Classroom incivility is “any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom” (Feldmann, 2001, p. 137). Classroom conflict is inevitable, and at times even necessary for effective learning to take place (Stone Norton, 2008). The techniques below are just a few strategies that instructors have used to create a safe classroom environment and to manage conflict as it arises.

**Understand What Incivility Is and Why it Happens**
- Reflect on both your own and your students’ expectations for behavior in the classroom
- Realize that students come to class with their own biases, experiences and relationships with learning that may influence their reaction to you and your class
- Know that if incivilities are not dealt with properly, it has negative impacts on student learning

**General Strategies for Handling Conflict in Classrooms**
- Rather than avoid potentially charged course content, anticipate conflict and be prepared to respond
- SOAR (stop, observe, assess, react)
- Acknowledge emotions (“I see that you’re upset,” or “I understand that this is a powerful topic for you”)
- Think of the moment as a learning opportunity and present it as such to the students
- Focus dialogue on academic concepts rather than personal opinions
- Give students a few minutes to write a personal response to the situation; collect these and prepare a response in the next class
- Listen and restate perspectives, especially if one student is receiving all of the heat (“What I think ____ is trying to say is…”)
- Meet individually with students if necessary

**If Students Are Behaving in a Disruptive Manner**
- Observe and control your emotional reaction to feelings of being challenged or threatened
- Be aware of your body language and what you are communicating through your actions
- Address behaviors, not people
- Uphold class norms (address issues that arise each and every time and remain consistent in how you deal with students; refer to your own class guidelines)
- Ask to speak to student(s) in private

**When Meeting Privately with Students (Meyers, 2003)**
- Ask students to explain what occurred
- Listen empathetically; acknowledge emotions by repeating what you understand their issues to be
- With student(s), brainstorm possible solutions
- Help students evaluate these solutions through comprehensive problem solving

**Create a Safe and Effective Learning Environment**
- Get to know students’ names and interests and be open to telling them a bit about yourself
- Be available for office hours
- Take a few minutes before and after class to interact with students
- Dedicate time for community building and peer learning opportunities (i.e.: ice breakers, group work)
- Have students create their own goals for the class
- Make your course relevant by connecting course content to the “real world”
- Include a non-discrimination policy in your syllabus
- Use your syllabus as a “class contract” and include guidelines for group work and classroom interactions
- Share authority by getting students’ feedback about classroom guidelines; incorporate their contributions

**Use Inclusive Teaching Practices**
- Communicate clear expectations
- Incorporate diversity (in choosing what texts, films, etc. students will encounter during the course)
- Use a variety of teaching strategies that reach different learning styles
- Provide various methods for students to demonstrate learning
- Learn about/reflect upon the various social identities that make up your class; monitor how these dynamics play out in your classroom setting
- Critically reflect on your teaching practice
- Assess classroom climate periodically: *Have students respond to prompts anonymously on index cards that you can collect easily for review. Some prompts: I feel comfortable participating in class: Yes; Always; Sometimes; Never. One thing that would help me be more comfortable is: ____________*

**Setting Up and Managing Group Work**
- Arrange groups with intention (mix of skills, identities and personalities); In large classes, assign randomly
- Create tasks that encourage interdependence
- Have groups create their own plans for approaching the task and dealing with potential conflict
- Include self and peer assessment as a small part of the evaluation (ratings for group work effectiveness)
- Assign roles within the group; switch roles throughout

For further information on this resource and more, please contact the CTE at: cornellcte@cornell.edu 607-255-3990 http://www.cte.cornell.edu Last Edited: 04/25/14
Some thoughts on preventing and managing difficult classroom situations...

“This study indicates that the consequences of ignoring classroom incivilities can have deleterious effects on students, as the findings support that classroom incivilities harm the classroom climate. Further, the effects of classroom incivilities extend beyond the confines of the classroom and can damage students’ efforts to succeed at their institutions” (Hirschy & Braxton, 2004, p. 72).

“Conflict is inevitable in a classroom, and if not channeled appropriately conflict can damage relationships. Inclusive faculty did not attempt to minimize conflict; rather, they strived for academic conflict and disagreement (Osei-Kofi, Richards, & Smith, 2004). Conflict, if channeled correctly, allowed for more ideas to enter the sphere of learning. Inclusive faculty embraced conflict by preparing ahead for conflict resolution (Chesler et al., 2005); encouraging, if not demanding, students to respect and appreciate those who disagreed with them (Elenes, 2006); acknowledging that learning through a crisis can be beneficial (Kumashiro, 2003); challenging students’ resistance to learning (Tuitt, 2003); recognizing and engaging both overt and covert forms of conflict (Sfeir-Younis, 1993); and physically reorganizing the classroom to deal with negative intergroup dynamics (Chesler et al.)” (Stone Norton, 2008, p. 37).

References


These steps for effective communication were taken from the Cornell Harold D Craft Leadership Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6 Key Actions for Active Listening</th>
<th>5 Key Actions for Constructive Feedback</th>
<th>6 Key Actions for Resolving Conflict</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mirror/Paraphrase.</td>
<td>1. Convey your positive intent.</td>
<td>1. Recognize emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Check for understanding.</td>
<td>2. Describe specifically what you have observed.</td>
<td>2. Briefly describe the problem and share your positive intentions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Probe for information and feelings.</td>
<td>3. State the impact of the behavior or actions.</td>
<td>3. Actively listen and seek FIRST to understand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Encourage/Show empathy.</td>
<td>4. Ask the other person to respond.</td>
<td>4. Share your perspective of the problem and the impact.</td>
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<td>5. Summarize.</td>
<td>5. Focus the discussion on solutions (not blame).</td>
<td>5. Work together on an action plan or next steps.</td>
</tr>
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<td>6. Show verbal and non-verbal attentiveness.</td>
<td></td>
<td>6. Check for progress and express thanks.</td>
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