

Welcome to “Civility 101”

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Dear Students:

Welcome back! I hope you had a good Christmas break (or Kwanzaa break, or whatever you celebrate). Mine was great but now it's time to get back to work as we kick off a new semester. Those of you who have had my classes before need to pay close attention to this memo because I am changing some of my class policies this semester. Specifically, I am changing the way that I deal with those who interrupt class by either walking in late or by allowing their cell phones to ring during a lecture.

At the end of last semester, I decided that something had to be done about this diminishing level of respect shown by students towards their professors and their fellow classmates. This decision came shortly after I sat in on another professor's class. While I was listening to a 75-minute lecture, the students interrupted the professor at least 58 times before I lost count.

First, a student came in class three minutes late. Then another student came in 15 minutes late. Then another student came in 25 minutes late. Then the first cell phone went off. Then the second cell phone went off. The other 53 interruptions were variations of “what was that again?” and “could you repeat that?” A raised hand accompanied none of these 53 interruptions from daydreaming students. They just shouted at the professor to get his attention. And they didn't seem to care whether he was in the middle of a sentence. Interestingly, most of these students were in their third year of college.

I haven't ever had a major problem with the hand raising issue. I just don't answer students' questions if they don't raise their hand. But the cell phone and tardiness problems have exploded over the last five years or so. Most of my liberal colleagues have just allowed these problems to get worse. No matter how bad it gets, these PhDs just can't seem to find a solution. Actually, that isn't fair. They could find a solution if they wanted to, but they just don't like imposing their own truths upon their students, who may live according to a different set of truths. And, of course, being disrupted by late students with cell phones gives them something to whine about during department meetings.

As most of you know, I take a different approach to these problems. First, I shut the door at the beginning of each class period. Then, if a student walks in late, he (it usually is a male, no offense to tardy feminists) gets three points deducted from his final average. If his cell-phone rings (no offense to co-dependent feminists), I deduct three points from his final average per ring. And if she (sorry guys, it is usually a female) actually answers the call, she fails the course. And, last semester, I actually started deducting points from the students' average if they (regarding gender, this is a closer call-no pun intended) are merely in possession of a cell phone. But, unfortunately, last semester, four different students let their cell phones (which were hidden in their pockets) go off in class. All four were one-ringers. I

also had one student in each class who decided to repeatedly come to class late.

In light of the on-going problems with tardiness and cell phones, I am going to modify my class policies this semester. I am not going to follow the advice of my anti-war colleagues who think that we need to talk to tardy cell phone people in order to find out why they hate us. Instead, I am going to let them do most of the talking. The specifics of my new policy follow:

If your cell phone goes off in class, or if you are late to class, you must write a 2500-word paper (minimum) entitled "The Death of Civility at the Postmodern University." In this paper, you will be asked to write about the decline of civility in our public universities in recent decades. Please note that if you are late more than once, or if your cell phone goes off on more than one occasion, your paper must be a minimum of 5000 words. If you have three separate transgressions, you automatically fail the course. Finally, the paper must be of "A" quality in order for you to stay in the course. You will receive no other credit for completing this project, except, of course, for its positive impact upon your character.

Since you have probably never written on this subject, and since the paper is fairly long, I have listed a couple of suggestions to help you get started and to help you fulfill the minimum word requirement. These suggestions are not exhaustive, nor are they mandated, but I think they will be helpful.

Suggestion #1. Interview a person who was alive during World War II. Ask them the following questions:

- 1. How often did students walk into class late when you were in school?*
- 2. How many of your failures in school were the result of a lack of "nurturing" by your teachers?*
- 3. Did your teachers spend a lot of time boosting your self-esteem and soothing your inner child, even when you failed to adhere to the rules of the classroom?*
- 4. Did any of your teachers ever suggest that punctuality was an antiquated Western notion with racist, sexist, and classist overtones?*
- 5. Did students ever get up and leave in the middle of a lecture if they had to go to the bathroom, without asking the permission of the teacher?*
- 6. Did students ever take long potty breaks in the middle of exams, without asking the permission of the teacher?*
- 7. Did students ever get up and leave class just because they were bored?*
- 8. Did you ever appeal a test score in front of the entire class or help other students do the same? If so, did you predicate your complaint with "hey Dr. Ummm," or "dude, you ripped me off."*
- 9. Did you ever interrupt a professor to ask whether what he was saying was "important" or whether you "had to know it for the next test?"*
- 10. Did people actually manage to finish school without having a cell phone with them at all times?*

Suggestion #2. Interview an employee at the Office of Campus Diversity or any professor currently teaching in the social sciences or humanities. Ask them the following questions:

1. *Is it possible that the diversity movement, with its emphasis on moral relativism, causes students to dismiss the rules a professor establishes with regard to appropriate class conduct?*
2. *If it is good to refrain from judging other people, doesn't that mean that we should stop expelling people for plagiarism?*
3. *Isn't the statement "it is good to refrain from judging other people" itself judgmental?*
4. *Is it possible that liberal professors who teach that people are not responsible for their own behavior unwittingly encourage their students to engage in anti-social behavior such as compulsive tardiness?*
5. *Is cheating wrong just because a professor says it is wrong?*
6. *If a student claims that cheating is acceptable in his/her culture, is he/she exempt from punishment for cheating?*
7. *Can a student be given credit for an answer that the professor deems to be wrong, just because the student "feels" it is right?*
8. *What if everyone decided to come to class late every day?*
9. *If tardiness becomes even more prevalent than it is today, can we just write "whenever, man" under the designation for class meeting time in the course-scheduling catalogue?*
10. *When professors come to class late, does that in any way encourage their students to do the same thing? Does that undermine the professor's moral authority?*

In closing, let me say that I hope you don't put yourself in the position of having to write a civility paper this semester. If you do, I would advise you to follow the first suggestion and interview a person who was alive during World War II. I don't mean to stereotype, but these people tend to be very helpful and patient.

Unfortunately, you may find the second suggestion to be less fruitful. University professors and administrators tend to be less patient and less accessible. After all, they're usually busy constructing a Utopian society. They seldom have time to talk about civility.