
Incivility in the Classroom Breeds 'Education Lite'

By PAUL A. TROUT

Ill-mannered, uncivil students are certainly nothing new to higher education -- remember the '60s? But over the last decade or so, the number of them on some campuses and in some classrooms has apparently reached a critical mass, provoking professors from across the country -- and the political spectrum -- to complain about them publicly (see "Insubordination and Intimidation Signal the End of Decorum in Many Classrooms," a news story in the March 27 [1998] issue of *The Chronicle*).

Although they don't agree on the causes of the problem, professors frequently identify the following: poor parenting and guidance; a youth culture that is profoundly contemptuous of authority and adult values (and that is embraced by a popular culture that glorifies in-your-face rudeness and coarseness); a marketplace ethos that fosters a demanding, consumerist attitude; and huge classes that are often dehumanizing and insulting to students.

One of the causes that tends to get overlooked is the "dumbing down" of elementary and secondary education. The educational pipeline is funneling to college more and more students who are not only academically underprepared but also hostile to the rigors and requirements of higher education. Although an overhaul of the entire education system would be the optimal solution, colleges can affect student attitudes toward learning in much more humble ways -- for example, in how we design the course evaluations that, in their current form, encourage students to trash their teachers. Evaluations can be worded instead to encourage students to reflect on the value of a rigorous education, and, at the same time, discourage instructors from lowering their standards in an attempt to win positive evaluations and mollify potentially disruptive students.

Of course, it won't be easy to change the attitudes of students who have spent 12 years in our typical elementary and secondary schools. In *Greater Expectations: Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in America's Homes and Schools* (Free Press, 1995), William Damon, the director of the Center for the Study of Human Development, at Brown University, writes that elementary classrooms have been so stripped of challenging intellectual material and rigorous standards that many students "are sitting for hours in mental states that approach suspended animation." They are learning habits of "idleness, of getting by with the least possible effort, of cynicism about the very possibility of achievement," in effect, of "willed incompetence," says Damon.

High schools often exacerbate that condition. In *Why Our Kids Don't Study: An Economic Analysis of Causes and Proposed Remedies* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), John D. Owen, a professor emeritus of economics at Wayne State University, says that in the typical high-school classroom an unwritten contract enables the teacher to trade fewer demands and lower standards for a minimum of conventional respect and cordial relations. By the time students get to college, Owen writes, they are experts at diverting instruction from "concentrated academic exercises towards genial banter and conversation," and at limiting how hard they will work.

The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles -- which annually surveys 250,000 students -- has found that "students are increasingly disengaged from the academic experience," with record numbers of them reporting little time spent studying, doing homework, or talking with teachers outside of class.

In other words, a sizable segment of students now entering college does not love to learn, is not used to working hard to learn, and does not have anything resembling an intellectual life. When those high-school graduates collide with college professors who have expectations and standards appropriate to training the nation's future scientists, professionals, and social leaders, they are understandably shocked. A science professor told me that he could provoke "real hostility" from students merely by presenting required course material. To a degree, classroom incivility is the way some students protest an alien academic culture that they deem onerous and unfair.

Let me support that view with a few comments from teaching-evaluation forms that my colleagues received last year, and that I read as a member of my department's performance-review committee. The students' remarks aren't rude in themselves, but they do reveal the degree to which some students feel aggrieved when requirements and standards are not as "comfortable" as they want them to be (assume "*sic*" throughout):

"It is unfair to drop someones grade because he/she missed to many days"; "we were bombarded with information about authors that was boring with fact"; "who gives a damn if we call it elegy or loss? Are these terms used elsewhere in lit? I've never heard of them"; "he had a tendency to be critical on objective manners such as word choice"; "it is really hard to come to class when every day the material is being shoved down your throat"; "the instructor needs to lower her standards"; "ease down on exam grading"; "I also think 2 novels to read outside of class is a bit too much. It's hard enough to get through 1"; "she should have more concern for her students, their stress levels, and their GPA's!"; "This course helped and I got a lot out of it but I feel that the professors expectations of us were *too high*. He didn't give much leniency toward what we wrote or toward our grades."

Remarkably, even students who acknowledge that high standards helped them learn nevertheless want professors to have lower expectations of them. Not quite *Mr. Holland's Opus*, is it?

[...]

Administrators and professors -- and indeed students themselves -- can do a number of other things to deter routine forms of classroom incivility. They can inform students of campus and classroom policies, confront the problem in freshman-orientation programs, manage the classroom in more-personal ways -- such as using a seating chart to learn students' names even in large classes - - and respond quickly and directly to rudeness in the classroom. Obviously, though, the problem is not likely to abate much until high schools produce college-bound graduates who actually enjoy learning and who take responsibility for their own intellectual development, and until colleges produce teachers and administrators who know how to accomplish that goal.

Until that Great Reformation, I intend to resist the persistent pressure to dumb down my requirements and standards any more than I already have. My hard-headedness may make some students angry, and they may act out their anger in class or express it on evaluation forms, but it could make *other* students happier. What I found while reading more than 1,000 teaching-evaluation forms this spring is that some students actually want challenging courses and high expectations. Let me quote from one such student: "She expected more from us than any teacher I have had up to this point. She did not waste a lot of time going over things we should already have learned. This was somewhat of a challenge to those of us who have been coddled by high-school English classes. I realize that I didn't really learn anything in high school. She warned us that she was a tough teacher. ... You need to be pushed and challenged, especially early on."

I side with this student, and those like her, in the struggle for a *higher* education.

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