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Civil Obedience:

A Multiple Session, In-Class Exercise:

Civil Obedience

Abstract

It is fairly common to hear faculty complain about student behavior in the classroom (Hill, 2017). These complaints often use words like ‘rude’ and ‘unprofessional.’ Some faculty even put a statement of expected behavior on their syllabi. However, often the problems persist. In our session, we present a simple but effect method of gaining student acceptance of professional behavior in the classroom, and of the consequences for unprofessional behavior.

Word Count: 67

Civil Obedience

Introduction

Is there a classroom instructor who has not caught, or at least noticed disengaged students staring at their laps during class? Rather than wondering what’s so fascinating (or suggesting a sexual dysfunction), these students are usually discovered to be texting on their cell phones. For most instructors, this behavior is simply the latest classroom incivility.

Many management syllabi contain a learning objective of students developing professional behaviors or conducting themselves in a professional manner. The instructors’ goal is to discuss and role model the types of behaviors that students should emulate to be accepted as a business professional after graduation. Most instructors then list a variety of specific behaviors that are not condoned:

“Students are expected to be attentive during class and should not be “multi-tasking” with open laptops or with other distractions. This course helps motivate students to develop their professional business skills. It is imperative that students begin learning professionalism now as opposed to waiting until they enter the workforce. In the spirit of promoting a professional ethic, cell phones and other electronic devices are to be turned off prior to the start of class. Furthermore, arriving late, leaving early, reading unrelated material, talking to classmates (side bars), sleeping, talking/texting on cell phones, surfing the web, etc. will not be tolerated, and you will be dismissed from class. In short, students are expected to conduct themselves in class, and within their teams, in a professional and respectful manner.” Author, 2016.

Notice the focus here. Selected behaviors are identified, although not necessarily defined, and equally salient, the instructor self-identifies the negative outcomes for any student engaging in these identified behaviors and, quite likely, other unspecified classroom behaviors (bullying, obscenities, racism, demeaning humor, rudeness, theft, sexual harassment, etc.). The result is a learning objective that students likely viewed as negative and punitive rather than engaging and reinforcing.

Problem

Presenting these draconian punishments to uncivil student behavior does not address the main “professional" proposition for inculcating the desired “professional” behaviors. Instead, the authors offer an active, participative exercise for the first class meeting that creates student engagement, critical thinking, and responsibility from the outset.

Small group Exercise:

1. Divide students into groups of three-four;
2. Instructor briefly describes the problem of incivility in class and its effect on students’ learning and performing “professional” behaviors;
3. Groups are then given 10 - 15 minutes to define classroom incivility and professional behavior and to identify behaviors they consider to be uncivil and professional;
4. Next, groups report out to the instructor and others in class;
5. Behaviors and definitions are recorded from each group, discussed, and consensus reached on list and definitions;
6. Instructor then explains the need to address violations of civility rules, and asks students what consequences they consider to be fair;
7. Continuing in their small groups, students are given another 10 – 15 minutes to develop a progressive framework of sanctions applicable to the severity of the infraction as well as first, second, and third violations (e.g., oral warning, written document, separate, respectively);
8. Groups then report out, and sanctions are recorded, discussed, and consensus reached;
9. Students receive (and optionally sign) the recorded list of behaviors and prospective violations at the next class meeting;
10. Periodically during the semester, instructor and students review how the process is working (e.g., procedural, distributive justice).

Learning

This process creates clarity in both the definitions of the words “uncivil” and “professional,” and clarity in the expectations for classroom behavior. When the instructor debriefs the students during the second class meeting, s/he identifies the learning concepts that the students experienced doing the exercise in the first class. Through small groups, the students worked productively to create, define, and implement a Classroom Code of Conduct (C3). They learned they could work effectively with classmates, they can be shown that they took responsibility for identifying behaviors and violations of classroom civility, and by signing the Classroom Code of Conduct, they have created a contract with their instructor and the other students. The Code is theirs, not something presented by the instructor. They own it.

Session Structure and Format

During our session, we will run a short version of our exercise. We will begin with a brief discussion of classroom civility, encouraging participants to share their experiences and their syllabus statements (if applicable). This will be followed by the two group breakout and two plenary sessions (described above) in which attendees are first asked to describe what professional behavior in the classroom looks like, and second to identify appropriate consequences for those who do not exhibit professional behavior. After the second plenary session, we will conclude with a brief discussion on student learning.

References

Hill, Robert W., (2107) "Civility is Needed in College Classroom—Now More than Ever." *Fischler College of Education: Faculty Articles*. 252. http://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse\_facarticles/252