

## Reflect on Instructor Behaviors That Impact Online Civility

Just like in a classroom setting, instructor behaviors can have a big impact on the online course environment (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Stavredes, 2011). The online environment leaves a lot of room for miscommunication and unintended communication (e.g. you don't reply to an email because you are busy, the student interprets the lack of response as not interested or caring). Therefore, it is important to be conscientious about the various ways you communicate and model civility.

Questions for self-reflection:

- How do you encourage students to reach out to you with questions or concerns?
- How do you communicate and what tone do you use to ensure students know you are interested in their learning and in the course topics?
- How do you ensure students don't misinterpret the timing of your responses?
- How and how often do you reply to questions posted in online discussion forums?
- How do you respond to negative and/or disruptive behaviors?

Here are some tips for instructor behaviors that positively impact online civility.

- **Be approachable.** Frequently remind and encourage students to take advantage of your virtual office hours. The more they hear you say it, the more likely they will be to take advantage of your availability. The more opportunity you have to connect with your students one-on-one, the better you will be able to understand and address difficult behaviors they may exhibit (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).
- **Check for tone.** Always re-read messages and discussion board posts to try to ensure that you are striking the right tone. Remember that humor can be difficult to communicate in a text-based format and can easily be misinterpreted. On the flip side, a serious tone can come off as more serious than intended. Always strive for an encouraging tone, even if dealing with difficult situations.
- **Respond quickly to questions and emails.** Let students know that you will respond within 24 to 48 hours to questions posted on discussion boards and emails. Then, make sure to live up to this commitment. Failure to address student concerns in a timely fashion can send an unintended message that you are not interested in or supportive of them.
- **Address disruptive behaviors effectively and promptly.** Below are some basic guidelines.

**Low-level disruptions.** If the behavior is mild, such as posting off-topic comments, writing in all caps, or using sarcasm, use the opportunity to remind the entire group of the netiquette guidelines or group norms discussed at the beginning of the course. This assures the students that the instructor is paying attention and caring for the group. You may also follow up with a private email to the offending student to make sure that they got the message, but try to ensure that you don't cause them to 'check out.' One strategy is to reframe the negative behavior by thanking them for the opportunity to remind the other students of the importance of the guidelines or offering encouragement 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. Sometimes the personal touch goes a long way.

**Midlevel disruptions.** If the behavior involves something unintentionally offensive, such as using out-of-date terminology that is offensive to some identity groups, you should first reach out to that student. Explain that although they did not mean any offense, their comments might have had a negative impact. Let them know that you are going to post a response on the discussion board because other students might need the information. Then post to the discussion board without mentioning the student, but rather focus on what was said and correcting the information.

**High-level disruptions.** If the behavior involves direct attacks or intentionally offensive language, you should remove the post immediately. To make sure that students who saw the offending post know that you are handling the situation, you can post a comment referring to the course guidelines and any other campus policies that might apply. Then reach out to the individual student and give them the opportunity to discuss the issue that is causing the behavior. It's important to remember how little we may know about some students, their troubles, or mental health. In the best case, these students might just need some additional support. In the worst case, they could be a danger to themselves or others. As a starting point, you can prepare for this conversation using the FICA (facts, impact, context, and action) feedback tool. If the student persists in the disruptive behavior and/or reacts negatively to your attempts to discuss it, you should consider contacting their academic advisor to seek input. You might also consider other mental health or safety resources available at your institution.

*\*Adapted from (Stavredes, 2011)*