

# CIVILITY CAN BE TAUGHT AND LEARNED

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Civility is about the character of who we are. Civility brings core values to life in one's behavior. History suggests that civility can be taught and learned. A corrosive lack of civility is evident today in every segment of society, from politics to academia, from media to the blogosphere, from talk radio to the pulpit. At issue is whether or not civility can be taught and learned in contemporary civic and academic settings.

## Introduction

Incivility today has become “socially acceptable, commonplace, and virtually instantaneous in electronic communications such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and e-mail” (Bowman, 2015a, p. 40). Is the contemporary societal slide into incivility neither inevitable nor unstoppable? History suggests that civility can be taught and learned. At issue is whether or not civility can be taught and learned in contemporary civic and academic settings.

## A World of Raw Emotions

In our media-drenched culture, citizens and students are being relentlessly exposed to a world of raw emotions in which visceral dislike becomes hatred, anger becomes narcissistic rage, opponents become enemies, and dismay teeters on despair. It is a world where individuals hear ideologically only what they want to hear always confirmed and never contradicted (Bowman, 2014). Whether in social media or traditional news media, the public is catching a glimpse of a “world closing shut, where individuals, groups, ethnicities, and governments fortify their positions behind impermeable boundaries” (Wheatley, 2013, p. 48). In the everydayness of life, “a

corrosive lack of civility is evident in every segment of society, from politics to academia, from media to the blogosphere, from talk radio to the pulpit” (Dilenschneider, 2013, p. 8).

## Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project

More than a decade ago, the rancorous politics in a once-bustling steel town in northern Minnesota prompted its residents to call for more civilized discourse in civic affairs. The decline of civility in political debate in Duluth, Minnesota, resulted in caustic rhetoric that not only interfered with resolving civic disputes but also disillusioned many young voters because of the bitter tenor of political debate. As a result, “civic leaders launched something called Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project. Participants drew up a list of guidelines for civilized debate so simple they could and did fit on a wallet card” (Seib, 2018).

Together, civic and business leaders developed nine principles that they believed should prevail in public discourse:

- **Pay Attention.** Be aware and attend to the world and the people around you.

- **Listen.** Focus on others in order to better understand their points of view.
- **Be Inclusive.** Welcome all groups of citizens working for the greater good of the community.
- **Don't Gossip.** And don't accept when others choose to do so.
- **Show Respect.** Honor other people and their opinions, especially in the midst of disagreement.
- **Be Agreeable.** Look for opportunities to agree; don't contradict just to do so.
- **Apologize.** Be sincere and repair damaged relationships.
- **Give Constructive Criticism.** When disagreeing, stick to the issues and don't make a personal attack.
- **Take Responsibility.** Don't shift responsibility and blame onto others; share disagreements publicly.

As public support grew, all six major units of regional government—city and county boards and school districts—adopted the guidelines. Today, elements of Duluth's civility program, outlined on its Speak Your Peace website have spread throughout the country. The website declares that “while this is not a campaign to end disagreements, it is a campaign to improve public discourse by simply reminding ourselves of the very basic principles of respect.” Specifically, “we are not just targeting those who are uncivil, but those who allow uncivilized behavior to happen.” Strikingly, what makes Duluth's experience so notable is that it suggests that a slide into incivility is neither inevitable nor unstoppable in public discourse.

### Teaching and Learning Civility in Academic Settings

While civility cannot be legislated, “it can be taught—and it can be learned” starting with the power and force of personal example (Dilenschneider, 2013, p. 12). When he was a young student in Virginia, George Washington copied a list of 110 “Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation” compiled by French Jesuit priests in 1595 and reprinted in English in 1640. The rules had such a “profound influence on Washington at age 14 that they shaped America's first president and guided many of his decisions and actions throughout his life and presidency” (Dilenschneider, p. 12).

Today, when intolerance, self-indulgent anger, and vitriolic rants are destroying the civility on which democratic government depends, the 110 “Rules of Civility” appear more relevant than ever in teaching and learning civility in instructional settings. In an era when broadcast and print media are unable to resist the temptation to label, to stereotype, and to *expose to denigrate* others, the “Rules of Civility” appear particularly relevant.

### The Rules of Civility: Perspective Taking

Wisdom is perspective taking. History is perspective taking. The Jesuits' “Rules of Civility” represent one perspective, among many, related to teaching and learning civility in principled ways. The “Rules of Civility” constitute a clearly written historical reflection on the choices that individuals make in relating to the higher selves of others across time. That historical perspective forces a contemporary question, “Has our perceptual lens of civility widened after some 275 years?” That is, are contemporary characterizations of incivility intensely contextual, and always dependent on particular circumstances that change from moment to moment and from place to place? (McChrystal, Eggers, and Mangone, 2018)

When students in a social studies class are invited to reflect dialogically, for example, on eight of the “Rules of Civility” listed below, those rules hold genuine promise for creating authentic classroom conversations which are interactive, inclusive, intentional, and civil :

- Honor and obey your natural parents although they be poor.
- Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those who are present
- Speak not injurious words neither in jest nor earnest; scoff at none although they give occasion.
- When another speak, be attentive yourself and disturb not the audience.
- Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your piece, walk not on when others stop.
- Show not yourself glad at the misfortune of another though he were your enemy.
- Use no reproachful language against any one, neither curse nor revile.
- Being to advise or reprehend anyone, consider whether or not it ought to be in public or in private, and presently or at some other time (Brookhiser, 2003)

*Honor and obey your natural parents.* One of the first objects to catch the attention of newborns is the human face. A newborn’s first impression compels a decision to trust or distrust a natural or adoptive parent. Extending trust activates social attachment mechanisms in which trust begets trust between parent and child. In order to enrich their lives, individuals innately seek trusting environments and trusting relationships. Ideally, family life is a mosaic of trusting interrelationships. Parents seek to understand their children, persuade

them, motivate them, influence them, inspire them, and forgive them. In a tactical sense, honoring and obeying one’s parents is ceding power to “let me down or do right by me” (Seidman, 2007, p. 166). In a more profound sense, when parents are fully committed to making better persons of themselves and their offspring, the ethical, moral, and spiritual elements of honoring and obeying one’s parents are inescapable. In collaborative, inclusive academic environments trust is how students *enlist* others in common purpose.

*Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those present.* Conflicted situations involving issues like immigration, climate change, and gun control frequently result in individuals arguing their positions intensely, listening inattentively, raising their voices, acting aggressively, and demeaning one another’s character. As a result, conflict can have a lasting destructive impact on interpersonal relationships and organizational morale. From ancient times, a circle has functioned as “the most common and enduring form of human meeting” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 185). Historically, the *equality* of the circle in promoting civility was recognized and honored as tribal members sat around their fires more than half a million years ago. In a circle, learners sense resonantly that each individual is human, struggling with life’s challenges. Because the world does not look exactly the same to any two people, in instructional settings, a “circle provides the form to gather many different perspectives without as much judgment or defensiveness” (Wheatley, p. 187). Communication comes from the Latin word for “sharing.” For communication to be effective in academic settings, it should be collaborative, candid, and civil (Fabritius & Hagemann, 2017, p. 275).

*Speak not injurious words neither in jest nor earnest; scoff at none although they give occasion.* Anthropologist Peter Wood (2006) argues that Americans have traded in their

older habits of civility and emotional restraint for the chancy excitements of anger and outrage. Politicians increasingly have venomous things to say about their opponents and little or no compunction about saying them. This slow erosion of civility has allowed partisans to develop a hair-trigger intolerance for one another. In concert, a controversy-hunger media focuses on the contemporary rhetoric of anger based upon ever-expanding claims that one's *rights* have been violated. The trump cards in the anger deck enunciate "outrage at the phony, the hypocrite, the liar, and the fake" for the sheer pleasure of expressing contempt for other people (p. 3). In highlighting the erosion of civility in social media, exemplary educators invite and support students in developing the skill of reasoned perspective taking.

*When another speak, be attentive yourself and disturb not the audience.* The evolving erosion of civility on college campuses in recent years has given way to the notion that anger in the present is authenticating. Individual authenticity is "achieved through the projection of personal power over others" by shouting down guest speakers on campus (Wood, 2006, p. 27). The insignia of anger today in collegiate settings is "I'm angry, therefore I'm real." Intolerance of others' political perspectives is reframed as accusations of phoniness, hypocrisy, and lying. It is an intolerance that congratulates itself.

In classroom discussions dealing with issues such as illegal immigration, the potential for suspicion and distrust frequently lurks just below the surface. Without reflective listening, misinterpretations of others' intent or meaning can lead to harsh interpersonal judgments. Organizational change theorists Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) developed a practice known as "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life." Appreciative inquiry in a classroom setting constitutes a method of bringing empathy into day-to-day conversations. Empathy does not mean sympathy. Empathy means "developing

a deep understanding of another so intimate that the feelings, thoughts, and motives of one person are comprehended by another" (Senge, 1999, p. 431).

In an instructional setting, the construct of appreciative inquiry functions as an invitation to "try on" different perspectives and assumptions when confronting potentially explosive boundary-crossing issues such as gun control or illegal immigration. Appreciative inquiry allows one to temporarily suspend one's own perspectives in a dialogic setting, essentially so that one can inquire into the reasons why others hold the beliefs that they do. The intent is straightforward: To underscore the notion that the world looks very different to others and that one could potentially appreciate another's perspective if one took the opportunity to see it from his or her point of view.

In rethinking the role of open discussion in organizational settings, Harvard University professor Amy Edmondson (2019) coined the term psychological safety. The concept of *framing* one's interpersonal interactions with others lies at the heart of psychological safety. Edmondson argues that "frames consist of assumptions or beliefs that we layer onto reality" (14). In dialogic settings, for example, learners tend to frame objects and situations automatically. In doing so, students are "subject to a cognitive bias called *naïve* realism that give us the experience of 'knowing' what's going on" (p. 18). As a result, learners tend to believe that they see reality rather than the subjective view of reality. Students' previous experiences related to issues such as police-community relationships, climate change, and immigration policies affect how they think and feel about what is currently in their midst in very subtle ways. As a result, students tend to believe that they are seeing what is *there*.

*Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your piece, walk not on when others stop.*

Respect resides at the heart of embracing the challenge of learning from those that one encounters. In classroom settings, respect manifests one's ability to truly value diversity. In daily practice, speaking from a place of respect and honor for the other person mirrors the essence of dialogue (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998). In contrast, disrespect tends to exclude and minimize the contributions of others while also often fostering distrust.

Respect has its roots in the Latin *respicere*, to "look back" or "look again." In dialogical settings, respect does not mean that one has to like the other person, but it does require that one be willing to "re-look" and reconsider what that person has to say. Paradoxically, *amplifying differences* regarding issues such as gun control, climate change, and border security is the means to creating a fuller, detailed appreciation of the complexity of a problem (Wheatley, 2005). In classrooms functioning as communities of engagement, each individual is treated with respect and returns that respect (Mintzberg, 2009). Both in the classroom and in the community, respect allows individuals to feel safe with another person. In a year (2018) in which, for example, multiple Georgia law enforcement officers have been fatally shot, one is struck by the unsettling realization that "If I do not respect you, I may harm you without a second thought" (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, pp. 180-181.)

*Show not yourself glad at the misfortune of another though he were your enemy.* When Alexis de Tocqueville began his journey throughout America's vast spaces in 1831, he astutely perceived the genius of American society: its respect for what the French observer called *self-interest properly understood*. Early Americans uniquely cared for everyone else's self. That is, they instinctively understood that respect for the common welfare is in fact the precondition for one's own ultimate well-being (Tocqueville and Goldhammer, 2004). Almost two hundred years later, civility

remains grounded in respectful relationships which unleash the insights of others in pursuit of common cause. In that sense, civility in academic environments is an inherently dynamic, evolving process, not an end point.

*Use no reproachful language against any one, neither curse nor revile.* Divisive issues present an opportunity for problem-based learning. In addressing politically-charged topics like building a wall along the Mexican border as part of a system of border control, for example, educators can insist that students answer questions such as: What do we know about this issue? Is what we know reliable? Are there diverse perspectives on this topic? How do we fill in our knowledge gaps on this topic? How do we avoid denigrating individuals who hold different perspectives regarding a border wall? Instructionally, divisive political issues present teachable moments in framing, persuading, collaborating, and compromising. Inviting students, for example, to envision a theme of "Mission Accomplished" allows them to confront questions like: What will the U. S. look like if the wall is built? What will our nation look like if a wall is not built?

*Being to advise or reprehend anyone, consider whether or not it ought to be in public or in private, and presently or at some other time.* At a town-hall style meeting in Edmonton, Alberta, in February 2018, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau listened respectfully to an unidentified woman compliment him for recognizing the "ability and power that women actually possess." The woman further remarked, "Maternal love is the love that's going to change the future of mankind." The prime minister interrupted her stating: "We like to say 'peoplekind,' not necessarily 'mankind.' It's more inclusive." After video footage of the exchange spurred accusations of sexism, Mr. Trudeau told reporters that he had made "a dumb joke" (Joseph, 2018). Whatever Prime Minister Trudeau's intent, he had publicly embarrassed someone needlessly.

### Discussion

The very soul of instructional leadership is the art of conversation, the ability to create a dialogue that students will willingly join. Without a good question, a good answer has no place to go. When students in a social studies class, for example, are invited to reflect on the “Rules of Civility” that had such a profound influence on George Washington at age 14, provocative questions such as those below hold promise for creating authentic conversations which are interactive, inclusive, intentional, and civil:

- Against the backdrop of the “Rules of Civility” first published in English in 1640, would George Washington recognize the media-drenched America that we live in today?
  - To what degree are the “Rules of Civility” regarding mutual respect, tolerance, and compassion evidence of how many traditional values in our country have changed or remained constant across time?
  - Do students today already intuitively know the “Rules of Civility” regarding respect, etiquette, and good conduct?
  - To the degree that most students understand the importance of civil behavior, is it fair to say that many students simply choose not to follow the “Rules of Civility”?
  - If civility is not taught in the home, must it be taught in public and private schools to ensure that students graduate as persons of integrity and virtue with the lasting appreciation for civility that George Washington had 275 years ago?
- Is the key to reestablishing civility in public settings dependent on developing people’s ability to hear and reflect on many different perspectives without having to fight through emotional charges and countercharges?
  - Have social networking tools like Twitter and Facebook popularized potentially offensive comments and outbursts of uncivil dialogue by allowing individuals to say whatever one feels as soon as one feels like it and to feel rewarded for doing so?
  - Have you witnessed meanness, bullying, cruelty, or uncivil behavior during interactions on social media? Have you joined in?
  - Can a generation of students not reared in the spirit of the Jesuits’ rules of politeness and civility change its behavior? (Dilenschneider 2013)

### Conclusion

Civility is about the character of who we are. In practice, civility brings core values to life in one’s behavior. History suggests that civility can be taught and learned. Embracing civility begins with confronting oneself: What are the core values that have guided my life? What principles do I stand for? (Bowman, 2015b) Instructionally, the 110 precepts that guided our first president in war and peace address moral issues, but they address them indirectly. Thus, the 110 “Rules of Civility” seek to form the *inner* person by shaping the outer (Bowman, 2015a).

In psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s (1959) *In Search of Meaning*, the author argues that what is important is not what we expect from life but rather what life expects from us. What life expects from us is that we use our words and actions to make others’ lives richer and more significant. Values such as honesty, integrity, justice, trust, community,

and civility inspire the highest in human conduct and human interrelations (Hesselbein, 1997). In the everydayness of life, civility is about valuing respectful relationships with others and affirming the dignity of the work that others do.

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