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Six Ways to Promote a Positive Learning Environment

By: Deborah Miller Fox

During the past 10 years, my colleagues and I have observed a steady increase in specific behaviors that create conflict in our classrooms. These disruptive behaviors do not arise every day and certainly are not exhibited by all students, but collectively, my colleagues and I could fill a sizeable bucket every year with examples of student behaviors that are rude, hostile, or confrontational. A belief that students have the right to do whatever they want because they are paying for their educational experience, and that faculty have no right to impose limitations on this freedom, is rooted in students' assumption that as consumers of higher education, their individual needs and desires are the only relevant factor faculty should consider when developing course policies, assignments, and curriculum (Fullerton, 2013).

This sense of entitlement is not the lone factor influencing student classroom behavior. Myers et al. (2016) observe that students know and willingly practice many classroom citizenship behaviors (active collaboration with other students, respectful interaction with the professor, and use of common courtesies and social etiquette, for example) when they believe the classroom environment is hospitable, their peers are friendly and view one another as equals, and their instructors possess a genuine concern for them (p. 77).

It is tempting to comfort our own frustrations by simply joining the chorus of voices who bemoan the gradual decline in maturity and work ethic exhibited by the current generation of college students. Simply lamenting our students' deficiencies really doesn't solve the problem of incivility, any more than eating a pint of Haagen-Dazs soothes a heartache. Adopting this kind of pessimism is dangerous because it blinds us

to the great potential that our students bring to the classroom. My daily challenge is to extend hospitality, to engage students with discussion and assignments that are rigorous and stimulating, and to foster an environment that disarms rather than intensifies students' skepticism and resistance. These are a few of the things I'm doing to bring out the best, and perhaps diffuse the worst, in my first-year students:

1. Regularly invite them to adopt a posture of humility and gratitude at the beginning of the class session. This posture makes all of us teachable because it acknowledges our limitations and our indebtedness to others. If an attitude of entitlement cripples many young adults, then gratitude, not derision, may be the most powerful antidote.
2. Include a commitment to classroom citizenship behavior in the mission statements that we share with one another at the beginning of the semester. For at least 10 years, I have used the opening class session to articulate my personal mission as a professor of English. This mission statement explains why I teach writing, why I choose to teach writing at this particular institution, and how my work as a writer and professor is an expression of my faith and my core values. This mission statement also includes a very specific, concrete list of behaviors that I invite the students (and expect myself) to practice daily in our classroom interactions. This list includes things like addressing one another by our preferred names, dressing in ways that are appropriate to the classroom context, admitting our mistakes quickly without shaming or blaming, and making eye contact when we speak to one another. Recent

experiences suggest that these behaviors may be wholly unfamiliar to some of our students. Asking new students to create their own mission statement as a writing assignment is an excellent way to let them claim the citizenship behaviors that promote rather than obstruct learning.

3. Invite students to participate regularly in a "word of the day" exercise. This exercise asks students to identify a word that is meaningful to them at that particular moment, to write this word in the center of a page in a mini writing tablet, and then to write two reflective statements. Above the word, students try to identify what preoccupation, condition, or circumstance prompted them to think of this word. Below the word, they write a forward-looking sentence that answers the question,

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“Where will I go from here?” I believe this exercise might help them to connect the inner life of their mind and spirit with the outer world they inhabit every day.

4. Confront disruptive behavior directly and compassionately. Whenever possible, I address disruptive behaviors that occur in class with the students privately after dismissing the other students. I simply describe what actions I find disruptive, ask if they understand why this has a negative effect on me, themselves, or their peers, and then tell them not to repeat that behavior in the future. Most students respond positively to these short conversations. But if the disruption becomes a persistent behavior, or if it is clearly derailing our work, then I confront it directly and unemotionally when it occurs. This tells students that they are not in charge of the class session; I am. And it shows other students that I will take action both to protect their opportunity to learn and to honor my responsibility to thwart classroom disruptions. This might mean giving a disruptive student a choice: comply with my request for a change in your behavior or leave the classroom.

5. Ask students to do things that are hard and scary, but set them up to succeed. Some of the assignments that I give to students in a composition or first-year experience course are tedious, complicated, and difficult. I acknowledge this fact openly, and then tell them that I believe they are each capable of completing the assignment successfully. Some of our students come into class with a track of lies playing in their heads: you can't do this; you're going to fail; she will see how stupid you really are. I know those statements are lies, but the students don't. The antidote for their fear is to give them a quick succession of smaller, achievable assignments, so I break most difficult assignments into smaller tasks, provide frequent opportunities for collaboration with peers, and offer feedback that includes a clear identification of what they've done right as well as what they've done wrong.

6. Acknowledge my own mistakes immediately and publicly. After a particularly difficult struggle with my youngest child, a 17-year-old high

school senior, I realized an important truth: I have made many mistakes in my parenting, but that does not mean I am a bad mother. This truth applies to my relationship with my students as well. I have learned to tell them during the first week of the semester, “I am a really good teacher, but I will make mistakes. If you see one, bring it to my attention so that I can correct my errors the way I'm asking you to correct the errors you make when you are drafting an essay.”

Should young adults entering college “know better” than to speak and behave in ways that are mean, petty, rude, or belligerent? Probably. Unfortunately, many of them don't because they have seen so few models of civil, compassionate behavior in their families, in movies or television, or in the news. As a professor, I get to choose how I respond to their inexperience. One of my own mentors reminded me recently of a Native American story about the warring forces inside each of us, two wolves if you will, who fight relentlessly for dominance over the other. Which one wins? The one you feed, of course. If the best qualities in our students—their capacity for empathy, their hunger for excellence and integrity, their

appetite for knowledge—are in a constant battle with their darker impulses—their capacity for meanness, their fear of exposure or humiliation, their apathy toward new ideas and unfamiliar perspectives—then the most important thing I can do for them is to feed the good.

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