

Perspective Article

Disruptive players: How Classroom Incivility impacts Educator Engagement and Performance

I. Anell¹

¹Department of Geoscience, University of Oslo, Norway

*Corresponding author. E-mail: Ingrid.Anell@geo.uio.no

Research studies within higher education have often focused on student learning, and on the role of the educator in creating effective learning. In today's increasingly student-focused interactive classroom, there is a heightened need to consider the role of the students, and their awareness of their influence on the learning environment and their effect on a lecturer's drive and enthusiasm. Classroom incivility, which covers a wide range of negative student behaviour, is emerging as an increasingly problematic aspect within higher education. Even minor disturbances can accumulate to have significant impact on the lecturer's confidence, motivation and enthusiasm. In course design we need to consider the classroom perhaps less like students with a teacher, and more like a sports team with a coach. The idea is ultimately to work together to achieve the desired learning goals, and the ability of a team to perform lies in the hands of both players and coach.

Forskning innen høyere utdanning har ofte fokusert studenters læring og lærerens rolle til å skape et effektivt læringsmiljø. I dagens stadig mer studentrettede, interaktive klasserom er det et økt behov for å vurdere studentenes bevissthet om deres innflytelse på læringsmiljøet, og hvordan dårlig adferd kan påvirke lærerens drivkraft og engasjement. «Classroom incivility» (uhøflighet), som omfatter et bredt spekter av negativ adferd, fremstår som et stadig økende problem innen høyere utdanning. Selv mindre forstyrrelser kan samlet sett ha en betydelig innvirkning på foreleserens selvtillit, motivasjon og entusiasme. Når vi designer undervisningsopplegg, bør klasserommet anses mindre som studenter med en lærer, og mer som et idrettslag med en trener. Målet er samarbeid for å oppnå de ønskede læringsmålene, og et lags evne til å prestere ligger i hendene på både spillerne og treneren.

Keywords: Classroom incivility, active learning, student-teacher relationships, lecturer enthusiasm

In business, the use of sports metaphors is a common occurrence. “Let’s not *jump the gun*, we want to *keep the ball in our court*, stay in *pole position*, we are almost *neck and neck* with the competition at this stage”. In teaching, not so much. I have yet to walk out of a lecture theatre, pat myself on the back and think, “*boy, I sure knocked that one out of the park*”.

Yet I cannot help but think about how similar sports teams and classrooms really are. Teaching is not an individual feat, it is a complex and dynamic interactive process between class and educator, between team and coach. I should know something about this, as I have had a foot in one, and a foot in the other for most of my life.

I reflected recently upon how I experienced changes in myself in response to changes in those around me. In two consecutive practices in the volleyball team I coach, I felt there was a difference between night and day. The only actual difference was the participation of a highly enthusiastic player. She brought an amazing energy and vibe, contagious enthusiasm, whooping with delight at every new exercise. It amazed me how much it affected me. I became a better coach. I became more involved, more vocal, more enthusiastic and engaged. I overcame the calm quiet Nordic observer role and dove into constructive engaged feedback mode.

The following week I lectured CO₂ storage in a late undergraduate/early MSc class. Knowing that CO₂ storage can be subject to scepticism, as it can be seen as a temporary fix which does not address the fundamental problems and diverts cost away from green energy solutions, I always introduce and encourage understanding the complex multi-faceted aspects of geo-engineering solutions. Unlike previous years, this class met the lectures with scepticism that bordered on hostility. The class was not engaged, they did not respond much or participate. The vibe that was being projected was that I was the face of green-washing; I was the well-dressed head of PR from the oil company, the fancy green stickers on the side of the cement factory, the freshly painted façade of the local coal plant. It *came out of left field*. I hate to admit it, but it did affect me. Immediately I saw changes in my teaching. I became unfocused, second-guessed myself, sped up the pace, or lost momentum. One might say, I *dropped the ball*.

In the interaction between educator and class there is a two-way dynamic. Success requires a co-committed dedication to create a positive spiral. The mutual energy, drive and enthusiasm between students and educators who commit and engage in the learning process creates a positive feedback loop. A demoralizing, negatively spiralling lacklustre learning environment can be created by the opposite.

What I experienced can be classified as classroom incivility. Classroom incivility covers a range of behaviours, at its apex verbal and physical abuse (Feldman, 2001; Schroeder and Roberston, 2008; Segrist et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the lesser disruptions include talking to others during class, using cell phones, eye-rolling, being late to class, sleeping, sarcastic comments, and packing up or leaving before the class is over (Clark and Springer, 2007; Connelly, 2009; Knepp, 2012; Nordstrom et al. 2009; Cahyadi et al., 2021). Usually, a sleeping student does not faze me much; they certainly aren’t reaching

their learning targets, but they are fairly harmless. Hostile scepticism, on the other hand, clearly jolted me. This is not surprising since classroom incivility is a bit of a ‘slippery concept’. (Bjorklund and Rehling, 2009). What one educator perceives as problematic another might be unfazed by. Similarly, an educator’s perception might not mirror that of the students, or have any impact on the actual learning (Bjorklund and Rehling, 2009).

On observing new faculty cope as teachers, Boice (1996) says: *Classroom incivilities emerged as a major factor, frequently dominating classes, often making or breaking novice teachers. I remember wondering: Why isn't this problem the subject of more study? Why don't we recognize its commonness and cost in higher education?*

There are a range of studies on the effect of the lecturer on students’ motivation and engagement (e.g. Wood, 1998; Mahler et al., 2018; Patrick et al., 2000; Marty-Dugas et al., 2024). There are also multiple studies on student boredom and consequences on learning (e.g. Kanevsky and Keighley, 2003; Tze et al., 2016; Farr-Wharton et al. 2018; Sharp et al., 2018; Tam et al., 2020). It has been shown that engaged and enthusiastic lecturers are pivotal in promoting intrinsic motivation and positively influencing both achievement and behaviour (e.g. Patrick et al., 2010; Keller et al., 2014). It is in fact hard to find anything remotely negative about engaged and enthusiastic lecturing.

Meanwhile, there are fewer studies on the opposite end of the spectrum – how students affect their lecturer. How student behaviour can lessen the drive and enthusiasm and lower the self-confidence of the educator. Classroom incivilities are emerging as an increasingly important factor in higher education. It’s been shown to affect both teaching and learning adversely, and it is a stressor, eliciting a range of negative emotions (Sana et al., 2013; Hamid and Azizee, 2024). Incivility has a direct negative impact on educators—physical and emotional reactions, along with decreased self-esteem and loss of confidence in teaching abilities (Luparell, 2007). A key factor in successful teaching and learning is lecturer self-confidence, and a determining factor in whether they use active learning strategies (Sadler, 2013). Educators also experience a loss of enthusiasm and drive, a disconnect from the students, and a tendency to rush through the material (Boice, 1996). Additionally, educators dealing with classroom incivility are more likely to experience discontent, eventually also burnout (Appleby, 1990). This is a natural instinct, met with indifference, hostility, boredom; thus, is it any wonder one would start to question oneself, and one’s own teaching ability?

It is fairly obvious that learning is hampered if an educator has to deal with incivility, which can demand time and energy that is normally spent on learning related activities (Stork and Hatley, 2009). Disruptive or inappropriate behaviour does not just affect the lecturer, but also disrupts other students’ attentiveness and note-taking (Boice, 1996). As a previously occasional eye-roller and expressively bored student myself, I know I never considered the potential effect this might have on my lecturers. Then again, student-centered active learning was not at the forefront during my academic years. So, in today’s more communicative, student involved learning environment, the question arises - do students consider how their behaviour and attitudes affect the educator? Perhaps there is a need for heightened student awareness around the dual nature of the roles, and their responsibility, maybe even accountability, for the learning environment.

So, what is the game-changer? What can one do to counteract even minor incivility, and create a classroom where coach and team are on the same page? In lieu of the decline in civility, Connelly (2009) suggests new students should be introduced early on to a code of expected academic civility. Nordstrom and Bartels (2009) suggest several ideas including clearly communicating expectations for classroom conduct, modelling behaviour by demonstrating inclusiveness and respect, and finally creating course content that encourages student involvement. Student involvement is linked to both improved conduct and learning outcomes. Connelly (2009) stresses the need to present civility as highly important, creating a sense of community around a shared experience in higher education.

As educators, many of us strive to improve our teaching and create more engagement, new tools, and perspectives. Yet like a coach who designs a game plan, we are only as strong as our weakest link. *It takes two to tango*. A lecture is no longer a riveting monologue, but a nuanced duet with a whole choir. Things were probably simpler “back in the day”. The professor was an all wise brilliant and near-untouchable person, regaling a silent classroom of students. Similarly, the coach was a higher entity, unquestioned, respected and obeyed. Today students are less like marionettes, more akin to dance partners. While this is less simple, it is, hopefully, much better. We feed more off the energy that we get in return. Each year, each term, we are faced with a new classroom and a new unique dynamic. Is there really a single way to create and maintain a winning synergy? What’s more, when faced with a ripple effect of classroom incivility, how long, how much drive can an educator sustain on their own? Is there a way to break a spiralling classroom dynamic?

I feel that reactions to classroom incivilities are often personal, and therefore we need to know and understand our own triggers. An educator needs to decide what they consider unacceptable behaviour. This can be clearly communicated to a classroom, and hopefully, agreed upon. Studies suggest much classroom incivility results from a social norm, acceptable because “everyone does it” (Segrist et al., 2018). When challenged to consider the effect of disruptive behaviour on an educator, and more importantly peers, perhaps a code of conduct can be established. However, I also feel that many minor incivilities can accumulate to create a significant impact. In asking for civility, it is important not to simultaneously squash an active and engaged learning environment, to not demand straight-backed silence. Healthy scepticism, even angry criticism, is not necessarily a sign of disrespect and incivility (Applebaum, 2020). Between this silent obedient classroom and open violent harassment there is a grey-zone of whispered conversations, heavy sighs, and eyerolls that might get under one’s skin. These behaviors can be harder to counteract. On a positive note, I experience that classroom engagement and positive behaviour counteracts and balances much incivility. It took just one enthusiastic player to make me a better coach *for everyone*, even those not hollering in delight.

After some deliberation my suggestions for counteracting classroom incivility are thus; define your list of unacceptable behaviours, open the dialogue and involve students in creating a civil but dynamic classroom, and imbue them with a sense of responsibility for

the learning environment. Finally, I suggest that one solution may be to accept that perhaps one cannot reach and engage every person but instead focus on those who energise and motivate you. "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," as the ancient Chinese proverb says.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ayesha Jordan for the enthusiasm throughout the season which inspired me to be a better coach and allowed me to reflect on this delicate balance which I could see mirrored in both sports and classroom.

References

- Applebaum, B. (2020). When incivility is a form of civility: Challenging the comfort of willful ignorance. *Educational Theory*, 70(6), 717-730. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12458>
- Appleby, D. C. (1990). Faculty and student perceptions of irritating behaviors in the college classroom. *The Journal of Staff, Program, and Organizational Development*, 8, 41-46.
- Bjorklund, W. L., & Rehling, D. L. (2009). Student perceptions of classroom incivility. *College teaching*, 58(1), 15-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567550903252801>
- Boice, B. (1996). Classroom incivilities. *Research in higher education*, 37, 453-486. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01730110>
- Cahyadi, A., Hendryadi, H., & Suryani, S. (2021). Thoughts on incivility. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 8(1), 129-142. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/593>
- Clark, C. M., & Springer, P. J. (2007). Incivility in nursing education: a descriptive study of definitions and prevalence. *Journal of nursing education*, 46(1), 7-14. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20070101-03>
- Connelly, R. J. 2009. "Introducing a Culture of Civility in First-Year College Classes." *The Journal of General Education* 58:47-64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/27798121>
- Farr-Wharton, B., Charles, M. B., Keast, R., Woolcott, G., & Chamberlain, D. (2018). Why lecturers still matter: The impact of lecturer-student exchange on student engagement and intention to leave university prematurely. *Higher Education*, 75, 167-185. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0190-5>
- Feldman, L. (2001). Classroom civility is another of our instructor responsibilities. *College Teaching*, 49, 137-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2001.10844595>
- Hamid, R. A., & Azizee, W. Y. I. W. (2024) Understanding Student Incivility among Undergraduates and the Impact on Educators' Subjective Wellbeing. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i9/22626>
- Kanevsky, L., & Keighley, T. (2003). To produce or not to produce? Understanding boredom and the honor in underachievement. *Roeper Review*, 26(1), 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190309554235>
- Keller, M., Neumann, K., & Fischer, H. E. (2014). Enthusiastic teaching and its impact on students' interest and self-concept: Investigating german physics classrooms. In M. R. Hofmann, K. Neumann, & H. E. Fischer (Eds.), *Quality of instruction in physics: Research and practice* (pp. 71-86). Waxmann Verlag
- Knepp, K. A. F. (2012). Understanding student and faculty incivility in higher education. *Journal of Effective Teaching*, 12(1), 33-46. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1092106>
- Luparell, S. (2007). The effects of student incivility on nursing faculty. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 46(1), 15-19. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20070101-04>
- Mahler, D., Großschedl, J., & Harms, U. (2018). Does motivation matter?—The relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and enthusiasm and students' performance. *PloS one*, 13(11), e0207252. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0207252>
- Marty-Dugas, J., Rajasingham, M., McHardy, R. J., Kim, J., & Smilek, D. (2024). Instructor enthusiasm in online lectures: how vocal enthusiasm impacts student engagement, learning, and memory. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 9, p. 1339815). Frontiers Media SA. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1339815>
- Nordstrom, C. R., Bartels, L. K., & Bucy, J. (2009). Predicting and curbing classroom incivility in higher education. *College Student Journal*, 43(1), 74-86. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ872216>
- Patrick, B. C., Hisley, J., & Kempler, T. (2010). "What's everybody so excited about?": The effects of teacher enthusiasm on student intrinsic motivation and vitality. *The Journal of experimental education*, 68(3), 217-236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220970009600093>
- Sadler, I. (2013). The role of self-confidence in learning to teach in higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 50(2), 157-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2012.760777>
- Sana, F., Weston, T., and Cepeda, N. J. 2013. "Laptop multitasking hinders learning for both users and nearby peers." *Computers & Education* 62:24-31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.10.003>
- Schroeder, J. L., & Robertson, H. (2008). Civility in the college classroom. *APS Observer*, 21, 29-31. <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/civility-in-the-college-classroom>

- Segrist, D., Bartels, L. K., & Nordstrom, C. R. (2018). "But everyone Else is doing it:" a social norms perspective on classroom incivility. *College Teaching*, 66(4), 181-186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2018.1482858>
- Sharp, J. G., Hemmings, B., Kay, R., & Atkin, C. (2018). Academic boredom, approaches to learning and the final-year degree outcomes of undergraduate students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42(8), 1055-1077. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1349883>
- Stork, E., & Hartley, N. T. (2009). Classroom Incivilities: Students' Perceptions about Professors' Behaviors. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 2(4), 13-24. <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v2i4.1066>
- Tam, K. Y., Poon, C. Y., Hui, V. K., Wong, C. Y., Kwong, V. W., Yuen, G. W., & Chan, C. S. (2020). Boredom begets boredom: An experience sampling study on the impact of teacher boredom on student boredom and motivation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90, 124-137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12309>
- Tze, V. M., Daniels, L. M., & Klassen, R. M. (2016). Evaluating the relationship between boredom and academic outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 28(1), 119-144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9301-y>
- Wood, A. M. (1998). *The effects of teacher enthusiasm on student motivation, selective attention, and text memory*. London: Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Western Ontario. [Accessed at 20 October 2025 Library and Archives Canada](#)