Cultivating civility
Reduce confrontation in your classroom

by Zopito Marini

"Offer students a chance to discuss the type of atmosphere they wish to create in the classroom."

WHILE MANY COLLEAGUES LAMENT the lack of civility in their classroom, the situation becomes problematic if it prevents the smooth and effective engagement of the curriculum. However, it can be particularly challenging when an antagonistic atmosphere is allowed to set in, giving impetus to costly and destructive conflicts, confrontations and quasi-legalistic processes, such as grievances and appeals. If this type of atmosphere is allowed to persist, we are quite likely to fall short of the teaching mission, which is so central to what we do in universities and colleges.

It does not have to be this way; the maladaptive pathway can be prevented by good planning before classes even begin and persistent vigilance afterwards. Focusing on prevention is important for every faculty member, but it is particularly important for younger colleagues just starting out, who may have fewer examples to call upon and in some cases even fewer resources and support.

In a *University Affairs* article titled "Disruption in the Classroom" (October 2012 issue) for which I was interviewed, some of these problems were addressed. The article must have struck a nerve, judging by the number of colleagues who have been willing to recount to me their own classroom experiences as well as those colleagues who offered their homemade solutions.

There are also many colleagues who, while supporting attempts to create a civil learning community in their classroom, usually bemoan the time these efforts take away from covering curriculum material. Reflecting on their concerns, I suggest that there are alternative ways to foster civility in the classroom which do not have to diminish instructional time. In fact, many of these methods can even enhance teaching and learning.

An important aspect is cultivating an atmosphere of civility that permeates every component of a course, starting from the development of the syllabus. For example, in developing a syllabus, most of the focus goes into the content, as it should. However, with just a little reflection, the delivery of the content can be improved immensely by devoting some deliberation to the kind of classroom environment we wish to create while connecting students to the material and to each other.

In general, students are more likely to buy into class guidelines (or rules) if they participate in the development of those same guidelines. Depending on how much time a faculty member wishes to allocate to this issue, a syllabus could provide a number of options, from laying down the rules and regulations (which is better than having none at all) to outlining a process that will be used to create these guidelines.

While face-to-face discussion on what constitutes incivility and civility is the optimal way to engage students, so that ideas and assumptions can be tested and revised in vivo, this is not always practical because of time constraints or class size. Hence, a constructive alternative to consider is the use of technology.

Since most campuses have some variation of classroom management software (for example, Sakai or WebCT), professors can post the same types of questions they would pose in a face-to-face discussion.

Questions to post on discussion boards could include asking students to share examples of incivility they have heard, observed or experienced (making sure not to use proper names). These entries could be easily collated and posted on classroom websites to illustrate the range of instances of incivility experienced. More importantly, they are an indication of what students in your class would consider to be uncivil, and by extension unacceptable, behaviour.

The next issue to discuss is what civility means to students. Again, this will provide a blueprint for identifying the type of social and learning experiences the students want in their class. Of course, professors can use software (such as Survey Monkey or Google Forms) to post close-ended questions, to collate and analyze the answers and then to share them with the class. Those using clickers can do surveys live in the classroom; in fact, it can be a nice way to start a course. Lastly, students could be invited to create a civility mission statement for their classroom.

Offering students the opportunity to discuss the type of learning atmosphere they wish to create in their classrooms (doing this either face-to-face or electronically) is more likely to promote civil learning relationships and to reduce student confrontations and grievances. UA