college still clinging to their high school mentalities; often their behavior is simply immature. Such diversity among students may be one contributing factor to the increases we're seeing in disruptive behavior in our classrooms.

Second, many campuses are today offering courses in a large-lecture format. Social psychologists have long known that, when people feel anonymous — that is, when they lose a sense of self — their behavior may be influenced in negative ways. Research (Zimbardo 1970; Prentice-Dunn and Rogers 1989) shows that, when people lose a sense of self and thus feel

"deindividuated" (Diener, Lusk, DeFour, and Flax 1980), they're more likely to behave in aggressive and undesirable ways. Students in large lecture classes often feel disconnected from the teacher, and for good reason: Some lecture classes have very high numbers of students, ranging from a couple hundred to several hundred. (In the latter case, the classes are sometimes so big that students can see the instructor only by watching a nearby TV monitor.) Add to these feelings of "deindividuation" the difficulty so many students have staying "tuned in" to a lecture that lasts fifty or seventy-five minutes. Such an atmosphere is ripe for side conversations, walking in and out of class, and engaging in other forms of disruptive behavior.

In the videoconference, "Faculty on the Front Lines: Reclaiming Civility in the Classroom" (presented by PBS and the Dallas County Community College District on April 8, 1999), there was discussion of the role of faculty in possibly creating incivility or exacerbating it, and what we as faculty could do to eliminate or reduce it. Although the panelists were not implying that student incivility is actually caused by faculty, they pointed out the many ways that our behavior may create a classroom atmosphere that opens itself up to disruptive behavior. For example, faculty members who are repeatedly late to class themselves are setting an example for students to emulate. Faculty members who show disrespect for their students by being condescending or sarcastic in class can expect students to be hostile toward them and the course itself. And faculty members who ignore disruptive behavior are tacitly giving a message to their students that they tolerate or condone the behavior. As teachers, we must address disruptive behavior when it occurs. Approaches that avoid direct confrontation seem to work best.

It's possible, then, that some faculty members are setting a stage for the development of incivility or, perhaps worse, exacerbating it when it occurs. However, even teachers who create a warm and welcoming classroom environment — who seem to be doing everything we hope teachers would do — are complaining about greater incivility in their classes.

What can we do to eliminate, or at least reduce, the incidence of disruptive classroom behavior? First and foremost, we need to put into writing what the course expectations are and what our expectations are with respect to student behavior. Whether this information is part of the syllabus, an addendum to the syllabus, or a separate guidelines sheet, it should be given out and discussed in the first or second class of the semester. In the book, *Coping with Misconduct in the College Classroom: A Practical Model*, Gerald Amada (1999) discusses the importance of setting clear academic standards as a basis for evaluating students, as well as specifying behavioral standards for class sessions. Most institutions have a code of student behavior clearly stated in the student handbook. Be sure you know

this code so that you'll be better prepared to deal with violations of the code if they occur in your classroom.

Richardson (2000) reinforces the idea of spelling out your expectations for acceptable student behavior. In fact, he believes that the key contributor to student incivility in the classroom is the lack of congruence between student and teacher expectations. He cites five ways that incivility might develop in your classroom:

- You fail to communicate your expectations to your students.
- Your students ignore or disagree with the expectations you've set.
- Your students fail to communicate their expectations to you.
- You ignore or disagree with the expectations your students have set.
- Your students disagree with or are unaware of each other's expectations.

Therefore, one way to encourage your students to behave appropriately in the classroom is to be on the same page with them where expectations are concerned.

Richardson also suggests that we as teachers move away from the traditional lecture format, which he says is based on a model of education that promotes one-way transmission of knowledge. Interactive styles of instruction — e.g., *cooperative* learning, *collaborative* learning (see Chapter 4, "Promoting Student Participation and Motivation") — are more likely to engage our students and discourage incivility among them, Richardson says. He also makes the case that traditional-age students are still "apprentice" adults, and therefore not fully mature. As professors, we must model the adult role and make our expectations for adult classroom behavior explicit. Richardson (2000, 7) offers the following guidelines for modeling classroom decorum:

- Make behavioral expectations clear in your syllabus. Use positive, constructive language, not threats of reprisal.
- Talk about yourself. Let your students hear what you value.
- Learn about your students. Ask about their hopes and dreams.
- Earn trust by being trustworthy. Live up to your own expectations, and be consistent in applying them to students.
- Prepare students for active learning by encouraging them to see learning as a process, not a product.
- Use collaborative projects and group dialogue as an opportunity for students to set and meet expectations for themselves.

- Model adult behavior. Remember that "apprentice" adults take many of their tacit cues from respected mentors.
- Be alert for symptoms of mismatched expectations. Even minor incivility should not be ignored, but treated as a sign that realignment of expectations is needed.
- Be prepared to adjust your own behavior, if necessary, and to let students learn from your example.
- Take time to discuss your expectations with other teachers. The faculty development center on your campus may sponsor seminars or informal opportunities to learn how other teachers approach civility issues in their classrooms.

When creating a statement of expectations for your syllabus, or developing a separate "student conduct guidelines" sheet, it's important that you set a tone fostering a positive classroom climate. Your guidelines should reflect the idea that you are in charge of the classroom dynamic, but without sounding authoritarian. What follows is an example of a guidelines sheet created by a committee at my institution. Many members of our faculty use it as is, while others adapt it to their specific courses. Feel free to use or adapt it as a handout for your classes (figure 2).

In his article, "Adapting to a New Generation of College Students," Turner (1999) uses a handout that talks about the academic community and the student's membership in that community. He spells out what he calls the "Seven R's" — Rights, Responsibilities, Roles, Rewards, Rigor, Routines, and Rules — and says, "...These explicit rules make student success a central concern of the course. The rules help convince students that they are integral members of the academic community. An ancillary goal: To increase the student sense of belonging and so improve the likelihood they will do what it takes to persist and succeed in their education" (Turner 1999, 35).

In addition to having a written statement of your expectations and discussing that statement in class, you should be sure you consistently come to class on time. This is another simple but important way to model adult behavior. If possible, arrive early to class so that you can connect with your students. Greet them in a friendly way. Ask them questions to engage them in conversation. Learn your students' names and how to pronounce them correctly. As I mentioned in earlier chapters, when I have led focus groups and conducted or reviewed studies, students have consistently said how important it is to them to have their instructors know their names. They want to feel that their teachers are approachable, and that they care about students.

Guidelines for Courtesy and Respect

I would like to welcome all students into an environment that creates a sense of community, pride, courtesy and respect; we are all here to work co-operatively and to learn together.

In order to create a smooth and harmonious learning community, please make every attempt to come to all the class sessions, to come to class on time, and to stay until the end of the meeting unless you have informed me that you must leave early. There may be a time when you are unavoidably late for class. In that case, please come into the room quietly and choose a seat closest to the entrance. Please see me after class to record your lateness; otherwise you will be marked absent. (Please note that two lateness's to class will be considered the equivalent of one absence, and that poor attendance to class may result in a ten-point penalty, a letter-grade penalty, or withdrawal from the course — see the syllabus for details.)

Please turn off all cell phones and beepers prior to class unless you have informed me that you are, for example, an EMT or a firefighter, or that you are waiting for a personal emergency call.

Once the class session has begun, please do not leave the room and then re-enter unless it is an emergency. If you miss a class meeting for any reason, you are responsible for all material covered, for announcements made in your absence, and for acquiring any materials that may have been distributed in class.

It is important that we are all able to stay focused on the class lecture/discussion. For this reason, only one person at a time in the class should be speaking. Side conversations are distracting for surrounding students and for me. As you can see, simple norms of courtesy should be sufficient to have our class run in the best interests of all of us. Thank you in advance for your co-operation.

Figure 2: Guidelines for Courtesy and Respect

We teachers ought to treat all students with respect. We must treat their questions and comments in class with respect as well. Even if what they have to say is sometimes ignorant, we need to find a respectful way to reframe it for the class. That way, misinformation is not accepted as true, but at the same time we haven't embarrassed the student. If we diminish a student's self-esteem — unintentionally or, much worse, on purpose — we have not only reduced the chances of that student participating in the future, but we have also reduced the chances that other students will ask or answer questions. One of the major themes of Amada's (1999) book centers on the issue of respect. There must be a collegial sense of respect throughout the institution: Respect for staff, faculty, administrators, and,

especially, the student body. Amada also suggests that we as faculty must be on the same page with administrators in terms of responding to disruptive behavior. A mechanism should be in place for the clear and concise documentation of problems, along with a timely and appropriate administrative response to classroom incidents involving incivility.

Specific Disruptive Behaviors — and How to Handle Them

Depending on the particular students in your course, you could face several types of "incivility" in the classroom. Let us look at some ways you can deal with specific disruptive behaviors you might encounter.

Dealing with students who have side conversations.

As I've emphasized throughout this chapter, it's important to discuss your expectations about classroom behavior early in the course. This may not have been necessary years ago, but it seems to be good practice today. I typically tell my students that I hope we have good discussions in class, and that a guideline that may facilitate good discussions is that only one person should speak at a time. If students then talk while I'm speaking, or when a classmate has the floor, I can simply say, "Please remember that only one person should speak at a time."

For many students who talk to the people next to them, simply looking at them — that is, making direct eye contact — stops their talking. Sometimes, walking toward them and looking at them stops their talking. On occasion, though, I've had students who seem not to be able to stop themselves from talking in class, even when I look at them. With students I've felt comfortable with, I've put my hand on their shoulder while I continue to discuss the material. This has always stopped their conversation abruptly. However, it's important for you to have established rapport with the student before trying this strategy; otherwise, the student may simply feel intimidated, and you may lose him or her.

You might also try directing a question to someone who is sitting close to the person who's talking. If you ask the student who is talking to answer a question, not only might you turn that student off to you and the class, but you may also turn off other students as well. The classroom atmosphere should feel safe. Asking a student a question when you know he or she isn't paying attention is perceived as a threat. Asking a nearby student to answer a question is a better solution, because it focuses the class attention to the part of the room where the disruption is and will likely "nudge" the disrupter(s) to stop talking.

If the various in-class strategies you try don't work, talk to the disrupter(s) privately before or after class. You can catch the person(s) on the way out of the room, for example, and say, "May I speak with you for a minute?" You can then explain how his/her/their talking during class is distracting to you and to the other students. You can ask the student(s) to hold his/her/their conversations outside of class. With students who seem not to be able to stop talking to their friends, you can ask that they take seats far enough away from each other so that they're not tempted. You can say this lightheartedly, and maybe with humor, so as not to alienate them. Students are generally much more cooperative if they feel you understand their behavior but simply cannot condone it. If you take a hard-line attitude with them, you may get them to stop talking in your class — but you may also encourage them to stop attending class altogether, or to let their minds wander when they do show up.

A variation on casually asking students who are on their way in or out of class to speak with them is to call their names during class (when they're talking) and tell them you'd like to speak with them after class. This approach generally stops the student from talking for the rest of the session, but it definitely has its risks. Everyone in the class now knows that the student will be reprimanded in some way. You haven't actually reprimanded the student in front of the class, but by calling the student's name, you've highlighted his/her misbehavior. The advantage of this strategy is that the entire class will probably be quiet for the class hour. The disadvantage is that you may have effectively stifled some appropriate class interaction by playing the "authority" role. The student you asked to speak with may feel embarrassed, threatened, and even hostile toward you. Despite the potential drawbacks, you may be forced to use this strategy in some circumstances. However, try alternative approaches first, since the ideal is to win the person, not the point.

Dealing with students who sleep or do unrelated work.

It's tempting to ignore students who sleep in your class, or who do other work clearly not related to your class, because their actions may lower your self-esteem, and/or you simply don't know how to deal with the problem. In the past, whenever I had a student fall asleep in class — and there have been more than a few in my thirty years of college teaching — I used to feel somehow responsible for the student's behavior. I often believed that I put the student to sleep by conducting such a boring class. I also felt embarrassed that other students had noticed the sleeper and seen that I had not responded in any way.

I no longer ignore sleepers — and neither should you, because chances are their fatigue has nothing to do with you and your teaching per-

formance. Talk to the student who falls asleep in your class. When I've spoken to such students, I've often discovered people who have been carrying incredible work loads, many times coming to class straight from working a shift without sleeping. Talking to students about their schedules and commitments — sometimes their overcommitments — can often be helpful to them. They may be able to figure out ways to come to class less exhausted. Additionally, I have on occasion discovered that a sleepy student was on medication for some serious physical problem. In these cases, the student's fatigue has simply been a side effect of the medication. I mention these examples because we're often prone to suspect the worst — of our students and of our own teaching. If we seek and understand the real reasons for a student sleeping in class — instead of falling into the trap of "taking it personally" — we can deal with the issue more effectively.

Students who do other course work in your class are a different matter. Clearly they are disengaged from your teaching efforts. You need to stop this behavior, because it is not in the student's best interest to "miss" your class, and the other students need to know that the behavior is unacceptable. There are several ways to deal with the student who does unrelated work in your class (or who reads the newspaper or a magazine — yes, it does happen!). Some suggestions:

- Try direct eye contact as you move in the student's direction.
- Ask a neighboring student to answer a question.
- Ask the student who is disengaged to answer a question. (Note the potential disadvantages of this approach, which I highlighted earlier in this chapter when discussing students engaged in side conversations.)
- Ask all students to write a response to a question you pose.
- Break the class into pairs or groups and require the completion of a task.
- Speak to the student after class.

The key is to do something in these situations! It may be easier (in the short term) to ignore a student's troublesome behavior, but in the end you'll do a disservice to both the student and the class by failing to act. Amada (1999) uses the term *benign neglect* to refer to the strategy of ignoring disruptive behavior in the hopes that it will go away. Some instructors believe that ignoring certain behaviors is a way to avoid reinforcing them, thus ensuring that the behaviors will cease. Amada, however, argues that there are so many other reinforcers of the student's behavior that are outside of our control that the behavior is more likely to continue if we don't intervene.

Dealing with student disruptions in large-lecture classes.

Side conversations among students are much more common in large-lecture situations than in smaller classrooms. As I noted earlier in this chapter, the greater anonymity students experience in the large lecture setting may encourage some of them to behave in ways they ordinarily would not. I've found, for example, that students who would never talk in a small group feel much freer to talk during large lecture (especially if they're sitting where most talkers tend to sit — in the back rows of the lecture hall). I've also learned that the best way to stop disruptive behavior in large lecture is to try to break down students' sense of "deindividuation." I should mention, though, that I haven't been as successful as I would like to be in this regard: I still have to deal with talkers every semester, but I do find that I'm able to stop the talking patterns earlier in the term, and I feel as if I'm in more control of the class than I was twenty years ago.

I use several strategies to mitigate students' feelings of anonymity in large lecture. In the first class, I explain the attendance policy (which has become more structured over the years). I ask the students to come to class early for the next class period so that they can each select a seat they will keep for the semester. (I tell them that most people automatically sit in the same area anyway, since we're all such creatures of habit.) I also tell them that, according to some research, students tend to do better if they sit close to the front of the room, because they then tend to stay more involved in the class. I note that if students have a strong preference for an aisle seat, they should come early to class for the next session so that they'll be assured of getting one. (I mention this because I've had several students, more in very recent years, who suffer from panic or anxiety disorders. They want to feel they can leave the room quickly if they have to.) I also tell students that first day that I will try to learn all of their names very quickly.

In the next class session, I have students choose their permanent seats, using a straightforward, fast technique devised by one of my colleagues. Then, for the first couple of weeks in large lecture, I sometimes use a student's name by surreptitiously referring to some sheets in front of me, on which I have students' names and row and seat numbers. I also meet the students once a week in twenty-person seminar classes, where I use additional strategies to memorize their names. Soon, I know enough names to create a large-lecture atmosphere where students feel I know who they are and whether they're there or not. Then, whenever possible, I use a student's name to answer a question, address a comment, or illustrate a point using an example.

In the first lectures of the term, I tell students that, considering the size of the class, it's very important to me that they pay attention and not en-

gage in side conversations. I acknowledge that it is understandable for them to be tempted to talk to a friend in the next seat, but that this behavior cannot be tolerated. I tell them I find side conversations extremely distracting, and that students have complained to me over the years that they too are very distracted by people who talk in class. I remind the students that they are all paying tuition to hear these lectures, and that it's part of my role to protect everyone's right to avoid unnecessary distractions.

I've found that the large-lecture atmosphere has to be somewhat different from that of smaller classroom sections. I play much more of an "authority" role in large lecture. I tell students that if they talk with people around them, I will call them by name — and that if I have to call them by name a second time, I'll ask them to leave the lecture hall. I warn the students that I may ask persistent talkers to withdraw from the course. (Note: I make this somewhat authoritarian-sounding statement in the first or second lecture just so students know that I'm serious about not tolerating side conversations. I very rarely use a student's name in this way in large lecture, and then only in extreme cases of disruption. If ever I do use this strategy, it's usually later in the term. By that time I've balanced this hard-line position, which may put students off, by building rapport in the smaller seminar classes.)

Unfortunately, some disruptive behavior in large-lecture classes is almost inevitable, unless you're teaching groups of highly motivated, conscientious students. Part of the problem with my introductory psychology large-lecture course is that most students take it freshman year, before they've been socialized as college students. In my experience, students mature as people and as students in their first college year. By their second year, in my advanced courses, students' behavior is much more mature.

There are many techniques I use in large lecture to keep students engaged (see Chapter 4 for details on "Promoting Student Participation and Motivation"). Obviously, one way to keep disruptive behavior to a minimum is to make the class interesting and to use active learning strategies within the lecture format. I have an edge in that most students elect to take courses in my discipline, psychology, and so they're at least somewhat inherently interested in the subject matter.

It's Always Good to Have a Plan

I'm convinced that when students feel respected and cared about by their teachers, they're far less likely to behave in inappropriate and disruptive ways. However, many students may not be aware of the "rules of college classroom decorum," and some others may bring their own emotional and

behavioral baggage to college that results in a lack of respect for the college environment. That's why it's important to have specific, practical strategies for dealing with incivility if and when it occurs in your classroom. It's just one of several things you can do to ensure "successful beginnings" in your classes.

But what about the "middles" and the "ends" of your classes? A "successful beginning" is great, but the atmosphere you create in your classroom must be conducive to effective teaching and learning throughout the term. So let's look at some ways to keep your students engaged and motivated over the long haul, so that they can successfully complete your course and take something positive and useful from it.