Responding to Major Challenges to the Learning Environment

Incivility can take various forms in an online course environment, ranging from minor to disturbing (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Although 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 minor disruptions as well as more serious challenges to the learning environment such as aggressive emails to the instructor, offensive or belittling remarks toward another student, or offensive language or terminology used in posts (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 or live sessions, your response often needs to address the full group and may or may not require a separate communication to the individual.

Basic Guidelines for Addressing Major Disruptions

Major disruptions include direct attacks on what another student wrote; insults or offensive remarks toward the instructor, course assignments, 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 to discuss your concerns. It may be that the student is passionate about the issue but does not have the skills to effectively communicate 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 that 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.

You should first reach out to the offending student:

- Describe the incident and 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.
- 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.
- Schedule a follow-up conversation in person or by a phone call or a virtual meeting.

Next respond to the 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 specific community norm, the course guidelines, and any other campus policies that might apply.
- When possible, describe the inappropriate behavior without mentioning the student's name.
- If applicable, provide additional information that may clarify any misconceptions about what the student wrote.
- 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.

Finally, have a follow-up conversation with the student:

- 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 we are here to discuss?"
- Provide an explanation of why the behavior was problematic and refer to the community norms that were violated.
- Ask if the student has any suggestions on how to resolve the issue. For example, they may suggest apologizing to the community as well as directly apologizing to impacted students.
- End the meeting with clear next steps and be sure to follow up with an email outlining next steps for both you and the student.
- 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.

Example of an Email and/or Script for a Phone Call

Hi Sherry,

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.

Response to Full Group

Dear Class,

I want to be clear why I removed Sherry's post. The issue was not that she 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 Sherry'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

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Galbraith, M. W., & Jones, M. S. (2010). Understanding incivility in online teaching. *Journal of Adult Education*, 39(2), 1–10.