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Civility as a Central Student Learning Outcome in the Basic and Introductory Communication Courses

Rod Troester

A recent edition of *Spectra* includes a collection of four thought-pieces focusing on the issue of civility. Former NCA President Lynn Turner observes "We need to come to the public stage now to offer what we do best; helping others develop the social glue that is attained through civil interactions at every level of human interaction. We can respond to these calls for civil behavior and we need to begin now" (2011, p. 2). Interestingly, several years earlier Sypher (2004) issued a similar call to action for communication scholars to "reclaim" civility and civil discourse in organizations, arguing that we must "remoralize what it means to be competent communicators" (p. 257). The purpose of this essay is to briefly explore why and how civility ought to become a central learning outcome in our various basic courses and introductory communication courses.[1] We as a community of communication teachers and scholars are uniquely positioned to address Turner and Sypher's challenges. Moreover, there is existing literature to inform the development of what Turner calls "the social glue" necessary at every level of human interaction and

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[1] I understand the focus of this annual is on the basic course. Depending on format, basic courses might include elements of interpersonal communication, public speaking, and business and professional/organizational communication. These common contexts are often also offered as introductory level courses available to communication majors and non-majors.

emphasize or re-emphasize civility as an essential as-pect of communication competence across the discipline.

The basic argument being advanced is that civility ought to be a fundamental or central concern and guid-ing principle in our basic and introductory courses. Like the more common standards of effectiveness and appro-priateness, civility ought to become one of the key standards by which we judge the quality of communica-tion, and consequently ought to become a central learning outcome and a more significant focus in our teaching and research. Specifically, students should leave our basic interpersonal, public speaking, and business and professional speaking courses with an un-derstanding of and appreciation for how an attitude of civility can positively influence their communication ef-fectiveness, and gain context-specific experience in translating civil attitudes into communication behav-iors. Examples of more specific learning outcomes will be describe for interpersonal, business and professional, and public speaking contexts. Therefore the first part of this essay will briefly outline the "case" for civility as a central learning outcome, while the second part will provide a very selective look at the available literature that can inform the inclusion and infusion of civility into our courses followed by sample student learning out-comes for each course.

The Case and Need for Civility in Basic Courses

Imagine someone trying to make the argument that **in**civility and rudeness ought to characterize effective and appropriate communication among people. It would be difficult to advocate that communicators be rude, dis-

respectful, and dismissive of their intended audience. The alternative position, at least at first glance, seems an easier and more reasonable position to advocate. Whether civility ought to join effective and appropriate as standards of communication quality will likely depend on how we chose to define our terms.

Dictionary definitions generally suggest courtesy and politeness in act and utterance as being important defining characteristics of civility. Popular writers like Carter (1998), argue that civility "…is the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together" (p. 11). Civility "guru" P.M. Forni, offered the following definition of incivility as "actions or verbal exchanges you would consider rude, disrespectful, dismissive, threatening, demeaning, or inappropriate" (Forni, 2003). Forni suggests "Civility allows us to connect successfully with others" (2002, p. 6). Troester and Mester (2007) suggest civility is "a set of verbal and nonverbal behaviors reflecting fundamental respect for others and generating harmonious and productive relationships" (pp. 9-10).

What do these varying definitions suggest? Civil behavior clearly involves our attitudes toward others and perhaps a degree of self-sacrifice. They focus on behavioral expressions that convey courtesy and arguably result in more positive relationships. Civility can be thought of as an attitude-value-belief we hold toward others, a way of behaving--communicating based on that attitude-value-belief, as well as, a conscious choice we can make in terms of how we perceive and behave-communicate with others. Clearly our verbal and nonverbal communication behavior can manifest and reflect civility—if we so choose.

The next reasonable question to pose is whether there exists a need for including civility as an element in evaluating the quality of communication. The research would suggest we are trending toward increased incivility. An often cited survey conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts a decade ago found that 8 in 10 Americans report that a lack of respect (civility) is a serious problem, with 6 in 10 stating that civility had become worse in recent years (Farkas & Johnson, 2002). The Pew Study concluded "…most human enterprises proceed more smoothly if people are respectful and considerate of one another, and they easily become poisoned if people are unpleasant and rude" (p. 7).

Turning to the workplace (where most of us and our students will spend one-third of our waking hours) Forni's 2003 "Baltimore Workplace Civility Study" found that 25% of workplace respondents felt their workplace had become less civil in the preceding year, 36% felt they had experienced either occasional or frequent uncivil workplace behavior in the past year, and 83% agreed that civility was "very important" to the work environment (Forni, 2003).

In a finding similar, though less significant than that of the Pew survey, eleven percent of Forni's respondents admitted to being the perpetrator of occasional or frequent uncivil behavior at the workplace. It should come as no surprise that a recent Gallup poll found that strong co-worker and boss-work relationships and increased satisfaction from personal recognition—marks of civility--will potentially benefit the U.S. economy (Saad, 2009). Clearly civility is an important societal and organizational issue.

If we consider the survey research, we can conclude that standards of civility and acceptable behavior are slipping. If it is reasonable to assume that communication behavior can manifest attitudes of civility, how can and should we guide our students toward more civil interaction in our basic and introductory communication courses?

Civility and Interpersonal Communication

Traditionally when we speak of interpersonal communication we are focusing our attention on one-on-one situations usually of a personal nature. In an era where the "smart, instant, and digital" seem to dominate, how we regard the other person in a relationship should remain an essential consideration. If we look at one of the earliest interpersonal communication texts/readers, *Bridges Not Walls* (Stewart, 1973), the readings are thick with concern for "the other" in a way similar to that suggested by Carter. One classic article in *Bridges Not Walls* is Buber's "Elements of the Inter-human" (Stewart, 2009) which lays out the "I and Thou" of effective interpersonal relationships. The work of Buber informs the writing of Arnett and Arneson (1999) in their book *Dialogic civility in a cynical age: Community, hope, and interpersonal relationships.* This work seeks to focus attention on the critical role civility can play in establishing positive relationships and keeping conversations going.

Teachers and scholars interested in infusing civility into an interpersonal classroom could also look to the early work of Hart and Burks (1972) and their concept of rhetorical sensitivity. They suggest that there are two

fundamental questions that must be asked in order to shape and construct a communicative response in any given situation: 1) what is to be said (content), and 2) how should it be said (process). The "how" focuses on civility's role in shaping communication behavior. This work can be combined with the perspective of Rosenfield, Hayes, & Frentz (1976) who suggest people are at their best when they are thoughtful, careful, and of good humor. Taken together, this body of early interpersonal work would suggest that people are at their best when they are (a) truly civil—i.e., thoughtful, careful and filled with good humor, and (b) willing and able to construct messages that adapt the content that must be presented to the unique demands of the situation. Deetz and Stevenson (1986) provide a more complete development of this approach. Civil interpersonal communicators fully take into account the other and the situation to be addressed and are thereby willing and able to craft and construct messages that are adapted to and appropriate for the other and the relationship.

An example of a specific learning outcome would be for an interpersonal communication student to be able to appropriately paraphrase comments from peers in a way that demonstrates civility and respect for the other. Such an outcome would be developed following the presentation of class material on perspective taking and listening skills. A simple means for incorporating this learning outcome would be for students (individually or as a group, in class or in writing) to first identify a recent problematic personal interaction, and second to be guided by the instructor in seeing the situation from the other's perspective, and finally demonstrate and/or facilitate students in identifying and practicing listening

and paraphrasing skills—which are already a part of any interpersonal course—that could shape a more positive outcome. Measurement could take the form of a graded written summary of the class discussion/reflection by students.

Civility and Public Speaking

If we move from the interpersonal to the world of public speaking, the lessons of civility should become no less important in shaping how we teach our students to interact with each other and audiences in the public sphere. Introductory level public speaking courses are reportedly the most common format for the basic course on many college and university campuses (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). We have the opportunity to advocate, or at least suggest, to thousands of students that civility—respect for the audience—is essential. Interestingly, in two most recent national surveys on the state of the basic communication course, the issue of classroom civility first emerged as a problem in the course in the 2006 survey (Morreale, Hugenberg, &Worley, 2006), and moved toward the top of the list of concerns in teaching and supervising the basic course in the 40th anniversary 2010 survey (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). The time seems ripe to seize the opportunity to advocate for civility. We need only recall and review recent political campaigns for examples demonstrating the need for civility in public address.

Public speaking texts routinely advise speakers to analyze and adapt to their audience, suggesting they treat the audience in a civil and respectful manner. Barrett (1991) takes a classical rhetorical approach to civil-

ity arguing that we, as a nation, have become more narcissistic and self-absorbed and therefore less concerned with others. He suggests incivility is a form of rhetorical dysfunction caused by narcissism and curable by employing rhetoric skills noting "Any decrease in the level of civility threatens the fundamental social structures and individual happiness" (p. x).

An example of a specific learning outcome for the public speaking student would be the development of a set of basic standards or guidelines for civil public communication behavior, and to integrate these behaviors into their classroom speeches. To initiate the development of such guidelines, student would first be asked to research recent instances in the media of "people behaving badly" in public. Likely, they will identify examples from the political, entertainment, and celebrity spheres. Then it is relatively easy for instructors to guide students in identifying public speaking situations involving specific uncivil verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors of these public figures (e.g. the use of profane, vulgar, and coarse language and/or inappropriate gestures). Part of the desired outcome would be for students to realize and recognize how such actions help to shape our negative or embarrassing perceptions of these public figures. Finally, the follow up discussion would focus on students identifying more civil and appropriate language, gestures, and ideas that can shape more positive perceptions. Measurement of this outcome would take the form of encouraging and rewarded students for incorporating and demonstrating similar civil attitudes and behaviors in their classroom speeches.

Civility in Business and Professional/ Organizational Communication Courses

Decades of research suggests that the quality of the organization and organizational life depends largely upon the quality of the organization's communication. There is a growing body of research both within and outside of the communication field that suggests civility can make a significant positive contribution not only to the organization's climate or environment, but can also make positive contributions and impact the organizational bottom line. Stated more concisely, civility is smart business. Earlier in this essay survey results were presented suggesting that, in general, people perceive that public life has become increasing uncivil. Uncivil behavior does not cease at the organizational door. For example, Pearson, Andersson, and Porath (2005) compile the results of several different surveys and found between 30% and 50% of workers polled reported acts of mistreatment or verbal abuse. Specifically, they suggest: "At work, people treat each other rudely by using demeaning language or gestures, "flaming" network colleagues, slinging innuendoes, or merely perching impatiently over the desk of someone engaged in a telephone conversation." Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout (2001) found that 71% of their survey respondents had experienced some type of workplace incivility in the past 5 years.

Pearson and Porath (2009) in their book *The Cost of Bad Behavior* report years of research with over 9000 respondents nationwide and conclude that "Far from a minor inconvenience, workplace incivility is one of today's most substantial economic drains on American business" (p. 4). As noted in the introduction to this es-

say, Sypher (2004) essentially throws down the gauntlet to business and organizational communication scholars and teachers to "reclaim" the civility high-ground arguing that "What is called for is nothing short of a war of words grounded in re-moralized behaviors that model and demand civility" (p. 257). Clearly the call here is to share what we know about message behavior in organizations in an effort to address the growing problem of civility in organizations. Much work has been done both in and out of the communication field. Communication scholars and teachers like Arnett (2006) argue for the concept of professional civility and suggests "…the importance of a third party, a sense of the neighbor that keeps our organizational communicative lives tempered with concern beyond our own individual demands" (p. 239). Management communication scholars Fox and Spector (2005) argue that there is an "explosion of research interest in behaviors at work that harm employees and organizations" (p. 177).

Among the most prolific communication scholars in the area civility in general and bully in particular are Tracy and Lutgen-Sandvik and colleagues associated with the Project for Wellness and Work-life at Arizona State University. The work of this group is highlighted in the publication of the edited volume *Destructive organizational communication: Processes, consequences, and constructive ways of organizing* (2009). Others like Harden-Fritz (2013) advocate for civility as a key professional value in the workplace.

A specific learning outcome in the business and professional speaking course would be for students to generate a typology of civil and uncivil communication behaviors they have experienced in or while interacting

with organizations. Then individually or in groups, students would be guided in developing more positive-civil communication alternatives. Assigning students to identify and generate lists of uncivil behaviors they have encountered enables students to realize the impact this issue has on organizational life. There is ample evidence and almost daily examples of how uncivil and bullying behaviors influence organizational life. Assigning students to research the topic of civility in organizations can point out to then that their lists and experience are confirmed by the existing literature. Measurement would take the form of an evaluation of the civil communication strategies students generated as alternatives to their lists of uncivil behaviors. Ultimately we want to encourage students to practice and incorporate these civil alternatives into their professional communication repertoire.

CONCLUSION

As communication scholars and teachers in the basic course and introductory communication courses, we are uniquely positioned to positively influence the communication behavior of our students, and by extension, the communication behavior of the broader society. If we are bold enough to taking up the challenges of Turner and Sypher, we should not be timid about advocating civility "rights and wrongs." This essay is a brief and modest attempt to address the challenges and possibilities of civility.

For instructors seeking to include civility as a focus or unit in their interpersonal communication, public

speaking or business and professional basic course, the literature provides many options. While most introductory or basic course texts do not explicitly include a treatment of civility, the following do provide some focus on civility: *Interpersonal Communication: Competence and Context* (2010) by Lane makes mention of civility as an important aspect of the appropriateness criterion of interpersonal competence; *Invitation to Public Speaking* (2012) by Griffin draws the attention of students to the issue of civility within the context of furthering the public dialogue; and in *Civility in Business and Professional Communication* (2007) Troester and Mester explore the dynamics of various communication contexts in organizations with special attention to issues of civility. In addition, books or parts of books from the popular press like Forni's *Choosing Civility* (2002), Carter's *Civility* (1998), or Pearson and Porath's *The Cost of Bad Behavior* (2009) provide a non-textbook introduction to the topic of civility in personal, public, and business settings. Finally, a simple Google search using the term civility will yield more than 2 million "hits."

As the technologies of communication rapidly evolve to the point where face-to-face interaction—traditional interpersonal communication, is eclipsed by various mediated forms of interaction, the topic of civility will become more important. As we teach our students to craft messages intended for the public sphere, reminding them to be civil and respectful and considerate of the audience will increase their effectiveness and success. We should remind our students that how they treat each other in organizations will not only make the workplace more appealing, but will also contribute the organizational bottom line. When we communicate, we

make choices. We can choose the verbal and nonverbal cues we use to craft the message we want to send. Whether communicating interpersonally, publically, or organizationally, these choices can be informed by our shared civility. We, as scholars of the communication arts are uniquely qualified, and by virtue of the teaching we do, uniquely positioned, to address the challenges of civility—if we choose to rise to the challenge.

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