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Article categories

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Civility in the Classroom

P.M. Forni, German and Romance Languages and Literatures

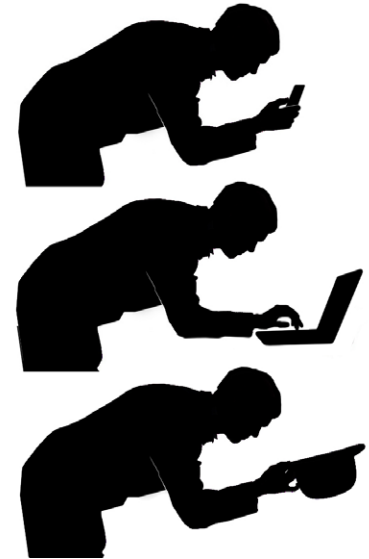
The Problem

Faculty profession of knowledge used to rest on the firm foundation of the principle of authority. Most students granted their teachers respect and sometimes deference as a matter of course. That foundation has been crumbling for at least three generations. The new digital technology has virtually razed it. As college teachers, it is imperative that we realize what this means for our relationship with our students and for the future of education.

For quite some time, we have observed that the disengaged, disrespectful, and unruly student behavior that used to be confined to secondary schools has reached higher education. In college classrooms across the U.S., tardiness, unfamiliarity with assigned readings, and unjustified absences are routine. So are chit-chatting, e-mailing, and instant-messaging. In large lecture halls where ringtones jar and jangle, students have been spotted reading newspapers and even watching television on their portable devices. Instructors routinely open their inboxes to find e-mail that is inappropriately informal, unreasonably demanding, or both. After receiving less-than-stellar grades, legions of students cry foul. The arsenal of the disgruntled includes profanities, threats, and sometimes even physical abuse. It may not be widely known, but university teachers are bullied, too.

Causes

How did we get to this? Many students are simply not prepared to engage in serious academic work and do not know how they are expected to behave on campus. Most of them bring a consumer mentality to school and very little concern about approval from the older generation. That their own generation was raised on oversized portions of self-esteem is part of the problem, not to speak of their massive exposure to coarse popular culture on television and the Web. Profes-



sors may be contributing to the problem as well. We can be unfair, unhelpful, disillusioned, disengaged, arrogant, and sarcastic. And sometimes, just as our new breed of students is not prepared for college, we are not prepared for them.

Solution

Establish a climate of relaxed formality

I have addressed all my students as Mr, Miss, and Ms throughout my teaching career and never had reason to regret it.

Train students to distinguish the trivial from the valuable

I believe that part of my job as a teacher is to convey the notion that, although the Internet may conceal it, a hierarchy of values does exist and does matter. Discuss Internet use with your students. Encourage a critical eye. Open a conversation on what makes information trivial or important. Make discussing values a recurring exercise. When your students become more invested in the notion of value, they will find value in a class that questions its own value and behave more respectfully and considerately in class. Respect takes root in the presence of perceived value.

Sell your product and yourself

Explain the benefits of taking the class, and taking the class from you. Go over what your role will be in a journey of cognitive and emotional growth that will take your students from information to knowledge and from knowledge to wisdom. Students need to understand what they can get from attending your class that they would not from sitting in their dorms in front of a screen. We faculty should present ourselves as necessary and authoritative mediators between the Web and our students, as the credible knowledge professionals who can teach them how to think about the information they retrieve. Do not overpromise, however. Tell them what the class is not going to do for them. This is also the moment to touch upon the workload and discourage attendance by students who find it incompatible with their degree of motivation or availability of time and energy.

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Stipulate a fair covenant

One way to improve the situation is to make your expectations explicit. For the past several years, my students and I have agreed upon codes of behavior – either oral or written – regulating our relationship during the term of classes. In the absence of compelling reasons not to do so, use a written covenant. Read the covenant to your students on the first day of classes and ask them whether they are willing to abide by it. You can certainly make it part of the syllabus, but if you prefer a more memorable option, bring copies on separate sheets. Then, after the students' approval, you will staple the sheets to the syllabi just before distributing them to your class. Either way, it is of utmost importance that you do not change the original stipulations during the course of the term.

Results

As you foster a learning environment where restraint, respect, and consideration are the norm, your students learn better and more. In turn, their success in learning will have a positive effect on their classroom behavior. Non-disruptive behavior reinforces learning, and vice-versa. This is the process you want to put in place in the everyday exercise of your profession. This is what defines a job well-done in the classroom.



Additional Resources

- The ideas presented here are examined in more detail in P.M. Forni's article *The Civil Classroom in the Age of the Net*, published in *The NEA Higher Education Journal*, Fall 2008: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1065281>

Author's Background

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German and Romance Languages and Literatures



P.M. Forni is a professor of Italian Literature at Johns Hopkins University, where he directs the Civility Initiative. The author of *Choosing Civility* (2002) and *The Civility Solution* (2008), he often speaks to college faculty, students, and staff.