

Teachable Moments of Civility in Every Classroom

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Abstract

Fostering civility in the classroom is not only a way to improve the learning environment, it is also a means to promote civic ideas. A practical strategy of using established social studies concepts to enlighten students regarding their interactions is proposed here. The theoretical and empirical understanding of the 'hidden curriculum' is discussed regarding the school environment, and the importance of considering more than facts and procedures but also universal concepts and meaningful reflection. A graphic organizer useful for teaching and assessing civic knowledge and skills is included.

Introduction

The current war in Iraq has triggered many discussions of decisions made by world leaders, by local employers of reservists called up, and by local teachers helping their students find meaning in the events affecting people far away as well as here. The enormous task of rebuilding and restructuring a society emerging from repression challenges the greatest leaders, and especially challenges the confluence of cultures issuing mutually exclusive mandates. News reports range from the early looting and chaos, to the emergence of local leaders to impose some new order based on safety, property rights, and customs of civility.

Teachers face these same challenges on a smaller scale every year as they craft a new society within their classrooms, often addressing a great range of ability, epistemology, and cultural norms in the process of developing a shared community of learners. An autocratic teacher may have nominal order, just as Saddam Hussein's reign was certainly controlled, but there is a risk of a counterproductive result: students who are not self-controlled or community-minded, but merely sensitive to power exerted by authority. I offer here a practical strategy for teachers to make a difference in their classrooms so that civility on a grander scale may result.

But how do teachers learn how to do this, given that simply being a nice person is a necessary but insufficient component of the many aspects of teachers' influence? Given the current demand for highly qualified teachers combined with the alarmingly short time many new teachers remain in the profession, alternative ways to certification have become widespread. These include '2+2' partnerships between community colleges and 4-year universities. Transferring from community colleges to universities could be smoother, but there is little precedent for faculty interaction between the institutions. This is one gesture in that direction, for these ideas are appropriate for community college instructors as well as community college students looking to earn a teaching certificate.

My key questions are these:

- *What do our students learn intuitively from the daily interactions structured by classroom educators?*
- *What becomes common sense to them regarding survival in a bureaucracy?*

Clearly, these questions apply to students of all ages, K-12 and community college and even graduate school. My comments are based on the assumption that more is learned about the reality of organizations from living life in school rather than any formal civics lessons. At the heart of the matter is the 'hidden curriculum' as Jackson (1990) termed it. Thus, we must consider what our students learn from our nonacademic interactions, and we must cross-reference these learnings with the academic objectives of our state standards.

Issues of civility can be found in Social Studies (Civics) and Language Arts (Communication) as well as Physical Education (Sportsmanship) and Health (Personal Growth and Relationships). However, the assessment of civility is usually in the negative: one who lacks civility is identified by classroom management infractions. It is measured in offenses rather than performances of mastery: number of times out of the seat, speaking out of turn, touching others' things, putting others down; number of minutes withheld from recess, number of referrals to the office, number of times standing in the hall. Teachers spend time planning strategies to prevent incivility as much as strategies to promote civility. And that is the point of this paper: how to support classroom educators attempting to increase mastery of civility skills, which will automatically remove the onerous task of classroom management by coercion.

I reveal here a bit of Glasser's (1992) quality schools rhetoric and a strong dose of Dewey's practical progressivism, plus Bruner's concept attainment model (1960), and also a great deal of assessment literacy from Stiggins (2002), Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy research and reconstructivist ideals of Counts (1912), all with the logical extension of state and national standards and reforms for student achievement and teacher competence. But the strongest support is from the American Psychological Association's (Lambert & McCombs, 1997) guidelines for learner-centered pedagogy and the NSSE's examination of constructivism (Phillips et al., 1999).

Before I offer some practical suggestions for teachers to structure their classroom routines for maximum civility, let's first acknowledge that social studies is the academic field in which civics is traditionally addressed. However, this is currently problematic for two reasons. One is that the increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy for improved achievement on standardized tests has profoundly affected the amount of time that teachers are permitted to spend on subjects that are not tested. Ironically, in spite of decades of research supporting more enlightened pedagogical theory, there is a trend toward 'drill and kill' emphasis on factoid mastery, and a trend away from constructivist and discovery methods. Many teachers perceive the classic social studies units with interesting group projects as a luxury they can no longer afford given the high stakes of accountability.

The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) is unequivocal concerning the mandate of showing improvement at the risk of losing one's livelihood. Therefore, teachers who have traditionally designed curriculum to incorporate both academic goals and personal development goals instead seek to maximize the first without causing too much lasting damage to the second; many feel like technicians implementing a scripted model that has demonstrated results empirically. Thus teachers need support in the language understood by policy makers: data that tests the hypothesis that more learner-centered methods are effective for student growth in more than academic areas.

The second problem concerns teachers' familiarity with the underlying principles of civility, and their use of the principles of concept attainment. Social studies is a modern blend of all social and behavioral sciences, with K-12 standards typically including history, geography, economics, and civics; psychology, sociology, and political science are incorporated, too. But few teachers are well versed in the disciplines. Rather, each teacher tends to artfully blend habits, common sense, examples modeled by others, resources available, and locally defined expectations. Very rarely are all the concepts basic to social studies, or in this case, civility, thoughtfully considered in view of theory and research. Very rarely are the concepts even recognized in the day-to-day dilemmas that are typically lumped together as 'classroom management.'

Teachers use many principles from the social sciences just functioning every day, but without the language of the disciplines or the curriculum acknowledgement that they are in fact instructing students in the content area. Rather, the intuitive experience of social studies is misconstrued as behavior, or classroom management.

The sad aspect of classroom management is that it demands so much time in an effort to eliminate or minimize distractions from the 'real' lessons. The hidden message here for students is that good citizenship is a matter of not expressing one's individuality, of not exceeding expectations, or not participating in the discussion. The tragedy for long-term self-control is that behaviorist methods of close monitoring for rewards and consequences results in an extrinsic orientation that actually weakens intrinsic motivation (Ormrod, 2002). The irony is that the same issue is already well researched and theorized, but in the business world as organizational dynamics. How do large groups of people in complex bureaucracies function to achieve their shared goals as well as their individual needs?

Given the industrial model reinforcing the data-driven culture of behaviorism in schools, the recent organizational theories are pertinent in their efforts to modify the 'sociotechnical system' (Trist, 1981). For instance, in *The Human Side of Enterprise*, McGregor (1960) contrasted his father's philosophy based on essential sinfulness with his own based on potential goodness. McGregor identified behaviorist principles as Theory X: workers will only work if given incentives or sanctions, that is, external reinforcement that management needed to monitor. In comparison, Theory Y understood workers to be intrinsically motivated to work, yet challenged by obstacles that management needed to remove (Owens, 2001). Yet another model, Theory Z (Ouchi,

1981) developed a hybrid of the two. This line of practical theory dismissed behaviorism as the only explanation for motivation.

Classroom management theories are also broadly drawn into two categories, with an autocratic approach like Theory X (workers will only respond to coercion because they would rather not work) and a democratic, control-theory approach like Theory Y (students are inhibited by maintenance factors but motivated by satisfaction, and would rather work than be idle). Theory Z (Ouchi, 1981) is echoed in classrooms as effective teachers use a combination of behaviorism to command attention and initiate engagement as well as constructivism in order to make school meaningful and increase motivation, retention, and retrieval of knowledge and skills. Glaser's (1985) Quality Schools rhetoric enjoyed a brief but widespread appeal, unfortunately resulting in anti-coercion efforts more than pro-community strategies.

Finally, there is a general assumption of interdependence from field theory (Lewin, 1925) and Deutsch (1949, 1999) that emphasizes collaboration over competition, which inspired Johnson and Johnson's (1972, 1995) cooperative learning model that has enjoyed great success as reported both anecdotally and in thousands of empirical studies. Recent research in Washington State (Fouts, 1997) studied the correlation between improved standardized test scores and various post-reform school-wide and classroom-level changes. Although several specific practices were positively correlated with improvement, there was only one factor shared by all the schools that did improve: each of them boasted a collaborative faculty with largely unanimous views on the mission of the school, with an active shared governance model. This was more powerful than any particular instructional practice. A sense of community was building; one that involved faculty, parents, and students in decision-making. This was the single-most positive influence on improved test scores. This is civility writ large.

Civility, however, is not a matter of knowledge or skill. It is a disposition, an attitude toward one's fellows, a philosophy of generosity and hope and trust in the order agreed by that fellowship. Civility is all that contrasts with brute force and anarchy, for it is the result of shared citizenship, or civil identity, and is thus inimical to competition. Civility, more than any other disposition exhibited by the adult models students observe and emulate, cannot be pretended, and incivility cannot be camouflaged. To quote an old beloved teacherism: "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Are there some basic principles of civility as a disposition to be fostered in the classroom? I suggest there are, beginning with the relationship that is defined by the teacher, and the culture of interaction among all those present in the classroom. At the core is the dual identity each child must embrace: at one and the same time an individual and a member of groups and the larger society. This may be understood in the field of emotional development, popularized by Goleman (1995) after the manner of Gardner (1985), but studied comprehensively by Salovey and Schleuter (1997) with contributions from Saarni (1997) who outlined eight skills of emotional competence:

Clearly, the emotional competence developmental model can be superimposed on other developmental models, for instance Piaget's cognitive reasoning from concrete to abstract, Seligman's perspective-taking, Kohlberg's moral reasoning, and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. The eight stages parallel many indicators used to identify Asperger's Syndrome or more extreme degrees of autism, as well as Attention Deficit Disorder and other conditions of nonsocial and antisocial behavior or mental health problems such as depression or bipolar disorder. Thus, elements of civility are key not only to the long-term goals of society which supports public education, but the immediate goals of classroom teachers to attend to the tasks at hand, and the personal needs of students who must function in society.

Given this strong mandate to address civility as an objective, how does the classroom teacher influence disposition that has been strongly influenced already: First by recognizing the power of the group, rather than focusing on the individual monitoring by the individual teacher of the individual student. Second by metacognition of the sensory perceptions of the students. Third by academic concept attainment of civility principles. And fourth by a shared vocabulary.

The Power of the Group

In a community of learners, the student is aware of a shared standard of behavior and a shared mood for interaction as well as a shared protocol for solving problems. One necessary condition is affiliation. Much of the literature aimed to prevent violence and gang membership identifies the opportunity to bond with significant others. Alfred Adler (1956) pioneered the concepts of the self as a product not of conditioning or inherent programming, thus departing from Freud's inner determinism and Jung's mystical dimensions. He suggested a socially interactive model of learning framed by an individual's personally constructed 'world view, 'thereby emphasizing the development of new understanding (Adler, 1956). The teacher, therefore, must not only target goals for the student's development, but also consider where the student is developing from, and his view of his world (Ketner & Smith, 1997).

Dreikurs (1964) applied Adlerian principles (e.g., S.T.E.P. parenting, logical consequences) which included using emotional responses to understand children's motives. This and other Adlerian techniques became standard practice for different educator roles such as school counselors (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, 1990; Baker, 1994; Dreikurs & Cassel, 1974; Myrick, 1997). However, the companion curriculum of whole language and the educational policies geared toward developing the 'maximum potential of every student' has given way to standardized tests geared toward cutoff scores identifying those who have and have not achieved minimum literacy. Individuals are evaluated, and their composite scores are used to evaluate the teachers responsible for them and the schools they attend, but there is no assessment of the community climate. Rather, the community is seen as a component of distributed intelligence, or the context and support resources that contribute to success, and pedagogy based on community is seen as an option justified if standardized test scores show improvement. Social consequences are not usually tabulated and correlated to

reveal that civility is actually threatened by particular teaching methods and school structures. It is possible to do so, but it requires a valid research design and reliable measures.

Although Piaget and Vygotsky are often contrasted – because Piaget (1968, 1970) focused on the cognitive development of the child and Vygotsky (1926, 1934, 1978) emphasized the socio-cultural context contributing to the development (Flavell, 1963) – they shared three principles: (a) interaction with the environment and people in it will affect understanding, (b) there are predictable phases of development (Cole & Wertsch, 1996), and (c) conceptual frameworks can change (e.g. schema theory). For instance, Vygotsky (1926/1978) stated the following:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals (p. 57).

Meanwhile, the individual teacher is best served by a commitment to community development, and by self-assessing curriculum and instruction decisions based on the classroom climate. This is well articulated in rubrics developed by Charlotte Danielson (1997) in *Enhancing Professional Practice*, now the standard for pedagogical assessment.

Metacognition of Sensory Perceptions

Learning depends upon memory, and three phases of memory are well established: sensory perception, short term or working memory, and long-term storage and retrieval. When metacognition is part of the experience, there is more effective meaningfulness. Thus, taking time to articulate the obvious, and to invite students to observe what has happened and what they were feeling at the time and what decisions they made however automatically, will contribute to a more integrated understanding of the experience. This means that rather than focus on the consequences of behavior, students can predict the cause and effect based on their own patterns.

The affective realm is far more influential on interaction decisions, whether this is explained in behavioral terms with the unpleasant feelings as an experience to avoid, or in cognitive terms with peaceful coexistence as a pleasant goal to work toward. Ultimately this means that the teacher must be able to articulate, in academic rather than disciplinary terms, what that dynamic is. Ultimately the teacher must help the individual student observe patterns and feel more capable of recognizing and predicting those patterns. This is strategic thinking and a prime element in self-efficacy. This requires concept attainment in order to identify generalizable truths in personal experiences.

Concept Attainment of Civility Principles

Jerome Bruner (1960, 1971) used the term ‘construction’ to describe the learner’s process of finding meaning from experience. He developed his influential theory of reasoning based on principles of learner readiness, a spiral organization of curriculum concepts, and extrapolation of concepts (1973) and cultural context (1990). The recently revised cognitive taxonomy associated with Bloom (1953) and recently revised by Anderson et al (2000) emphasized the dimensions of knowledge: Factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive. The facts of a situation must be understood in terms of concepts (civic ideals), while the actions must follow conventional procedures (law and custom). But for people to reflect upon the meaningfulness of a dilemma requires the fourth type of knowledge: metacognition, or self-awareness of one’s own thinking. This reflective component is not automatic for students even through university age. It must be coached through personal experiences. It may be prompted with brief discussion points or exercises such as “What surprised you about that?” or “How have you handled this in other situations?” or “What could you do differently?” or any number of questions that engage the student’s personal experience and interest while highlighting the dynamic nature of one’s understanding. It will develop as one matures, but only if one makes sense of the experience. The main cognitive tool for making sense is language, and it helps to use the same language as those people with whom you would like to live peacefully.

Shared Vocabulary

Teaching the concepts of civility as defined by the social studies standards – whether state academic standards or those outlined by agencies such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) – permits a more thoughtful discourse on a universal topic. Everyone everywhere must balance the needs of oneself with the needs of the group to which one hopes to be affiliated. Rousseau called this the social contract. But having the words to articulate the cognitive ideas elevates the discussion above the discourse of an argument in which words are used as weapons to achieve supremacy. An intellectual removal from the passions of the conflict allows rational processes to prevail over righteous indignation and retribution. A confrontational disposition leads to open conflict and casualties with the inevitable retaliatory action using ever more sophisticated weapons and tactics. This is a competitive orientation, expecting there to be both a victor and the vanquished. The ‘win-win’ mentality of transactional analysis focused on the interdependent ideal of peaceful coexistence, or civility. It is important for students to intuitively experience situations that reveal the isolation resulting from competition to be less appealing than the affiliation developed through cooperation.

An effective pedagogy will include safe experiences that trigger awareness of the interactions, meaning some metacognitive exercises to consciously find meaning in them. Then every interaction becomes a new teachable moment to learn accurate terms for human interaction, and to eventually master the academic content of civility through lower and higher cognitive levels. This will translate all classroom management, or

discipline, issues into academic objectives requiring thoughtful explanation, self-conscious modeling, careful monitoring, helpful feedback, and extended instruction.

Just as all teachers are expected to promote and apply literacy skills of reading and writing, no matter what the nominal subject matter, perhaps all teachers are likewise civics teachers (Petersen, 2003). Just as they are responsible to understand how reading occurs and how writing is processed, all teachers must understand the dynamic elements of interaction. Just as students keep writing and writing in order to master the intricacies of paragraph structure and conventions, the student can likewise keep respecting boundaries and acknowledging others' efforts and making eye contact when listening until the conventions of civil behavior are mastered.

Rather than focusing on behavior as selfish, impulsive, contrary, uncooperative, or passive aggressive, teachers could use the language of civic ideals in order to establish the shared expectation. Normal egocentrism of a young child is mediated by discussion of the existence of a larger group which shares resources and shares a culture, that is, ways of doing things and solving problems that everyone in the group recognizes and accepts. Rather than negotiate shared discipline strategies, teachers should instead reinforce common civics concept definitions. Although state standards are generally thorough, they do vary; let us instead be satisfied with the ten thematic strands proposed by the National Council for the Social Studies.

Civics Concepts

Four of the ten NCSS strands summarize civics:

- Civic Ideals
- Power, Authority & Governance
- Individuals, Groups, and Society
- Identity

These concepts introduce students to the relationship each person must establish in order to live in an orderly community. These concepts are broad and applicable to all classroom management issues. I suggest introducing them, perhaps in a graphic organizer, and then incorporating their terms into everyday interactions. I recommend all students be pre-assessed for mastery of understanding and applying each concept.

My own construction shapes these into a classic federalist architecture design (See Figure 1): Civic Ideals crown the graphic in the triangular pediment. Power, Authority, and Governance are the three pillars upholding the Ideals. The Individual, Groups, and Society are the three steps leading up to the columnade. The Individual Identity stands within the columns. I call this an 'iconic organizer' because the shape is a visual metaphor that gives both structure and meaning to four separate concepts requiring yet more elaboration. I find it useful for students old enough to write and draw to analyze information. It is easily drawn and may be used to ask students to identify the concept that is involved during any classroom management issue.

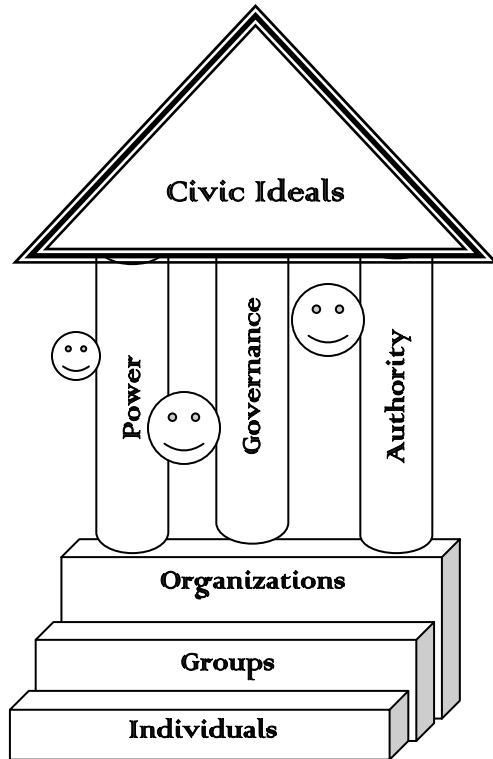


Fig. 1. Iconic Organizer for Civics Concepts.

Every Day All Day Long

The final step in implementing this model of teachable moments for classroom civility is to diligently excise language that is coercive or appears to judge character rather than analyze behavior. Any tone of voice that sounds like a warning or a threat will undermine the teacher, and thus teach not civics but control issues. This extends the model to professional development, that is, a self-assessment of one's own interactions based on the four thematic strands of NCSS' standards. If your ideology recognizes all students as potentially successful and capable of making sense of ambiguous and sophisticated events, you can surely establish a community of learners who learn not what the consequences of an action are, but the greater dynamic likely to be governing the dynamics.

In conclusion, I have suggested a small modification to the instructor's habit of structuring class to avoid problems or establish his or her control. Instructors of any age student must be aware of the hidden curriculum as well as the non-intrusive teachable moments of civility and the enduring value of seeing ourselves as part of a larger system.

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