

INVITED EDITORIAL

Responding to Incivility in the Classroom: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper briefly reviews the literature of incivility in the university. We then describe a case study of incivility in a university classroom. We analyze how incivility can be handled as a teaching moment that facilitates deeper learning. Rather than seeing incivility as the disruption of learning, we argue that it provides the possibilities for engagement in a form of pedagogy that stresses inclusiveness and democratic values.

Keywords: Classroom, lecture, students` behavior

Introduction

Several researchers have noted the increase of incivility throughout the university system. In 2001, Feldman created a typology of students' uncivil behaviors, with the most commonly reported categories being sleeping, daydreaming, reading a newspaper, using a cell phone in class, and leaving early. Burke (et al. 2014) completed a comprehensive review of student incivility that included four of Feldman's categories. Such incivility included two that were "low intensity" and two (bullying and harassment) that were "high intensity." In a more recent study of 800 University of Michigan faculty, one-quarter reported undergraduate student behavior viewed as disrespectful, while 30% of the faculty reported that their expertise was challenged. Chesler's (2016) classification of the organizational factors that contribute to incivility, includes undergraduate rather than graduate classes, large classes, and research-oriented rather than teaching-oriented

institutions. Chesler also highlights the effects of incivility independent of the intentionality of the speaker and how race and gender, along with privilege and disadvantage are frequently related to incivilities and the responses to them (Caza and Cortina, 2007). Incivilities clearly disrupt the learning process. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) voice their concerns with microaggressions and other uncivil behavior in their Atlantic article, in which they suggest that concerns with microaggressions create an atmosphere in the classroom that contributes to an overbearing adherence to political correctness. This rigid adherence to being “PC” may cause some to refrain speech, as they fear charges of thoughtlessness or worse (pg. 44). Their concern is that this delicacy in discourse is oversensitivity, and therefore creates “the coddling of the American Mind.” In contrast, Chesler’s work suggests that attention to slights, microaggressions, and prejudicial judgments, which disrupt the learning process, should be addressed. He argues 1) incivility is a cost that sometimes has to be absorbed in the interest of diversity and growth 2) the teaching enterprise in which undergraduate classes may have 400 students creates an environment prone to disinterest, withdrawal, and distraction. Therefore, is it responsible for faculty to expect incessant attention given this class structure? Connelly argues that civil behavior is often meant to mean blind obedience and subservience (2009, pg. 54). Just as civil disobedience often challenges unjust laws, isn’t it possible that incivility can challenge unjust learning environments? Incivility as Chesler notes can be initiated by faculty towards students or other faculty, or by students to faculty or other students.

In this paper, we discuss an incident of incivility that occurred between student and professor.

A Case Study of Incivility¹

In a class on racism, with 45 students, I started by writing two quotes on the board.

One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. - Martin Luther King, Jr.

You are never strong enough that you don't need help. - Cesar Chavez

The students here were not the middle-class, high- achieving students that I often had at UCLA. These students often came to class unprepared, doing only a cursory reading of their assignments, if at all. I wanted them to connect these important words and concepts to the readings I had assigned and to their own lives. I wanted discussion. Not a single hand went up when I asked what they thought MLK Jr. or Cesar Chavez was talking about. We

¹ This classroom experience was described in an earlier work (Rabow, 2013).

were 20% into the 15-week semester. They weren't fazed when I told them that being unprepared for discussion was unacceptable. Receiving zeros for the day would not goad them into action. I felt deeply disappointed and weary.

"You're college students. You are required to read." I said, hearing sharpness in my tone. I didn't like how I sounded. I was discouraged but I was angry. I continued,

"Do you want me to send you home?"

I couldn't believe these words were coming from my mouth. It was a hollow threat. Beads of sweat began trickling down my forehead, running into my eyes. I didn't stop.

"Stop behaving like children! Stop acting so irresponsibly!"

I hated myself in that moment. I knew I was insulting them, I didn't know what I was trying to achieve. What was wrong with me? I knew many of these students had full-time jobs or families to take care of on top of their class load. They weren't irresponsible, and they certainly weren't children. But the words were out. My ship was sinking. I decided to ignore what I had said and turned to the chalkboard and pointed to the quotes. From behind me I heard.

"Cocksucker."

It had been spoken softly, but everyone in the room had heard it. I hesitated a moment, then turned and stepped in front of the student whom I believed had spoken.

"Excuse me," I said. "I believe you just called me a cocksucker."

Students who had been slumping quickly raised themselves. The young man stared at me. He showed no fear or embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't recall your name?"

"Joe."

"Joe, do you think you could tell me what you meant by that? Did you mean it literally, that I do that?"

Joe sat stone-faced. I looked into his eyes. I imagined he felt that the classwork was irrelevant to his life so had decided to insult me. Reading wasn't going to pay for his tuition or rent, he was there to get a degree, and my demands seemed unreasonable. I had had many students who rationalized their lower ambition, they said: "Professor Rabow, Cs gets you degrees."

I knew that Joe would not back down. I admired this young man. He had done something I wish I had had the courage to do so many times in my own life. I saw in this awkward silence a way to right the ship— if I could look beyond the insult and get to his frustration.

"Can you please answer my question, have you ever called anyone

else that?"

He nodded.

"I appreciate your honesty, would it be fair to say that when you use it you don't mean it as a compliment?"

For the first time there was a slight movement in his shoulders as he shrugged.

"So, you that wasn't a complimenting you were directing at me, right?"

His "Yes" came quietly, but he had spoken. He had heard me. Now I felt I could move into the work for today. We had started talking.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I don't want probe to deeply, and I'm not concerned about the specifics of what you said to me, but I'd really like to know if you often disagree with what others ask of you? For example, things your parents or friends might ask of you? Do you still go ahead and do them anyway?"

"Sure."

"So do I! I'm sure lots of people in this classroom would agree. The readings this week were about conformity and resistance. Anyone here who has gone along and obeyed a teacher, a parent, or a partner's request, despite not wanting to, please raise your hand."

Over half the class raised their hands. That was a good sign, so I went on.

"Sometimes we conform willingly. Other times, we do so against our will. But then there are also times when people neither don't conform, they protest!!"

I waited a moment.

"Joe, I think you were protesting when you called me a cocksucker. You were protesting my request and admonishment about reading and coming to class prepared. Protests are all around us in the world. We've all protested something, sometime. Sometime people do this alone, sometimes together. Students have

recently been protesting about the increases in tuition and the failure of Congress to pass the Dream Act. They marched, petitioned and held rallies. But today's reading is not just a description of a protest. Today's reading attempts to answer an important question, about leads to a successful protest."

The class was now listening.

"Joe, I don't mean to pick on you, but you raised an important challenge for me. You disliked what I was asking of you, so you protested by calling me a name. Do you think that's a fair description?"

"Yes."

“Did the rest of you see his comment as a protest against my requirements?”

“No, he was being rude,” shrilled a voice from the back.

“That may be true. But it is also true that he was objecting. He was saying, ‘I don’t like your rules, Professor Rabow.’ Does anyone see it that way?”

Some heads nodded. They were coming on board.

“Do you also think he was taking a risk? He didn’t risk jail like MLK or Chavez or other’s we’ve been talking about, but he was risking something. Being expelled or probation? Forced to drop the class? Maybe a visit to the dean’s office?”

Heads nodded again. “Does anyone feel that Joe’s protest was successful?” “Yes, he got you to stop lecturing,” someone else piped up.

I laughed along with them. “Yes he did,” I said, “but hasn’t gotten me to change my expectations of you for this class.”

I waited a minute for that to register, then asked, “Who has heard of Cesar Chavez before today?”

Almost 100% of the class raised their hands, many said that their families had even worked in the fields when Chavez had organized the grape workers strike and boycott in the 1960s.

“Both Joe and Cesar Chavez were willing to take a risk to fight a rule that they believed was unjust. Why was Cesar Chavez’s protest so successful? Just yell out what you think and I’ll write it on the board.”

“Signs.” “Bullhorns.” “Marches.” “Letters.” “Boycott.” “Unity.” “Solidarity.” “They also sang songs.” “They prepared food for the people on the barricades.”

“So how is Joe’s protest different from the workers who were beaten with clubs, sprayed with water hoses and who after being booked and jailed, still went back to the picket line to continue to fight for their cause?” I asked.

“They were stronger!” came an answer.

“What made them stronger?” I asked, and then answered my own question. “They worked together and they were prepared. After months and years of ignoring the strikers the growers were forced to listen. That began a dialogue.”

I looked at Joe. I knew nothing about this young man, but I could imagine some of the things that might have happened to him in school or outside, that caused him to be angry about my requirements.

“So, Joe, I’ve got just two more questions. Do you want to be heard?”

He nodded.

“Good. I want you to be heard also. Do you want to have a relationship with your classmates and with me?”

He nodded again.

“Great. If you are heard, you will have a relationship. But you have to do something that all successful protestors do. You need to prepare, and you need to get others to join with you. What you said was shocking. It shocked me. It upset me. But you didn’t influence anyone to speak on your behalf or to take up your fight. So, Joe, what do you think you can do to influence your peers in this class?”

There was a long silence. Finally, “I’ll try some of the reading.”

“Great. If you are prepared and participating with others you are more likely to be heard, to create real dialogue.” I turned around slowly and walked towards the blackboard, and wrote, “William Gamson, *Encounters with Unjust Authority*.”

“Who can summarize the findings from today’s reading? Who wants to apply it to the protest here today? And who wants to integrate it to Martin Luther King, Jr., Elie Wiesel or Bishop Desmond Tutu?”

I had prepared a slide that I projected onto the screen.

We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Elie Wiesel

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.
Desmond Tutu

More than half the class raised their hand, looking eager to talk. I smiled as I called on the first speaker.

Discussion/Conclusion

When I left class, I realized how important Joe’s challenge had been. He made me realize something personal about myself. My buttons could still be pushed. That reaction was less important than the effort I needed to make to listen and understand what Joe wanted and needed in his education. Joe and others in the class wanted recognition, respect and engagement on issues that touched their lives.

In this case of incivility, a student of color challenged a white male professor. Yet the response was not reactive. Rather, the professor without knowing the specific factors that may have contributed to this incivility acted as if there were legitimate reasons for the student’s misbehavior. Such factors may have been an impoverished educational background, working at two jobs, or supporting a family. By imagining that there were good reasons for the incivility, the student felt understood.

In this paper, we have described how the disruption of the learning process by a student who challenged the authority of the instructor did not lead to the interference of learning. It did not lead to isolation of the student,

ignoring of the student, or shaming of the student. Rather, it provided an opportunity for facilitating the educational process. The challenge to authority by the student provided opportunities to relate to the reading materials, teaching goals, and the overall atmosphere of trust.

We are hopeful that this case study will inspire other instructors to not be frightened or upset by incivility in their classroom or blame the perpetrator. As social scientists, we should be able to understand that a multiplicity of factors besides individual ones were likely operating to cause the disruption. Surely such empathy and understanding is not too much to ask from university faculty.

Chesler eloquently states the importance of student engagement. This paper suggests ways in which incivility can lead to engagement.

“Student engagement in the teaching/learning process is an effective form of pedagogy and a crucial element in the preparation of students for participation in a diverse and democratic society. Thus, engaged classroom strategies might have both immediate and long-term effects on student incivility toward other students and faculty. This principle is probably much more difficult to implement in large classes and in institutions where teaching, especially innovative teaching, is not a high priority” (Chesler, 2016, pg. 2).

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