

# Classroom Incivility: Understanding Student & Teacher Attitudes

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## Attitudes toward Classroom Incivility: A Psychological and Pedagogical Analysis

The phenomenon of classroom incivility represents a growing challenge within institutions of higher education globally, fundamentally impacting the quality of the learning environment and the professional satisfaction of faculty. Incivility is generally defined as any behavior that violates the established norms of mutual respect in the academic setting, ranging from subtle disruptions to overtly challenging acts. Understanding **attitudes toward classroom incivility** is crucial because these attitudes--held by both students and instructors--determine the perceived seriousness of the behavior, the likelihood of intervention, and ultimately, the perpetuation or mitigation of such disruptions. These attitudes are complex, influenced by evolving social norms, generational expectations regarding authority, and the increasing reliance on digital communication tools that often blur the boundaries between formal and informal discourse. Furthermore, individual attitudes often dictate the threshold at which a behavior is labeled disruptive; what one student dismisses as harmless multitasking, another may perceive as a profound lack of respect for the learning community, thereby establishing a critical area for psychological inquiry into social perception and academic norms.

Attitudes, in this context, are multifaceted psychological constructs comprising affective (emotional), cognitive (belief), and behavioral (action tendency) components regarding uncivil acts. For instance, a student may hold the cognitive belief that checking a mobile phone during a lecture is acceptable because the material is redundant; the affective component might be a feeling of boredom or entitlement; and the behavioral component is the act of using the device. Analyzing these components helps researchers distinguish between behaviors that are intentionally disrespectful and those that result from poor socialization into the academic environment, or simply a lack of awareness regarding professional expectations. The collective attitudes of a student body toward specific behaviors, such as habitual lateness or inappropriate use of technology, create a normative climate that either enforces or undermines institutional standards of conduct, making the study of these attitudes paramount for effective pedagogical management and institutional policy development.

The rise of incivility is often linked to shifts in the consumerist model of education, where students increasingly view themselves as clients purchasing a service rather than active participants in a collaborative intellectual endeavor. This shift can foster attitudes of entitlement, leading to behaviors such as aggressive grade negotiation, challenging the instructor's authority in public forums, or demonstrating blatant disinterest in class activities. Conversely, faculty attitudes range from proactive confrontation and clear boundary setting to passive avoidance, often driven by fears of negative student evaluations, administrative non-support, or the emotional exhaustion associated with constant conflict management. Therefore, the prevailing attitudes within an academic setting operate as powerful social regulators, either reinforcing a culture of **mutual**

**respect and academic engagement** or allowing low-level disruptions to escalate and normalize, ultimately degrading the shared intellectual space necessary for deep learning.

## Conceptual Frameworks of Incivility

To systematically analyze attitudes toward classroom incivility, researchers often employ theoretical frameworks that categorize and explain the etiology of these behaviors. One common distinction is made between **active incivility** and **passive incivility**. Active incivility involves direct, often confrontational behaviors, such as verbally challenging an instructor in an aggressive tone, making derogatory comments, or packing up belongings noisily before the class is dismissed. Attitudes toward active incivility are generally negative across all stakeholders, as these behaviors violate fundamental norms of social interaction and authority respect. However, the threshold for defining a challenge as "aggressive" versus "intellectually stimulating" is often subjectively determined by the cultural background and individual personality of the participants involved, highlighting the inherent subjectivity in evaluating these disruptive acts.

In contrast, passive incivility involves indirect behaviors that demonstrate a lack of engagement or respect for the time and effort of others. Examples include persistent tardiness, inattention, texting, sleeping during class, or neglecting assigned readings. Attitudes toward passive incivility are often more permissive, particularly among students, who may rationalize these behaviors as coping mechanisms for demanding schedules or non-engaging lectures. This permissive attitude poses a significant challenge because while passive behaviors may seem minor individually, their cumulative effect erodes the collective focus of the classroom and signals to the instructor that their efforts are undervalued. Psychological frameworks, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, suggest that if students perceive that their peers and instructors hold positive or neutral subjective norms regarding passive incivility, their own intent to engage in these behaviors increases significantly, regardless of explicit course policies.

Another critical conceptual lens is the application of **Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT)**. EVT posits that individuals develop expectations about the behavior of others, and violations of these expectations trigger a cognitive appraisal process. In the classroom, both students and faculty hold expectations regarding appropriate conduct. When a student checks email during a lecture (violating the instructor's expectation of attention), or when an instructor fails to provide timely feedback (violating the student's expectation of service), an attitude of dissatisfaction or annoyance is formed. The valence of the resultant attitude (positive or negative) depends heavily on the "communicator reward valence"--that is, how positively the recipient views the violator. If the instructor is highly respected, a minor violation by them might be excused; conversely, if a student is already perceived negatively, a minor act of incivility may solidify a negative attitude toward them, illustrating how pre-existing biases mediate the interpretation of disruptive behavior.

## Factors Influencing Student Attitudes

Student attitudes toward classroom incivility are shaped by a confluence of developmental, technological, and cultural factors. One significant factor is the rapid integration of digital technology into daily life, which has fostered a cultural expectation of constant connectivity and immediate gratification. Students accustomed to multitasking and fragmented attention in other spheres may genuinely hold the attitude that it is acceptable, or even necessary, to engage in unrelated digital tasks during class time. This attitude often stems from a cognitive dissonance where they fail to recognize the distinction between private digital consumption and participation in a shared, formal academic space. Furthermore, the perceived anonymity offered by digital devices can reduce social inhibition, leading to online incivility (e.g., posting disrespectful comments about the course or instructor on social media) that students might never exhibit face-to-face, complicating the enforcement of behavioral standards.

Generational differences also profoundly influence attitudes. Younger generations, often raised in less hierarchical educational settings, may hold attitudes that challenge traditional power dynamics, viewing instructors less as absolute authorities and more as facilitators or collaborators. While this can foster critical thinking, it can also manifest as an attitude that justifies questioning pedagogical decisions or demanding accommodations in ways that previous generations might have deemed inappropriate. The perceived fairness of the instructor is also a powerful mediator; if students perceive the instructor as caring, equitable, and highly prepared, they are generally more likely to hold negative attitudes toward peer incivility and positive attitudes toward adhering to civility norms. Conversely, if the instructor is perceived as punitive, unprepared, or biased, students may develop attitudes that tolerate or even encourage disruptive behavior as a form of collective resistance or justification for disengagement.

Moreover, the sheer size of the class environment influences student attitudes toward incivility. In large lecture halls, students may feel depersonalized and less accountable for their actions. This reduced sense of responsibility can foster an attitude of detachment, where students believe their individual behavior has minimal impact on the overall learning climate. This collective detachment facilitates passive incivility, as students feel less compelled to monitor their own behavior or intervene when witnessing peer disruption. The concept of the "bystander effect" is highly relevant here; if students observe that incivility is frequent and goes unaddressed by the instructor or peers, they form an attitude that these behaviors are normalized and acceptable, leading to a downward spiral in behavioral standards across the cohort. Thus, the perceived social environment serves as a powerful reinforcer of existing attitudes regarding the boundaries of acceptable academic conduct.

## Faculty Perspectives and Response Strategies

Faculty attitudes toward classroom incivility are primarily shaped by their training, administrative support, and prior experiences with disruptive students. For many instructors, incivility is a significant source of professional stress and burnout. The attitude that incivility is a personal affront, rather than merely a behavioral management issue, is common, leading to emotional exhaustion. Faculty often employ attribution theory when responding to incivility: if they attribute the student's disruption to internal, stable factors (e.g., "This student is inherently lazy or disrespectful"), they are likely to adopt punitive or confrontational response strategies. Conversely, if they attribute the behavior to external, unstable factors (e.g., "The student is having a bad day" or "The lecture material is too dry"), they might adopt more empathetic or passive strategies, such as ignoring the behavior.

A pervasive attitude among faculty, particularly those without formal pedagogical training, is a reluctance to intervene, driven by fear of negative student evaluations. In institutions where tenure and promotion decisions heavily rely on student feedback, faculty may adopt a passive attitude toward low-level incivility to maintain high favorability scores. This reluctance, however, inadvertently signals to students that the behavior is acceptable, thereby validating the students' attitude toward entitlement or disengagement. Furthermore, when faculty do choose to respond, their efficacy is often mediated by the perceived level of institutional support. If an instructor believes that administrative staff will not back them up in a disciplinary dispute, their attitude shifts toward avoidance, perceiving the cost of confrontation to be higher than the cost of tolerating the disruption.

Effective response strategies require faculty to cultivate an attitude of proactive boundary setting combined with empathetic understanding. Instructors who clearly articulate their expectations on the first day of class, often collaboratively creating a civility contract with students, frame these rules not as personal demands but as necessary conditions for a shared, productive learning environment. This approach shifts the attitude of the classroom from a power struggle to a collective agreement. When incivility does occur, faculty trained in de-escalation techniques often adopt a restorative justice attitude, focusing on understanding the root cause of the behavior and restoring the learning environment, rather than purely focusing on punishment. This shift in attitude, from policing behavior to cultivating shared responsibility, is crucial for long-term behavioral change and fostering a positive academic climate.

## The Role of Institutional Culture

The broader institutional culture plays a crucial, often unseen, role in shaping the attitudes of students and faculty toward classroom incivility. When an institution lacks clear, consistently enforced policies regarding student conduct, it implicitly signals an attitude of tolerance or

ambiguity toward disruptive behavior. This ambiguity allows individual faculty members to set highly variable standards, leading to student confusion and inconsistent application of discipline. Students quickly learn which instructors enforce civility and which do not, developing opportunistic attitudes that maximize their comfort while minimizing effort, often leading to increased incivility in classes perceived as having lax standards. A strong institutional commitment to civility must be visible in the student handbook, faculty training materials, and administrative disciplinary actions.

The normalization of incivility within the institutional environment is perhaps the most insidious challenge. If faculty meetings are characterized by passive-aggressive communication, if administrative processes are unnecessarily difficult, or if staff members exhibit poor customer service, these behaviors establish a meta-attitude of general disrespect within the institution. Students and junior faculty observe this broader organizational climate and internalize the message that low-level disrespect is simply the norm of professional life. Addressing classroom incivility effectively therefore requires a comprehensive cultural audit, ensuring that the institution models the very behaviors it expects from its students. This involves promoting positive attitudes toward conflict resolution, transparency in decision-making, and consistent acknowledgment of respectful behavior across all levels of the academic hierarchy.

Furthermore, the institution's attitude toward student mental health and well-being directly impacts incivility. Many disruptive behaviors are symptoms of underlying stress, anxiety, or unmanaged psychological distress. An institution that adopts a supportive attitude, providing accessible mental health services and training faculty to recognize signs of distress, can mitigate incivility by addressing its root causes rather than merely punishing its manifestation. When students perceive the institution as prioritizing their holistic well-being, they are more likely to internalize positive attitudes regarding the value of the academic community and their responsibility to maintain a respectful environment. Conversely, a purely punitive institutional attitude risks alienating students and increasing resistance, making behavioral management significantly more challenging.

## Psychological and Pedagogical Consequences

The consequences of pervasive classroom incivility extend far beyond immediate disruption; they fundamentally undermine the pedagogical mission and psychological safety of the academic environment. Psychologically, incivility creates a hostile climate that increases anxiety and stress for both faculty and non-disruptive students. Students who witness frequent incivility often develop negative attitudes toward the class, perceiving the instructor as unable to control the environment and their peers as disrespectful, leading to reduced motivation and engagement. This erosion of psychological safety can silence marginalized students who may fear speaking up in an environment where basic norms of respect are not maintained, thereby limiting the diversity of voices essential for robust intellectual discussion.

Pedagogically, the primary consequence is the degradation of the learning process. Incivility, whether active or passive, fragments attention, making deep cognitive processing difficult for all participants. When an instructor must repeatedly interrupt a lecture to address a student using a mobile phone or engaging in side conversations, the momentum of the lesson is lost, and instructional time is diverted from core content delivery. Studies show a direct correlation between high levels of perceived classroom incivility and lower student achievement, as the collective learning environment is compromised. The attitude that "it's acceptable to disengage" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, making the instructor's task of fostering critical thinking and complex skill acquisition nearly impossible.

For faculty, the psychological cost is significant. Persistent incivility contributes directly to professional burnout, lowered job satisfaction, and an increased likelihood of leaving the profession. Instructors who frequently encounter disrespectful behavior may develop cynical or defensive attitudes, leading them to reduce their investment in innovative teaching methods or personalized student interactions. This cycle of withdrawal further degrades the learning environment, reinforcing the initial negative attitudes of the students. Ultimately, the normalization of incivility damages the reciprocal trust necessary for effective teaching and learning, transforming the academic encounter from a shared pursuit of knowledge into a transactional, often adversarial, relationship.

## Mitigation Strategies and Future Directions

Effective mitigation of classroom incivility requires a multi-pronged approach that targets the attitudes and behaviors of all stakeholders. Proactive strategies focus on establishing clear, shared norms from the outset. This often involves the use of a **civility syllabus statement** that clearly defines expectations, lists specific examples of unacceptable behavior (including digital disruptions), and outlines the consequences of violations. This formalization helps to neutralize permissive attitudes by establishing objective standards rather than relying solely on the subjective judgment of the instructor.

Pedagogical interventions represent another crucial area. Instructors can adopt teaching methods that inherently reduce opportunities for passive incivility by demanding constant engagement. Techniques such as active learning, frequent small group discussions, and immediate feedback loops make it difficult for students to disengage or multitask, shifting their attitude from passive reception to active participation. Furthermore, training faculty in effective communication and conflict resolution techniques empowers them to address incivility confidently and professionally, replacing passive avoidance with constructive intervention. This includes teaching faculty how to address disruptions privately and respectfully, avoiding public shaming that can escalate conflict.

Future directions in research must focus on the longitudinal study of attitudes toward digital

incivility and the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) tools on academic integrity and classroom conduct. As digital communication continues to evolve, understanding how students' attitudes toward anonymity and accountability shift in virtual learning spaces is paramount. Furthermore, institutions must invest in developing and consistently applying restorative justice models for addressing incivility, focusing on repairing the harm done to the learning community rather than simply imposing punishment. By cultivating an institutional attitude that prioritizes respect, transparency, and shared responsibility, higher education can effectively counter the corrosive effects of classroom incivility and restore the integrity of the academic environment for all participants.

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