

Encouraging Civility among Nurse Practitioner Students Enrolled in Online Courses

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Abstract

This article reviews incivility in online courses and recommends strategies to reduce its occurrence. Faculty have an important role in fostering civility among nurse practitioner students through maintaining a trusting and respectful learning environment, providing clear course guidelines and expectations, and establishing a sense of community. Without a social presence in online courses, nonverbal cues are lacking and netiquette becomes important. To discourage uncivil behaviors among students, the institution's Student Code of Conduct must be consistently enforced by faculty and supported by administration. The promotion of civility is of utmost importance as rude behaviors may progress to violent situations when left unaddressed.

Incivility seems to be an ever-increasing trend in daily life. In the book *Incivility: The Rude Stranger in Everyday Life* (2010), the authors present multiple studies validating that this phenomenon is not imagined. Overall, studies show about 1 in 3 daily encounters are considered uncivil (p. 23). Teachers are not immune to this social trend, and must attend to incivility to maintain a healthy atmosphere for learning. In higher education, faculty members continue to contend with incivility, and it seems that the anonymity of online classrooms may contribute to this trend. One problem is that incivility is subjective; one may not intend to be uncivil or rude, yet this is how the receiver may interpret a behavior. Incivility is, of course, the opposite of civility; it is discourteous behavior, synonymous with rudeness (Dictionary.com). Clark defined incivility in nursing education as rude or disruptive behaviors that often result in psychological or physiological distress for the people involved, and may progress into threatening situations when left unaddressed (Clark, Farnsworth & Landrum, 2009).

In online classes, the nonverbal cues (social presence) are missing, leaving the words to convey meaning (Mayne & Wu, 2011). In his classic work, Mehrabian (1972) claimed the face conveyed 55% of the information, the voice 38%, and the words just 7%. Emoticons, those ubiquitous smiley faces, arose when email users realized they needed to let the reader know

the context of the message to avoid unwanted negative reactions (Techtrainteam.com).

Netiquette (network etiquette) guidelines were created to inject civility into electronic communications. In fact, the internet expression “flaming” arose from electronic posts of angry comments, often in capital letters, effectively “shouting” at others.

Providing Nurse Practitioner (NP) programs online has allowed students to breach barriers, such as distance from campus and work schedules, allowing a broader student base. Students undertaking an online program need to have netiquette skills, as well as computer skills and self-discipline to be successful. The physical distance from educators makes close communication even more important. There is no opportunity for casual communication in the hallway or after class to clarify information.

Galbraith and Jones (2010) listed the predominant behaviors constituting incivility in online courses as: demanding special treatment, such as extending due dates; missing due dates without an explanation; academic dishonesty, and assertively and disrespectfully expressing an entitled “I paid for this” attitude. Other uncivil acts that may impact an online classroom include: disrespectful communication, arguing over grading or teaching methods, using foul language, and threats (Luparell, 2004).

Although Luparell’s study of incivility in nursing education did not include online classes, the findings may be extended cautiously to this method of teaching and learning. Males were responsible for 43.8%, of uncivil behaviors toward female faculty, although fewer than 5% of nurses were men (Luparell, 2004). She describes escalating tension and a triggering event as common precursors. Typically, poor student performance was the cause for increasing tension; the student responded poorly to constructive criticism or to a failing grade. Other triggering events included, for example, canceling a test review because one student had not yet taken the exam, or students doing poorly in the clinical setting. Nurse practitioner programs also have clinical components, and evaluation by faculty can create a highly charged atmosphere. The study found uncivil behaviors escalated along a continuum, ranked by degree of aggression, from dishonesty or lack of integrity, to disrespectful retorts, to indignation, to escalating confrontation to threats toward faculty well-being. Luparell describes students seeking others (other students, a spouse, administrator, lawyer or legislator) to back them up and engage in actions meant to pressure faculty into changing a decision.

Significance

In Luparell’s study, faculty felt attacked or injured from the encounters, compelling her to invoke a battle metaphor (2004). Faculty who are targets of uncivil behavior can become disengaged and cynical, and resign from holding students up to high expectations (Wildermuth

& Davis, 2012). This may be especially problematic in a graduate nurse practitioner education program, where high expectations are the norm. There is a stigma attached to being the target of student incivility; it may be perceived the teacher is poor because s/he attracts misconduct. Thus, teachers may be reluctant to divulge the extent of bullying and intimidation they perceive, as they may feel they will be blamed for it (Luparell; Morrissette, 2001). This can perpetuate a sense of isolation. It is important that administration is sensitive to this and avoids blaming the teacher. Bringing the discussion out into the open reduces stigma, allows solutions to be developed, and helps retain faculty members. Faculty who are targets of student incivility can also suffer physical and emotional problems, including insomnia, and reliving the event. Self-doubt and lack of confidence in their ability to teach may lead some to leave education (Luparell). Other outcomes included excessive time consumed by follow up with administration, and the out-of-pocket expenses for legal fees and security systems (Luparell).

NP students are ethically bound to civility through Provision 1.5 of the *Code of Ethics for Nurses* (American Nurses Association, 2001) which requires nurses to treat patients and colleagues with compassion and respect with no tolerance for harassment, disrespect, or threats. Incivility, in either the educational or healthcare setting, must be addressed as part of socialization into the role, as it may potentially lead to safety and quality issues.

Fostering Online Civility

While multiple factors may contribute to incivility among students in online courses, academia has a unique role in fostering civility. Several studies have found that the overall atmosphere of the learning environment is a significant contributing factor to fostering civility. The optimum online learning environment is consistently described as positive with a sense of community (Cobb, 2011; Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly & Killion, 2009; Yeh, 2010). Students should be able to trust peers and faculty in a safe, supportive environment (Mayne & Wu, 2011). Yeh (2010) cited collaboration and meaningful participation among all faculty and students as indicators of a successful online learning environment. Strategies faculty should take to promote an online learning environment conducive to student civility include: maintain a trusting and respectful learning environment, provide clear course guidelines and expectations, and establish a sense of community.

Maintain a Trusting and Respectful Environment

When faculty and students work together in a well managed environment, civility is enhanced and a respectful learning environment is created. Thomas (2003) found faculty behaviors such as unfairness, rigidity, criticalness, and overt discrimination often contribute to distress and desperation, leading to incivility among nursing students. Likewise, Hall (2004)

noted nursing faculty members' unreasonable expectations, belittling behaviors, and insistence on student conformity as contributing to frustration and distress among nursing students.

Clark and Springer (2007a, 2007b) assessed factors contributing to incivility from both the faculty and student perspective. Stressors that attributed to student incivility included competing work, academic, and family demands; time-management challenges; financial pressures; lack of faculty support; and mental health/personal issues. Likewise, faculty had several stressors that contributed to uncivil behavior toward students including stress from multiple work demands (heavy workload, maintaining clinical competence, promotion issues, lack of administrative support, poor coping ability); pressure caused by problematic students; financial pressures related to low salary; and teacher-to-teacher incivility. Faculty behaviors that attributed to student incivility included overt rudeness through verbal and nonverbal behaviors, avoidant behaviors through lack of communication, and perceived rudeness by not adequately acknowledging student contributions.

The above findings establish the need to maintain a trusting, respectful environment between faculty and students as well as between faculty members. When uncivil behaviors exist between faculty members, the attitude often spills over to students. Creating a trusting and respectful relationship between students and faculty is important to the professional development of the student. Students who experience uncivil behaviors from faculty tend to withdraw and/or retaliate as negative emotions are evoked (Wallace, Todd, Edwards, Frazier, & David, 2009). In online courses, extra emphasis must be placed on the social engagement aspect, requiring that faculty be personable, supportive, approachable, and professional.

Faculty must serve as role models of professionalism and civility; they must model the type of professional attitude and communication techniques they wish students to use. Interaction within the course should reflect respect among faculty-faculty, student-student, and faculty-student interactions. Faculty behaviors that involve a breakdown in communication have critical importance in online courses as the students often have a sense of isolation because they lack the visual cues inherent in face-to-face interactions. Thus, the tone of online communication is especially important. As much as possible, the tone should be positive, for criticizing, belittling, and overall negative messages will set a defensive mood. Even when negative information such as a failing grade must be relayed, the underlying tone should remain positive. Failing grades are usually better accepted by students when a trusting and respectful relationship has been established between the faculty and student. Once an underlying trust is established, the environment is conducive for faculty to provide both positive and negative constructive feedback

to students. It is beneficial to begin with positive feedback, address the negative aspects, and end with positive statements.

Provide Clear Guidelines and Expectations

Clear, specific course guidelines and expectations are especially important for online students since they do not have the ability to interact face-to-face with faculty. Clear communication begins with a comprehensive course syllabus that includes explicit learning objectives and expectations. The syllabus should be comprehensive and include instructions and a grading rubric for all assignments; required and recommended resources; faculty contact information; and a course calendar with assignment and exam dates. It is important that the syllabus be finalized with no revisions made after the course begins, unless absolutely necessary. Students are usually negatively affected by changing established exam and assignment dates as they have already manipulated their work and family schedules to mesh with their course schedule.

Clarity is important regarding how often faculty will monitor and respond to student postings, emails, voicemails as well as the expected time for posting graded assignments. Clark, Werth & Ahten (2012a) found students are most frustrated by unclear expectations for assignments, failure to respond to postings in a timely manner, failure to post grades in a timely manner, assigning students in a group the same grade regardless of contribution, and assigning grades without providing useful feedback. Clear communication with students regarding expectations, timely responses and posting of grades, and constructive feedback with rationale for a grade often decrease the student's frustration and may decrease the potential of uncivil behavior. In addition, an audio podcast is beneficial in an online course to further explain the course expectations and requirements.

Another important step to managing the online learning environment is to provide social networking behavioral expectations. Students should be informed of the behavioral expectations and consequences of uncivil behavior in an initial program orientation and then through individual course orientation podcasts. An institutional policy that clearly defines uncivil behaviors and consequences of these behaviors should be developed, signed at new student orientation, and included in each course syllabus. It is important that the consequences be clearly listed and consistently followed by all faculty.

Establish a Sense of Online Community

Establishing a sense of social presence, or community, is important as connectedness in online courses is closely correlated to perceived student learning and satisfaction (Mayne & Wu, 2011). Online learning requires extra effort to establish a social presence since there is usually

limited, if any, synchronous interaction. With limited cues for interaction, including no facial expressions and other body language, social presence techniques should be utilized for students to perceive connectedness to each other and to their faculty in an online learning environment.

Early in the course, a welcome email should be sent to each student and include the faculty's biographical, personal, and contact information. To establish a sense of community, students should be encouraged to introduce themselves and to interact with other students within the discussion forum. Students should be encouraged to post a picture, as this is beneficial for getting to know each other. A discussion forum should be available for students to ask questions and to express concerns. Within the forum, students' points of view should be encouraged and acknowledged with regular faculty participation that is timely, supportive, and encouraging. Validation is a high-level communication technique that faculty may use to show students they are being heard. Students also welcome having a "coffee shop" forum for discussions that are not monitored by faculty. This allows students a place to share personal struggles, concerns, and problems and receive support from their peers.

Group work is often utilized in online courses in an attempt to connect students to one another; however, it often leads to student frustration when all members do not complete their part according to the standards set by the group. Students dislike group work when it allows some students to receive a grade that they did not earn based on their subpar or lack of participation. If all members of a group are not fully engaged, feelings of anger and stress can arise. For this reason, judicious use of group assignments in online courses is preferred by students (Clark, Werth & Ahten, 2012b). When group work is used in online courses, a rubric should be developed to allow the group members the opportunity to rate each other's level of participation and engagement, permitting the perception of a more judicial allocation of grade points.

Responding to Student Misconduct

When a student's behavior is not meeting the standard set for the program, the student must be confronted immediately and held accountable. When intimidating and disruptive behaviors are not formally addressed, they are indirectly being promoted with the risk of ultimately escalating to violent behaviors. Whether meeting in-person or by phone, it is advisable to have a department chair, or another third party, present when confronting a student. While it is important to allow a student freedom of speech, insubordination and intimidation should not be tolerated. Insist that communication remain respectful and if it does

not, stop the conversation and let the student know it will be resumed when control is maintained.

It is important to document undesirable student behaviors even if they do not quite violate the institution's Student Code of Conduct, for they may eventually escalate to a level that does violate the policy. Your notes will demonstrate that a pattern of behaviors has been observed. The behaviors and any interactions with the student should be thoroughly documented.

In addition to the advice offered here, faculty must consult with institutional administrators responsible for student conduct and campus legal counsel regarding issues. Faculty must also be familiar with the institution's Student Code of Conduct and be consistent in the approach to uncivil behaviors. Criminal actions, such as threats to fellow students or faculty, require prompt referral to campus and/or local law enforcement.

Conclusion

The fact is that society is dealing with a sea change in how people communicate. Humans are social animals, used to gaining much of their information from nonverbal cues. This was necessary for survival in times past. As we continue to negotiate the use of the internet to communicate, we are necessarily developing new ways to show the intent of our words without the other person being visible. Teaching and learning, particularly at the graduate level, is challenging, and by choosing to perform this mission online, we are at the forefront of coping with all the new problems that arise each time humanity learns to adapt to new technology. Self-awareness of the communication style used by both faculty and students is significant, and it may require several proof reads of an e-mail before pressing the send button. One must adopt a self-reflective attitude and ask, how might this be perceived by the receiver? Application of high-level communication skills to develop a trusting relationship between faculty and students is important. Use of positive statements and validating students who are experiencing stress will be received as nurturing and go far to prevent incivility.

Key Words: Incivility, uncivil behaviors, student misconduct, online learning, Student Code of Conduct

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