

LE2: Expert Insights Podcast

Bonni Stachowiak [00:00:02] Judith Boettcher shares with us about promoting a civil online learning environment.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:00:10] Judith, how might an instructor begin an online course to better ensure a simple learning environment?

Judith Boettcher [00:00:17] Well, you know, one of the things about online courses is that the most important thing for course beginnings is to set expectations. And this means and include setting expectations about communication. And basic to any communication is respect of others' ideas and values, even if we don't necessarily share those ideas or values. So how do we get started in an online course to kind of establish that kind of environment? This is what I would generally really recommend, and that is that, number one, that we include a set of netiquette guidelines in the course resources. And we don't just put them in the course resources, then we also have a discussion forum where the students refer to those netiquette guidelines and then add and share their most important or valued habits when they talk about communicating online. And then the results of that forum can then become kind of a supplement to the generic netiquette guidelines.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:01:18] So much of the time it's important that we think about all that can't be sometimes communicated in a written form that, you know, we lose the sense of a tone of person's voice or their cadence, and so it is really important that we think through those things and also remind people about how we want to avoid assuming any kind of intent, or just the danger in doing that by human nature. You know, this is what they meant and it's like, well, there's so much that could be missed. So it's good to have that groundwork set.

You shared so much of creating a civil learning environment comes down to respect: instructors respecting students, students respecting instructors, and also students respecting each other. As you think through those different groups, can you tell us, Judith, in particular what needs to be recognized and respected?

Judith Boettcher [00:02:09] Sure. Let's go ahead and start with the dialogue between instructors and students. And we often forget how students are really busy people as well. And they're often balancing, particularly online students, they're balancing online learning with many other life responsibilities.

And I think the most important recommendation I would have for respectful instructors is that they don't throw surprise assignments at their students. Remember, one of the best practices about online learning is we want to be really, really clear about the expectations of learning assignments up front so that students can plan their lives. They're going to be getting enough surprises from other areas of their life without getting surprises like an additional case study. Oh, by the way, let's just do that. So, instructor respect for students is remembering to be really clear about those expectations and also clear as to how students will collaborate with each other and with faculty members. Then let's go on if we think about respect of students for their instructors. Again, online instructors are probably balancing multiple courses and multiple life responsibilities, and therefore respectful students only email instructors for information that's not in the syllabus or in other online course resources.

Now, there are times when students really might need to have confidential communications with faculty or they really need help clarifying something, but they shouldn't be interrupting faculty willy nilly for information readily available from other tech resources or library folks or other students.

And a really good practice that I keep coming back to, too, is to have a cyber cafe area of your website, your course site, where students can really gather. It's like a student union and they can chat about their assignments, about questions, about how did you interpret this assignment, for example? We have to remember that oftentimes students can clarify for other students better than the faculty because the faculty have all this expert knowledge and they just make a lot of assumptions, whereas students talking to students can really often have very clear communications.

And let me go on here, for, students showing respect for each other. And two ways that students can really show respect for each other is to number one, and we've mentioned this before, the importance of acknowledging others' postings in a very thoughtful, considerate way. And be sure to acknowledge a number of other students. You know, it's really easy to get into a habit of just reviewing or responding to a selected subset of students.

And yet, you know, students who spend a great deal of time and energy with their postings, and if nobody ever responds or acknowledges anything that they say can, you know, it's like they feel invisible. They can get very discouraged very quickly. So two things for students to do to each other is to acknowledge each other's postings and also to be really clear and concise.

I haven't used the applications that are out there right now, but there are some applications that review one's writing and get rid of a lot of rambling and imprecise language. You know, I think maybe we ought to encourage online students to get in the habit of using those, that kind of an application to see the difference between what they might have been writing and what is recommended so that it is concise and clear, saving their students and their faculty members time and reading very long, rambling things.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:05:53] So we've looked a bit about how we can respect each other from a number of different contexts. Can you offer examples of instructor behaviors that might tend to put a civil learning environment at risk?

Judith Boettcher [00:06:07] You know, that question brings us back to one of the absolute number one best practices for teaching online, and that is for the instructor to be present virtually, almost every day in some way, because daily presence continually sends students the message that their instructor cares about them and their learning. It also communicates the message that the instructor is observing, watching, and checking out what's happening on the course site so that things don't get out of hand. The second item is that the instructor can really put things at risk if incivility, if it does happen, is not recognized, acknowledged, and dealt with. If students aren't abiding by the netiquette rules and are being obviously disruptive or their postings are truly out of bounds, they have to be dealt with. Because, again, this means that the instructor respects the community, respects the area, and tries to keep it safe for learning.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:07:12] How would you recommend an instructor address a mild incivility in an online space? And also, let's look at moderate- and high-level incivility.

Judith Boettcher [00:07:22] As with any difficult human behavior, the best strategy is prevention. But problems will still arise. So let's talk about mild incivility. It would be a rare course where one or more students is, you know, neglectful about observing the normal etiquette in netiquette practices. And so I find that the best way of dealing with that kind of behavior is to do two things. Model the best behavior, and then gently correct inappropriate postings or behavior, mostly in, again, private and confidential communications. Most of the time times most students just need a gentle reminder. If we move on to moderate incivility most of the time, moderate incivility is, again, best handled by private and confidential communication. But if you do get a situation where two or three students start pushing off or getting off on each other, it can work to gently remind the class as a whole: Let's go back to, you know, the netiquette guidelines and also the supplemental ones that you developed at the beginning of the course.

Of course, if comments are really inflammatory or distressing and merit deletion, an instructor really has a right and probably should delete a posting immediately and then follow up again privately by phone or email with the offending student.

As for the rare, more rare case about a very severe form of incivility that's best handled by a referral to a student affairs office. In rare cases, a student truly might be mentally ill and in need of serious counseling. So faculty do have to remind themselves that they are part of a whole support team for students and that they don't have to

handle really, you know, outlandish situations all by themselves. Severe incivility can be really, really stressful and cause damage in a course community. So it's really important, again, that these kinds of incivility be dealt with.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:09:28] Thanks, Judith Boettcher for joining me in this conversation for ACUE, the Association of College and University Educators.