Civility in an Online Platform Learning Environment
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The purpose of this document is to generate ideas and resources to support students, staff, and faculty that are working, learning, and teaching within an increasingly online environment. Online environments involve using learning platforms and social media for communication. Examples include, but are not limited to, Zoom, GroupMe, Twitter, Facebook, and email.

Section 1 – Foundation

In 2013, the Harvard Business Review published an article written by Porath and Pearson, The Price of Incivility. The authors collected data from more than 14,000 individuals from the United States and Canada and proposed the conclusion that “incivility is expensive, and few organizations recognize or take action to curtail it.” Incivility does harm to individuals physically and psychologically. Employees are found to be less motivated, driven, and satisfied with their work while having uncivil workplace experiences (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Long-term team performance, spirit, and creativity can also deteriorate (Porath & Pearson, 2013).

Definitions of Incivility

For the purpose of this document, incivility is defined as:

- low-intensity, deviant behavior such as rudeness, discourtesy, and thoughtlessness, with or without the intent to harm others
- Offensive speech or behavior; disrespect
  “Civil behavior includes treating people with dignity and respect, maintaining courtesy and politeness, and acting with regard to the feelings of others. In short, civil behavior maintains an environment that preserves mutual respect (Carter, 1998). Thus, uncivil behavior occurs when an individual displays a lack of respect for others and a disregard for feelings and dignity.”
- “Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others” (p. 457). To contrast with overt aggressors or bullying, those who behave uncivilly can often hide or disguise the intent of their behavior. They may claim
ignorance to the effect of their conduct, suggesting they did not realize their comments or actions would be harmful.”- Virginia Commonwealth University, Counseling Center

- While somewhat dated, the linked article makes useful points regarding Understanding Incivility in Online Teaching.
- YouTube videos on the topic of civility and incivility in the classroom or workplace that may be useful to share in a class or with a group follow:
  o How incivility shuts down our brains at work | Christine Porath, Georgetown University
  o Civility: Tedx Talk

Statement of the Problem

Concerns have been shared with CVM leadership related to incivility by some students and faculty while using online platforms for communication. Recognizing that uncivil behavior may be conscious or unconscious, a few examples include:

- Concerns with “no consequences for being uncivil over an online platform.” For example, if a disrespectful exchange occurs, the professor cannot require students to stay after class or ensure students participate in a dialogue regarding unacceptable behavior as the student can simply log off and leave the meeting.
- Organizing an online test/exam/quiz without reaching out to the students and checking with them to ensure that they have equal access to stable wi-fi or Internet. Faculty members may make unfounded assumptions about students’ life situations, including their internet access. According to statistics collected in 2019, 1 in 10 Americans do not use or have access to the internet. Some professors do not grant a second chance for online exams, triggering meaningful conflicts.
- Invading personal privacy, gossiping
- Texting or browsing websites while other students or faculty are speaking or presenting
- Talking over or interrupting other students
- Allowing loud background noise that is disturbing for others
- Purposely excluding groups/individuals from the conversation
- Microaggressions represent subtle forms of interpersonal discrimination. In contrast to formal discrimination, which is characterized by more overt discriminatory behavior, interpersonal discrimination is conveyed through seemingly innocuous actions such as discriminatory remarks – comments/remarks about an individual's appearance, behavior, or “jokes” about a person’s identity, etc.
- Not adhering to best practices for FERPA and individual accommodations

Section 2 - Ideas for Increasing Civil Behavior While Using Online Learning Platforms

Below are some ideas to address, and hopefully increase, civil behavior in our learning environments.
Facilitation and Monitoring Ideas

- An alternative communication channel to the online platform can be established. For example, while using eCampus/Canvas for sharing class materials and student participation, there could be a second communication channel utilized to frequently check in with the students and make sure (a) they have access to the eCampus/Canvas materials; (b) that uncivil behaviors on the discussion forum or other places can be seen and attended to in a timely manner. The back-up communication channel could be a weekly “touching base” email sent to the whole class, a closed Facebook group, etc.
- For students who want to individually meet and discuss any uncivil experiences, Zoom office hours can be a good option.
- Faculty or TAs can facilitate breakout sessions to ensure that students are able to discuss and engage in a civil environment and if disturbances/incivility arises, the faculty/TA can communicate directly with the person and/or mute them to prevent further disruption. After class, the faculty/TA can communicate a warning to the student responsible for the disrespectful behavior and/or take off participation points.
  - Points related to behavior can be codified in the syllabus.
  - Consider a response in writing with a specific statement as to what was offensive; a discussion is probably warranted in order to make the event a learning opportunity.

Syllabus Ideas

- Indicate that sound and image are important in class culture. Nonverbal behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and word choice give an overall sense of how the individual is expressing demeanor. Tone can be equally, or even more potent, on virtual mediums. Consider providing a video link that must be watched on course etiquette expectations; for example - Internet Etiquette: Netiquette Guidelines for the Online Classroom https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6Sh6Hdsf0I.
- The instructor should make it clear whether the class session will be recorded.
- The syllabus can be used as a means of putting all participants on equal footing. No one should be able to claim that they didn’t understand the importance of civility in the online setting or didn’t know about a statement requiring civility during the course.

Recommendations for Statements to Include in the Syllabus

- Consider whether the student needs to be physically present as they would be in a face to face class for interaction, class participation, and attendance. If so, active student participation is expected. Respect for others is an absolute requirement.
- Include a definition of both civility and incivility
- Include examples of incivility and state a zero tolerance policy.
- Include consequences if an individual/group of students actively participate in incivility
- “Our goal for this course is that you learn. That could mean that you learn the “other side” of an argument or stance. It could mean that you learn the reasons you support your stance, or all the above. An open mind is requested in this course.”
- Consider including a Commitment Statement (See TAMU CEHD example on p. 5)
• Require students to sign a statement acknowledging they read and understand the syllabus
• Require students to sign a commitment to being respectful of their peers and instructor during online classes, which includes adhering to the co-created “ground rules” (see Section 3 below). This commitment could be their first assignment and count as part of their overall grade.

Role of the Instructor/Meeting Facilitator
• Model and develop a culture of respect.
• Be culturally sensitive. Increase self-awareness. Use constant perspective-taking.
• Understand the bandwidth available to the students (literal). There will likely be strains on internet access at times and turning off cameras may help or even be necessary.
• Uphold statements in the syllabus.
• Have a zero-tolerance policy for uncivil behavior.
• Assess the environment in the online classroom through encouraging student feedback; this may be done through breakouts/small group discussion.
• As the instructor/host, be transparent in authorizations on the online platform, such as having the ability to mute a participant.
• Convey proper Netiquette. "Netiquette" stands for "Internet Etiquette," and refers to the set of practices created over the years to make the Internet experience pleasant for everyone. Like other forms of etiquette, netiquette is primarily concerned with matters of courtesy in communications including:
  1. **Remember the Human.**
     Exercise perspective taking. When you're holding a conversation online -- whether it's an email exchange or a response to a discussion group posting -- it's easy to misinterpret your correspondent's meaning, and it's frighteningly easy to forget that your correspondent is a person with feelings more or less like your own.
  
  2. **Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life.**
     This is about manners, so consult the code that you follow in real life. Chances are, upon reflection on professional behavior, you'll find the right answer regarding how to deal with most circumstances of uncivil behavior.
  
  3. **Make yourself look good online.**
     While working online, you may be assessed less on observable attributes such as age, gender, clothing, etc., but you may be judged more critically on the quality of your writing. For most people who choose to communicate online, this is an advantage. Spelling and grammar count!
  
  4. **Be professional. Don't post “flame-bait”**.
     Flame trolling is the posting of a provocative or offensive message, known as "flamebait", to a public internet discussion group, such as a forum, newsgroup or mailing list, with the intent of provoking an angry response (a "flame") or argument. Be kind and polite. Do not use offensive language or be confrontational for the sake of confrontation. We are not making sound bites that are 50 characters or less. We are working towards understanding,
conversation, and explanation. We are also trying to help students learn to be professionals. Adults (in a perfect world), would not goad or bait. Rather, we should ask questions and pause to listen. We should focus on listening to hear and understand and discern facts from opinions. Speak and write in complete sentences. Be willing and proud for future bosses to see what we have written and espoused. We should address others with respect.

5. **Commitment Statement** (adapted with permission from TAMU College of Education & Human Development)

The faculty of the College of Education and Human Development values and respects diversity and the uniqueness of each individual. The faculty affirms its dedication to non-discrimination in our teaching, programs, and services on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, age sexual orientation, domestic partner status, ethnic or national origin, veteran status, or disability. The College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University is an open and affirming organization that does not tolerate discrimination, vandalism, violence or hate crimes. We insist that appropriate action be taken against those who perpetrate such acts. Further, the College is committed to protecting the welfare, rights, and privileges of anyone who is a target of prejudice or bigotry. Our commitment to respect and action to promote and enforce these values embraces the entire university community. In the spirit of shared responsibility, each University unit, student organization, and community member is encouraged to help make our campus, and this class, a welcoming place for all. Should you have any concerns related to respect for diversity or feel that you (or any others) are being discriminated against, please contact your instructor or department head. You can also report anonymously at https://tellsomebody.tamu.edu

**Role of the Student(s)**

- Muted when not speaking, but leaving the video on unless unable.
- Fully engaged and fully participating in class
- Convey proper *Netiquette* – See above

**Section 3 - Developing a Group/Class Commitment to Effectively Use Social Media for Teaching and Learning**

Ideas and recommendations for creating a group or class civility commitment are:

- Instructor will help create and post any commitment that is developed.
- Instructor and students co-create the statement. Have a class group.me to touch base and maintain continuity and cohesion of the group. Depending on the size of the class, some groups chat before the course begins if it is a zoom class. If simply an online class, incorporate some zoom sessions during the semester to diminish student isolation.
- Pose questions to the students: What is civility? What does it look like for this class?
- Consider creating a closed group on Facebook, depending on the size of the class.
• Co-creating ‘ground rules’ for the semester to help increase respect and civility amongst students and between students and instructor, i.e. students can post one ground rule each and instructor can use this list to develop a master list of ground rules. Minimally, the list needs to have 3 to 5 points. In general, there will be more buy-in when individuals are given the opportunity to voice their opinion/thoughts about decisions regarding respectful behavior.

Examples of group commitments

• Do not interrupt or talk over each other
• Practice active-listening while other people are sharing
• Mute your phone and other irrelevant electronic devices during class
• Turn off web pages that are not class-related
• Mind your volume and mute yourself while other people are talking

Section 4 - Honing Your Communication, Conflict Management, and Critical Dialogue Skill Sets

If you have interest in adding to your communication, conflict management, and critical dialogue skills, consider additional readings or participation in communications-based courses.

1) Read:

   Integrating social justice-based conflict resolution into higher education settings: Faculty, staff and student professional development through mediation training

2) Participate in additional professional development offered by the CVM Office for Diversity & Inclusion:
   • 40-hour Conflict Management & Leadership Course
   • 4-part (10-12 hours) Critical Dialogue Course
   • Dare to Lead Workshop
   • Other workshops to increase communication, conflict management, and leadership skills

3) Grow skill sets through additional reading, podcasts, and courses in these subject areas.

References
advance.tamu.edu/Resources