

Responding to Minor Disruptions to the Online 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 such as sarcastic posts, posting off-topic comments, or distracting behavior during a live session, as well as more serious challenges to the learning environment (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 Minor Disruptions

Minor 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 that the offending student remains engaged.

- **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.
- **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.

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 regarding your post on the discussion board. Although 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!*

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.