

The Civil Classroom in the Age of the Net

by P.M. Forni

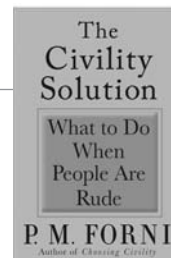
The professing of knowledge used to rest on the firm foundation of the principle of authority. Most students granted their teachers respect and sometimes deference as a matter of course. That foundation has been crumbling for at least three generations. The new digital technology has virtually razed 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.

In his *Chronicle of Higher Education* column, the pseudonymous Thomas H. Benton articulated a concern of many of today's faculty:

Whatever the explanation, I sometimes feel stung by students' rudeness. I try to make my classes interesting and relevant, and I care about their learning. I try to conduct myself in a kindly but professional manner. But, more and more, I think the student culture of incivility is a larger impediment to their success than anything they might fail to learn about Western Civilization or whatever it is I am teaching.

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

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newspapers and even watching television on their portable sets. Virtually no academic term goes by in which instructors don't 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 physical abuse. It may not be widely known, but college teachers are bullied too.

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

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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 Net. Of course, professors are not blameless either. 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.

The Net is a case in point. We know that it plays a major role in the shaping of the young, but how many of us have a strategy in place to cope with the challenge that this poses to education? In the last decade, first-year-experience programs have been sprouting up at many two-year and four-year colleges. When expertly managed, they have been invaluable assets, helping students learn how to behave civilly with both peers and teachers. However, these programs are not enough. If we want to slow down the continuing decline of traditional civil interaction on American college campuses, we must train ourselves too. In the following pages, I have collected a few reflections on the challenges we all face as college teachers and on ways of responding to them that have been working for me.

ESTABLISH A CLIMATE OF RELAXED FORMALITY

Even in the radically informal times in which we live, I cannot be alone in believing that positive pedagogical results require a modicum of formality. It is, in part, through formality that you convey that there is value in what is taking place in class. Formality is the homage that intelligence pays to value. I concede that there may be circumstances in which asking your students to address you by your first name is the thing to do; I just have not experienced them often. Your students are not your pals. Boundaries between roles should remain solid. Go for

an Aristotelian happy medium between stilted formality—the kind that makes you aloof and discourages dialogue—and chumminess. Call it relaxed formality. I have addressed all my students as Mr., Miss, and Ms. throughout my teaching career and never had reason to regret it. If they seem to like it, in the second half of the semester I will switch occasionally to their first names. Students appreciate much more the informal address when we do not grant it outright, but rather as the result of a degree of familiarity they have achieved with us after hours of class-work.

I do not use juvenile jargon for effect, and only occasionally will I use an infor-

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mal expression picked from the realm of popular culture if I see a pedagogical advantage in doing so. My private life remains so. Still, on occasion and with cause, I will disclose something personal—without indulging in idle chit-chat or gossip. I encourage my students frequently, often with a smile, but I am firm in expecting undivided attention for whoever has the floor, be it the instructor or a student. This style of interaction has helped me build a civil environment in which I and my students can be at our best as we teach and learn.

As you foster (through relaxed formality) 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 virtual circle you want to put in place in the everyday exercise of your profession. This is what defines a job well-done in the classroom.

TRAIN STUDENTS TO DISTINGUISH THE TRIVIAL FROM THE VALUABLE

The notion of value is woven together with that of difference. Recognizing and accepting difference is the premise of our recognizing and accepting value. Unfortunately, one major aspect of their experience with the Net inclines our students not to perceive difference. On the Net *every single thing* is equidistant from *every other thing* and from the person at the keyboard. It takes the same amount of time and the same effort to access *anything* you wish. The fact that one can as easily conjure up the Bible as *Mad* magazine erodes some of the difference between the two. When everything comes from the same source—the mysteriously endless and spaceless warehouses of the Net—everything reveals itself under a varnish of

equivalence. To quote Philip Roth, “everything goes and nothing matters.”

I believe that part of my job as a teacher is to convey the notion that although the Net may conceal it, a hierarchy of values does exist and does matter. No matter what the topic of my class is, I often find myself using the material as a primer in moral philosophy. If we are reading poetry, we discuss the ethics of reading poetry: Why are we reading poetry? Can we justify this expenditure of time, money, and energy on moral grounds? How can we locate the value in what we are doing? Is there something more important that we should be doing instead? Go through the Net with your students, educating their 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

Two current ways of looking at knowledge add disaffection and tension to the lives of teachers and students on today’s campuses. They are: knowledge retention and knowledge retrieval. Many teachers and professors profess the former. For them knowledge is something to acquire and retain forever. Most students are partial to the latter. They look at knowledge as something to access when needed. For them, the Net is the repository of information of choice. The Net is where they go to have all their questions answered, be it the name of Alexander the Great’s teacher, or how catecholamines work. This devalues the figure of the



teacher as a provider of knowledge. “I don’t really need you, I have the Net,” is the unspoken and sometimes subconscious belief that many students bring to the classroom; hence, there exists less incentive to pay attention in class, more boredom, more frustration, and more disruptive behavior.

Then, to make matters worse for them, that very professor whose image is so diminished in their eyes proceeds to evaluate them according to traditional standards. The professor expects retention of knowledge from students for whom retrieval on demand is the only way that makes sense. Not only are they unable to see the point of retaining, they do not know how to read to retain. Poor perform-

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ance in tests follows. When students receive low grades, their disappointment and resentment are fueled by the perceived unfairness of it all: having paid good money for a bad grade, and for an education they see as obsolete. Anger can ensue. And, of course, anger (or even simple disaffection) can make students behave poorly—not only with their teachers, but with anyone else on campus as well.

Be proactive. Bring forward the retention/retrieval divide, making sure you are well-prepared to defend the former without dismissing the latter. It goes without saying that retrieval according to necessity must become second nature in a world saturated with information. At the same time, make very clear that retention is crucial to our cognitive and emotional functioning. Our very ability to function in the world needs a solid structure of notions that we acquire and retain, be they historical, philosophical, literary, artistic, astronomical, musical, or other. Without reference to retained knowledge, there is no effective thinking. Without effective thinking, no wise choices are possible, and the good life is nothing but a chimeric abstraction. The outstanding leaders of tomorrow will be people with a rich inner structuring of possessed notions *and* a great ability to retrieve information.

Explain the benefits in 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. This is easier to do in humanities classes, but science teachers will have to imagine new ways to get through to their students as well. 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 digital screen. We need to present ourselves as necessary and authoritative mediators between the Net and our students, as the credible

knowledge professionals who can teach them how to think about the information they retrieve. The alternative is to fade into obsolescence. 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. I bring with me an at least subliminal awareness (if such a thing exists) of the new instructor-student dynamics brought about by the digital revolution every time I teach. It keeps me on my toes, making me want to convey content and meaning in ways that are insightful, challenging, and memorable.

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STIPULATE A FAIR COVENANT

If you have been dealing with a widespread student attitude mixing disengagement with disregard, you are not alone. Millions of educators around the world are in your same position. A tool of choice to make things better 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, go for the written covenant.

At the top of a sheet of paper, under the heading “What I Expect from You,” list entries such as:

“That you be punctual for every class.”

“That you do not receive or make telephone calls.”

“That you respect what I and your fellow students have to say.”

“That you come to class ready to ask and answer questions of substance on the day’s readings.”

“That you be mindful of time constraints when making presentations.”

“That you will concentrate exclusively on this course during class hours.”

Use the bottom half for your own list of commitments, “What You Can Expect from Me”:

“That I will be punctual for every class.”

“That I will give everybody a fair share of my attention.”

“That I will prepare you for your tests.”

“That I will grade the quality of your work rather than the amount of time and effort you spent on it.”

“That I will work to make you perform at your best.”

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.


Place plenty of emphasis on the notion that it is not acceptable to come to class without having read and assimilated the assigned material.

A MIXED-BAG FOR THE ROAD

Your students are aware of their own edge over the older generation in the handling of all things digital. The smaller the gap between their competence and yours, the more respect you will receive, and the more in control of the class you will be. Take care of disruptions of any kind right away. Interrupt your class if necessary, and allow it to continue only after the disruptive behavior is corrected. It is unfortunate that teachers are reluctant to report egregious breaches in civility and ethics because they perceive them as personal defeats, and for fear that administrators will deem them unable to control their classes. This, of course, gives students the impression that they can act with impunity, which makes them repeat their behavior. It is also unfortunate that when breaches are reported, administrators often appear reluctant to discipline a paying constituency. This wrongly reinforces the students’ feeling that their transgressions will be tolerated.

Keep exceptions to the rules to a minimum. If your syllabus says “No make-up tests,” explain that you really mean it out of fairness to the contingent of students respecting the rule. Place plenty of emphasis on the notion that it is not acceptable to come to class without having read and assimilated the assigned material. Help your students prepare for their tests. They will be more likely to do well, which means fewer challenges of grades. When students come to class unprepared, it does not necessarily mean that they have not opened their books. It is easy to mistake inability to study for a lukewarm interest in the subject; teach them what it means to study in earnest. Inform them that study is just another form of work. As such, it is most rewarding when you reach a state of uninterrupted absorption in what you are doing. It is the mental state called “flow.” Show no tolerance for the antics of the overbearing, the mean-spirited, and the narcissists.

However, never cease to be clear-headed, temperate, considerate, and compassionate. Never argue or raise your voice. In a particularly difficult encounter with a student, imagine that you are being videotaped and that the resulting video will be used to train other teachers in the handling of such situations. While remaining engaged, you will perceive the hostility directed at you less like a personal attack and more like a management task.

There is no doubt that today's relationship between college professors and students is fraught with tension. And it is becoming clear that the massive presence of the Net in college students' lives is contributing to that tension. By casting a glance at why and how that happens, these pages are a contribution to an area of interest in which scholarly work is destined to grow in the years to come. Examining what being a teacher and a student entails is going to be an important task within the larger enterprise of reconceptualizing what being human is in the age of the Net. 

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