

Classroom Civility

The word "civility" has a distinctly antiquated ring to it; to talk about civility in the classroom seems to recall an earlier, more structured era, when the pedagogical hierarchy was distinct and stable: the teacher was in charge, the students sat in quiet ordered rows and absorbed the material that was given to them, and everyone was polite, courteous, and *civil*. Putting aside the question of whether such a classroom ever actually existed, it often serves as a kind of benchmark against which current classroom models are measured. We now inhabit classrooms that are dynamic and interactive and that emphasize the application of skills over the memorization of information. We emphasize the ways in which our classes depart from the traditional model, but in this rush of innovation it is essential to retain a sense, however modified and updated, of the civility of the classroom. Our classes may be more open, but they are not unbounded; we may be more informal than our forbears, but we still maintain standards of conduct. There are still reasons for treating the classroom as a specific kind of space that is different from the other spaces (home, residence hall, coffee house, chat room, etc.) that students inhabit, and thinking about civility is a crucial way of making such differentiations.

Civility, in the sense in which it is used here, refers to the atmosphere of the class, and comprises the manner in which it is conducted and the attitudes of its members. It concerns both the relationships between teacher and students and among the students themselves. Whereas veteran teachers have generally observed and/or participated in a wide range of such experiences and can thus negotiate among them, novice TAs often tend to gravitate towards one of two extremes: the loose, easygoing friend-figure or the stern, inflexible disciplinarian; both are understandable reactions, but they can set difficult precedents for the classroom atmosphere. TAs therefore need to be particularly aware of the ways in which their own behavior sets the mood for the rest of the class. From the teacher's perspective, civility indicates the ability to create an environment where all students feel comfortable and free to

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The Techno-File: E-mail

This is the first in a series of articles that address the role and usefulness of various new instructional technologies for TAs. E-mail is the first topic under discussion because it is the most pervasive and integrated new technology on university campuses. Almost all students, and most faculty members, have e-mail accounts and check them regularly; it is an easy and efficient way of reaching a large audience. As a teaching tool e-mail, like any other instructional technology, can be used in one of two modes; it can function as an electronic continuation of existing techniques, or it can be used to create new pedagogical strategies. Examples of the former include using e-mail to repeat or redistribute classroom announcements and assignments, to respond to student queries, or to receive student work. Examples of the latter cover a wide range of possibilities. E-mail can provide an alternate form of student-teacher communication; it is less intimidating than going to office hours and allows certain students to formulate their thoughts more clearly. Rutgers TAs can also set up online

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respond, offer opinions, and ask questions; it also involves establishing standards of responsible academic work. In responding to student comments, TAs should maintain a careful balance between encouragement and critical rigor. Errors should be kindly, but firmly, corrected. Praise should be offered, but only when it is deserved; teachers who say "very good" after every response run the risk of devaluing the praise, which disappoints good students and confuses struggling ones. Teachers should be sensitive to issues of difference and identity, and should ensure that unequal relations based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation are not established or perpetuated in the class; off-color jokes and risqué comments often excused under the sign of "political incorrectness" cannot be overlooked in the classroom, and for the teacher to ignore or pass over such moments is tantamount to encouraging them. This requires a constant awareness of one's own behavior (do you

favor, either consciously or unconsciously, particular groups or individuals? Do you permit disturbing comments to go unchallenged? Do you treat all students with equal respect and politeness?) as well as interactions between students.

From the student's perspective classroom civility involves, in the first place, following the standards for classroom comportment (enumerated above) set by the teacher. It also involves accepting the conventions under which certain kinds of behavior are unacceptable in the university classroom: sleeping, reading the Targum or a book for another class, listening to music, interrupting other students or the teacher, insulting or belittling other students or the teacher, talking out of turn or talking outside of the main class discussion, using inappropriate language, arriving late to class or leaving early (and unannounced) from class, consuming food to the point of distraction, etc. These are expectations that should be obvious but often go unacknowledged, so while it may seem silly or redundant it is helpful to announce these standards during the first class and to stick to them as the semester progresses.

One does not need to consider students as enemies or antagonists who, left to their own

devices, will break the codes of classroom civility at a moment's notice; civility is an issue of respect, not of martial law. If, however, a student persistently and/or deliberately refuses to act civilly, TAs should feel as justified as any other teacher in asking the student to leave the class.

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mailing lists (see the RUCS homepage for details: <http://ruc.s.rutgers.edu>) for their classes. A mailing list can be used for numerous purposes: you can offer it as an optional forum in which class members can continue discussions outside of class time. You can treat it as an additional course requirement, a halfway point between oral discussion and written work in which students respond to readings or to discussion questions. Students who are uncomfortable speaking in front of the class often have no such qualms about cyberspace contributions; e-mail can thus reveal examples of class participation that may have remained hidden under a discussion-centered pedagogy.

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TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School—New Brunswick.
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Letters, responses to *Tapped In*, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

TapTalk

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Tapped In – The Diary of a Practicing TA

by Rupert Peals*

It's mid-term time again, which means an increase in absences, a lot of late or sub-standard work, and a general drop in morale. These seasonal developments (which will undoubtedly return with a vengeance in December) are, as usual, accompanied by an excruciating parade of excuses; in the last two weeks alone I have been audience to: a) harrowing tales about dead or severely ill family members; b) intricate descriptions of sickness, ranging from obscure viruses to more familiar cases of insomnia and stress (the latter two are, of course, a sure sign of a potentially successful graduate student, and should therefore be encouraged); c) requests for leniency due to astonishing cases of over-commitment: "my mock United Nations Security Council meeting ran long because we couldn't agree on a response to the North Korean situation - can I have an extra day to finish the paper?"; d) admissions of incompleteness (e.g. "I have no excuse, I just didn't do the assignment") that are apparently strategically designed to replace what the

student lacks in substance (i.e. work to hand in) with directness and candor; e) the familiar organizational and logistical laments: "I didn't get the assignment," "my printer went nuts," "traffic was really bad on Route 18," "I didn't know what you meant by 'write a paper,'" etc. I am inundated with stories, explanations, apologies, promises, complaints, pleadings, and confidences - and it's exhausting.

While the catalog of excuses offered above is in a somewhat comic mode, it's not my intention to belittle people's real crises. While many of us are familiar with the semi-apocryphal student whose grandparents pass away with a frequency suspiciously coordinate with assignment due dates (and who runs into trouble when the fifth assignment arrives and the grandparent well has run dry), I tend to assume that most of these excuses are at least versions of the truth, and that the anxieties that produce them are real. What's unfortunate about this "reality" is that it is often transferred from student to instructor; I can joke about the explanations and excuses I receive, because otherwise their cumulative effects are almost too much to bear. It seems that, for a variety of reasons (generational proximity, general cultural outlook,

institutional status), TAs function for many undergraduates as the pedagogical face to which such outpourings should be addressed and from which responsibility and sympathy are expected to flow.

Aside from being exhausting, students' personal disclosures are awkward. Often a sort of contract is assumed in which the sheer heft and intimacy of the revelations automatically confers special treatment; how could one not grant an extension to someone in such an exceptional situation? The problem, of course, is that as a teacher of successive waves of students one realizes that very few problems are exceptional, and that the heartfelt "I'm having a really difficult semester..." email is just as much a commonplace generic category of university life as "land-based invertebrates" or "the novel." Thus the intimate student revelation is paradoxically traumatic (because of its intensity) and mundane (because it is so overwhelmingly familiar); the two tendencies seem to cancel each other out, and we are left at the same place we started: a paper is still late, an absence is still recorded, an exam is still missed. What begins as a professional obligation to teach ends up as a personal request to listen and to understand; it is a request that I hesitate to refuse, yet dread to grant.

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**Rupert Peals is a pseudonym*

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While e-mail clearly opens up opportunities for classroom innovation, there are other factors to consider. Campus-wide, instructors have noticed an increase in workload due to the sheer volume of student e-mail they receive. One solution is to answer large numbers of related messages (questions about assignments, office hours, due dates, etc.) with a general response, thus cutting down on the time it takes to compose individual responses. Another solution is to specify a particular time frame (e.g. one hour a day, two 2-hour periods a week, etc.) in which you will read and respond to student e-mail; setting such electronic "office

hours" indicates a definite instructional commitment, lets students know when they can expect responses, and draws boundaries that they should respect. A second, and often overlooked, factor is privacy. E-mail is an insecure mode of communication, a fact of which both students and instructors should be aware before using it to exchange personal details, grades, or any other sensitive information.

As you decide how to use e-mail, consider what methods will best meet your instructional needs, how it can support your course from an administrative perspective, and how e-mail will help your students learn.



November

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| 5 | Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 10 a.m.* |
| 8 | Workshop: Career Resources
on the Internet (call 5-6127 for
details) |
| 10 | Workshop: Writing the C.V.
(call 2-9742 for details) |
| 11 | Verteran's Day
Remembrance Day (Canada) |
| 16 | Workshop: Careers in Academe
25 Bishop Place, 12 noon |
| 17 | Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 1 p.m.* |
| 24 | Change in designation of class
days - Friday classes |
| 25 | Thanksgiving |

*please call 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at sirman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you plan to attend a workshop.

COMING IN DECEMBER

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| 4 | First day of Hanukah |
| 9 | Dissertation & Thesis Workshop |
| 13 | Last day of Classes |
| 22 | First Day of Winter |
| 25 | Christmas Day |

Teaching Assistant Project

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