

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

May 7, 2007

Remedial Civility Training

By Thomas H. Benton

I am an English professor, but I teach a lot of general-education courses, including a large, required survey of Western civilization.

Every morning, after setting up all the multimedia components I'm going to need, I stand at the door of my 8:30 a.m. classroom in my jacket and tie and say, "Good morning" to each entering student.

Only a few will say "Hi" or "Good morning" in return. About half will give me a somewhat confused nod, not quite making eye contact. The rest will not even look at me; they look at their shoes and keep walking, exuding a vaguely suspicious and hostile air.

I don't believe that I catch most of those students off-guard, or that they are simply too groggy to respond appropriately. I suspect they are afraid to be polite because it will signify some kind of solidarity with authority that will harm their standing in the eyes of their peers. My theory seems to be confirmed by the affability of those same students when I greet them one-on-one in a hallway or on one of the paths between buildings. They may not be effusive in those exchanges, but they are at least civil.

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.

I often hear a lot of talk about the academic weaknesses of new freshmen. Even at a relatively elite college, it's not uncommon to find 18-year-olds who have problems with reading -- so much so that almost no incentive can persuade some students to spend an hour with Shakespeare, Kant, or Gibbon.

Writing is an even bigger problem for many students. Most have never produced anything longer than a few pages. A serious research paper -- involving sources, citation, and maybe eight pages of thoughtful analysis -- has become almost entirely unknown before college. The fundamental skills that used to qualify students for admission have been eroded to the point that nothing can be assumed anymore.

But those deficiencies don't bother me all that much. I am here to help them become better readers and writers, as well as to learn the particular content of my courses. Even more than that, I want to cultivate in them a sense of pleasure in learning that will enrich their lives.

Of course, I think it is a serious problem that many public schools -- and private ones -- have just about given up teaching many of the academic skills that were once considered basic for every high-school graduate, not just the ones going to college. But what really troubles me is that schools -- no doubt, mirroring the broader culture -- have given up cultivating the ordinary courtesies that enable people to get along without friction and violence.

Instead, I see among my students a dispiriting amount of cynicism about teachers and contempt for learning except as a hurdle over which one must jump on the road to some lucrative career. Some students imagine they will advance on the basis of having a degree, even if their words and manners indicate that they are unsuitable for any kind of job that involves dealing with people. They seem completely unaware that knowing how to behave will have a serious impact on their future prospects.

This is not about the simple rules governing which fork one should use but about norms of behavior about which nearly everyone used to agree and which seem to have vanished from student culture.

There are the students who refuse to address us appropriately; who make border-line insulting remarks in class when called upon (enough to irritate but not enough to require immediate action); who arrive late and slam the door behind them; who yawn continually and never cover their mouths; who neglect to bring books, paper, or even something with which to write; who send demanding e-mail messages without a respectful salutation; who make appointments and never show up (after you just drove 20 miles and put your kids in daycare to make the meeting).

I don't understand students who are so self-absorbed that they don't think their professors' opinion of them (and, hence, their grades) will be affected by those kinds of behaviors, or by remarks like, "I'm only taking this class because I am required to." One would think that the dimmest of them would at least be bright enough to pretend to be a good student.

But my larger concern here is not just that students behave disrespectfully toward their professors. It is that they are increasingly disrespectful to one another, to the point that a serious student has more trouble coping with the behavior of his or her fellow students than learning the material.

In classrooms where the professor is not secure in his or her authority, all around the serious students are others treating the place like a cafeteria: eating and crinkling wrappers (and even belching audibly, convinced that is funny). Some students put their feet up on the chairs and desks, as if they were lounging in a dorm room, even as muddy slush dislodges from their boots. Others come to class dressed in a slovenly or indiscreet manner. They wear hats to conceal that they have not washed that day. In larger lectures, you might see students playing video games or checking e-mail on their laptop computers, or sending messages on cell phones.

Those behaviors are, of course, relatively minor offenses, but permissive environments have a way of leading to larger problems. The situation reminds me of James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling's famous essay "Broken Windows": "if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. This is as true in nice neighborhoods as in run-down ones . . . one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares." Wilson and Kelling note, tellingly, that one of the major signs of a neighborhood in decline is when adults give up correcting the misbehavior of children.

For the most part, colleges are middle-class institutions. As such they are generally spared the more extreme manifestations of societal breakdown. Serious moral and criminal transgressions are rare -- at least where I teach -- and I sense that some of my students -- the skeptical ones who shun eye contact -- are not "beyond redemption." Rather, they are veterans of schools where petty crime, harassment, and violence are common, and almost nothing is done to prevent those ills by adults who look the other way.

I am sometimes sent to observe new high-school teachers and am usually shocked by what I see. Those teachers -- bright, idealistic, hopeful -- are sometimes treated with such open rudeness that it seems as if they have become objects of ritual abuse -- scapegoats for undisciplined adolescent rage. It doesn't surprise me that attrition rates for teachers are so high: teaching requires a kind of moral strength that few possess without many years of training.

For all my grumbling, I lead a charmed life compared to the average high-school teacher. And I feel deeply sorry that some of our graduates are sent into what is little better than what I would expect to see in a prison: students who mumble lewd, racist, and homophobic remarks about the teacher and other students; who furtively destroy school property; and who engage in petty acts of violence and intimidation just outside of the teacher's field of vision. Perhaps teachers pretend not to see most of what happens because they have come to believe there is nothing they can do about it -- and students play at forcing their reactions, stepping repeatedly to the edge of open defiance.

What is it like for students to spend a dozen years in such places? What does it do to children's sense of curiosity to learn that any expression of shared interest with a teacher will subject them to verbal and physical abuse?

Like prisoners, they learn that the safest thing to do is keep your head down and not attract attention. Currying favor with teachers will only get you into trouble: the adults will not protect you; they will pretend not to see when someone hits you; they will pretend not to hear when someone calls you an obscene name. They will not be there after school when the other kids come after you. Better to cultivate the support of your peers by signifying your contempt for the institution in which you are all trapped.

Unfortunately, the problems of students in elementary and secondary schools -- mirroring the problems of the larger culture -- are beyond the immediate control of college faculty members. But, in the last few years, I have become convinced that professors -- particularly the ones with tenure -- need to find ways to give remedial attention to student behavior, just as they have long done for students who cannot read or write well enough to succeed at college.

We must stop pretending that we are not seeing what is in front of us every day. We must stop shrugging our shoulders at minor discourtesies before they metastasize into a culture of vulgarity, violence, and general mayhem. In the process, maybe we can win back the trust of serious students and provide a safe learning environment where they can express their enthusiasm for learning without making themselves targets for abuse.

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