

## Responding to Varied Levels of Disruptive or Challenging Behaviors in an Online Environment

Incivility can take various forms in an online course environment, ranging from challenging to disturbing (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). While preemptive measures, such as creating community norms and including activities that build community will likely reduce incivility, instructors still need to be prepared to handle disruptive and/or challenging behaviors such as:

- sarcastic posts,
- posting off-topic comments,
- complaining about the course or assignment on discussion forums,
- aggressive emails to the instructor,
- ranting about a topic,
- offensive or belittling remarks towards another student,
- attacking another student's post,
- offensive language or terminology in posts,
- failing to participate in discussions and/or
- missing deadlines (Galbraith & Jones, 2010).

If left unaddressed, these behaviors can detract from a positive and productive learning environment. At the same time, instructor responses are most effective when they are well aligned and proportionate to the problematic behavior. It is also important to try to keep the offending student(s) engaged in the learning process. Because most of these behaviors occur in discussion forums, your response often needs to address the full group and may or may not require a separate communication to the individual.

Below are some basic guidelines for addressing varied situations.

### Low-level disruptions

Low-level disruptions include behaviors such as posting off-topic comments, writing in all caps, using sarcasm, etc. Usually this behavior is unintentional, but you should reassure students that you are paying attention and are committed to ensuring a productive learning environment. You also want to ensure the offending student remains engaged.

- **Response to student:** Follow up with a private email to the offending student to make sure that they got the message, but also to try to keep them from checking out. Consider the following strategies:
  - Reframe the negative behavior by thanking them for the opportunity to remind the other students of the importance of the guidelines.
  - Encourage them to remain engaged in the discussion by highlighting the things they are doing well in the course.

- Ask if they would like to schedule an online or phone meeting to discuss further.
- **Response to full group:** Remind the entire group of the netiquette guidelines and/or group norms discussed at the beginning of the course. Be sure to refer to the specific norm(s) that applies to the situation.

For example, in a response to a sarcastic post, you might write:

**Response to full group:** *Hi all, I just wanted to remind everyone about our community norms and guidelines. In order to make sure our ideas are received and considered in the way we intend, it's important that we remember our community norm to avoid sarcasm in online discussions. Even if the intention may be humorous, text-based communication leaves too much room for misinterpretation. That's all from me for now. This is a great conversation so far; I look forward to reading the rest of your posts!*

**Response to student:** *Hi Aden, I just wanted to reach out to you about my comments to your post on the discussion board. While you likely meant no harm, as we discussed when we developed our community norms, we all have to take extra care to create a productive learning environment if we want to be successful in this course. You have contributed some fantastic ideas to our discussions, and I don't want to see that diminish. I just ask that you be a little more mindful about our communication guidelines. Please let me know if you'd like to talk about this a bit more. I'm happy to schedule a phone call or Skype meeting with you. Thanks again for your contributions to our learning community!*

## Midlevel disruptions

Midlevel disruptions include behaviors such as using out-of-date terminology that is offensive to an identity group or complaining and venting about an assignment.

**Response to student:** You should first reach out to the offending student to:

- Acknowledge their intention or explain that although they might not mean any offense, their comments could have had a negative impact.
- Remind them of their commitment to the community norms and guidelines. Be sure to refer to the specific community norm or guideline that was violated.
- Offer ideas for improvement.
- Let them know that you are going to post a response to the full group on the discussion board to ensure that the other students do not assume that the behavior is appropriate.

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### Response to full group:

- When possible, describe the inappropriate behavior without mentioning the students' name.
- If applicable, provide additional information that may clarify any misconceptions about what the student wrote
- Refer to the specific community norm or guideline.

### Examples:

**Incident:** A student posts a one-sentence reply to discussion questions about an article complaining that they did not understand it.

**Response to student:** *Hi Ethan. It sounds like the article was challenging for you...and that's a good thing because being challenged is how you learn! However, what stops you from learning is getting frustrated and giving up. You are a valuable member of this learning community, and as such it is important that you remember the commitments you made at the beginning of class, including to reach out and ask for help from me or your peers. This is so important because if you struggled with the reading, chances are other students did as well. If you let me know that you are having trouble, I can provide additional support to you and your peers before the assignment is due. Thank you for the opportunity to remind everyone about this important agreement. To help you better understand the article, I suggest that you thoroughly read your peers' responses. If you still have questions, please come to my virtual office hours this week. You can reformulate your reply to answer the discussion prompts and earn the points for this discussion forum.*

**Response to full group:** *Hi Class! I know that this is a challenging article, but it's an important one for helping us to understand the underlying mechanisms of chronic fatigue syndrome. If you find that you are unable to fully understand the article in order to respond to the discussion prompts, please remember our group agreement to reach out for assistance either from me or your peers. We are all here to support each other's learning. I have virtual office hours each week for exactly this purpose. I look forward to our continued discussion on the article. Be assured that I will clarify and correct any incorrect or inaccurate replies as necessary.*

**Incident:** A student posts a comment about “the Indians” who were protesting the Dakota Access pipeline.

**Response to student:** *Hi Sally! Thank you for your discussion post about the protests over the Dakota Access pipeline. In addition to raising an important topic, you have unintentionally provided an additional learning opportunity for the class by using the word “Indian.” Although this label is still used in many places, the*

*more widely preferred term is “Native American.” This raises an important topic about preferred labels and changing terminology that is important for everyone to consider, so I am going to address it on our discussion board. I think everyone will benefit from this discussion, so thank you again. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.*

**Response to full group:** *Hi all! I wanted to take this opportunity to discuss an important issue under the broad topic of “inclusive language.” At the heart of it, inclusive language is about using terminology (or labels) that are preferred by the people about whom you are talking. This is one way to show respect for people who are different from you in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc. But this isn’t always easy because preferred terminology often evolves and changes. For example, while the term “Indian” was widely used for centuries, today it is more appropriate to use the term “Native American.” That said, not every person of Native American descent is going to prefer that term either, so there is no hard and fast rule. I’ve attached a few resources in our additional resources section for those who want to explore more. And I’ll continue to post information as opportunities arise!*

## High-level disruptions.

High-level disruptions include direct attacks on what another student wrote, insults or offensive remarks towards another student in the class, a person outside the course, or a group of people, and offensive or politically provocative language. Instructors should immediately reach out to the offending student and give them the opportunity to discuss your concerns. It may be that the student is passionate about the issue, but does not have the skills for effectively communicating their ideas. It is also important to remember how little we may know about some students, their troubles, or in some cases their mental health. The best case scenario is that a student might just need some additional support. The worst case scenario is they could be a danger to themselves or others.

These behaviors also require a response to the full group and, if the disruption involved an insult or attack on another student, the instructor should follow up with that student as well.

### **Response to full group:**

- Depending on the degree of severity, you may want to remove the post immediately. In these cases, you should ensure that students who may have seen the offending post know that you are handling the situation. You may send an email or post a comment referring to the course guidelines and any other campus policies that might apply.
- When possible, use the disruption as a teachable moment for the entire class by acknowledging the issue out in the open.

- Name the specific problematic behavior and refer to the relevant community norms and their importance for the learning process.
- Guide the discussion back to the course content and discussion prompts.

**Response to student:**

- Use the FICA (Facts, Impact, Context, Actions) feedback tool to prepare for a conversation or write an email.
- Express your concern for the student as well as for the impact of their behavior on the class.
- Ask a question to open the conversation, such as “What is your understanding of the problem I’ve asked you here to discuss?”
- Ask how the student would like to resolve the issue.
- Request a phone or video meeting to discuss next steps.
- Share the information with the student’s advisor, as well as your Dean or Department Chair. It may be that the student is having similar issues in other courses, which can be a sign of a bigger problem.

**Response to full group:**

Dear Class,

I want to be clear why I removed Robert’s post. The issue was not that he disagreed with the policy of creating “Sanctuary Cities” to stem the mass deportation of undocumented immigrants. In fact, it is really important that we examine the issue from all sides so that when we develop policy recommendations, our ideas address the complexity of the issue. My concern with Robert’s post was that it used a term that is dehumanizing and hurtful in reference to a specific group of people.

So, I thought this would be a good time to remind everyone to abide by the community norms we all created, and agreed to, at the beginning of the course, including our agreement to avoid language that belittles, demeans, or disrespects any person or groups of people. We all agreed that respectful language was essential for having productive discussions about contentious issues.

I would like for us to continue this important discussion and dig deeper into the readings as we grapple with different social, economic, and political aspects of this issue.

Thank you!

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Example of an email and/or script for a phone call:

Hi Robert,

We need to talk about what happened this week on the course discussion board. As you know, the use of racial slurs is completely prohibited in our learning community. This language is hurtful to your peers and destructive to our learning process. Just like you, everyone has the right to a respectful learning environment.

Although you have made some important contributions to our discussions, I've also spoken to you a few times about how your tone and use of sarcasm can sometimes be off-putting. Your use of racial slurs is an escalation of inappropriate behavior and crosses a line.

That said, I would like to work with you to remain in the course, which would include some work to repair the impact of your behavior on our learning community, such as an apology to the group and rewriting your post in a respectful and thoughtful way. Please let me know if you are willing to discuss this further.

In either case, I will be notifying your academic advisor so she can follow up with you and see if there are other support resources that might be helpful to you.