

HIGHER LEARNING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSROOM INCIVILITY

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Abstract

Being aware of and addressing incivility in educational settings is important not only for providing a positive learning environment but also for shaping the student's behaviour once they enter the workplace. Thus, this study investigated the phenomenon of classroom incivility through the eyes of undergraduate students. The sample consisted of 120 undergraduate students from a public higher educational institution in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The data were analysed using descriptive analysis in Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 21 (SPSS v21). The findings of this study provide useful information to organizations, faculty members, and administrators about the uncivil behaviour that occurs in educational settings. The findings have implications for how faculty and administrators establish policies to guide students towards appropriate behaviour. Some initiatives that can be implemented to reduce classroom incivility include (a) establishing a code of conduct in the classroom outlining acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in the classroom, (b) addressing uncivil behaviours as soon as it begins, and (c) all university members must model good behaviour.

Keywords: Education; higher educational institution; incivility; rudeness

Abstrak

Kesedaran dan menangani ketidaksopanan dalam persekitaran pendidikan adalah penting bukan sahaja untuk menyediakan persekitaran pembelajaran yang positif, tetapi juga untuk membentuk tingkah laku pelajar apabila mereka memasuki tempat kerja. Oleh itu, kajian ini mengkaji fenomena ketidaksopanan di dalam bilik darjah berdasarkan pandangan pelajar pra-siswazah. Sampel kajian terdiri daripada 120 pelajar pra-siswazah dari institusi pengajian tinggi awam di Lembah Klang, Malaysia. Data kajian dianalisis menggunakan analisis deskriptif dalam Perisian Statistik untuk Sains Sosial versi 21 (SPSS v21). Hasil kajian ini menyediakan maklumat berguna

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kepada organisasi, ahli fakulti, dan pentadbir tentang tingkah laku tidak sopan yang berlaku dalam persekitaran pendidikan. Hasil kajian ini mempunyai implikasi terhadap cara fakulti dan pentadbir menetapkan dasar untuk membimbing pelajar ke arah tingkah laku yang sesuai. Beberapa inisiatif yang boleh dilaksanakan untuk mengurangkan ketidaksopanan di dalam bilik darjah termasuk (a) menetapkan satu kod tingkah laku di dalam bilik darjah yang menggariskan tingkah laku yang boleh diterima dan tidak boleh diterima, (b) menangani tingkah laku tidak sopan sebaik sahaja ia berlaku, dan (c) semua ahli universiti perlu menunjukkan contoh tingkah laku yang baik.

Kata kunci: Pendidikan; institusi pengajian tinggi; ketidaksopanan; kebiadapan

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Incivility has emerged as an important discourse in education settings because of its prevalence in the workplace. University settings, for example, serve as essential socialisation environments in which students develop their behaviour. Their perceptions of appropriate norms and behaviours are influenced by their experiences with or witnessing incivility in the classroom. When such norms and behaviours are tolerated and accepted, then these learned norms and behaviours may influence the way individuals behave and interact in their future workplaces.

Incivility that implies rudeness and disrespectful behaviour towards others can manifest in various forms (Pearson et al., 2000). The behaviour is not limited to verbal actions but can also take the form of non-verbal actions. In the classroom, the act of incivility includes students conveying disrespect by using inappropriate language, talking loudly, disregarding instructions, talking down to others, and doubting other judgements (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010). In the form of non-verbal actions, incivility can be expressed in the form of inattentive posture or facial expressions such as a roll of the eyes, stares, or sneers, and using electronic devices without permission (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010). Incivility can be the starting point for social interaction, which can lead to more actions of intent such as bullying and deviant behaviour (Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000; Schilpzand, De Pater & Erez, 2016).

As compared with workplace incivility, classroom incivility has received attention among researchers but is still limited (Ibrahim & Qalawa, 2016; Sethuraman & Latt, 2019). Most studies focused on organizational settings (Holm, Torkelson & Bäckström, 2023; Hülshager, van Gils & Walkowiak, 2021; Parray, Islam & Shah, 2023; Taylor et al. 2021). As previously argued,

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understanding the experience and perception of students is also important because they form the future workplace. Therefore, in order to contribute towards a better understanding of classroom incivility, this study examines undergraduate students' classroom behaviour. Particularly, we examine the behaviours that undergraduate students find to be uncivil and a norm, as well as how often they engage in and observe those behaviours in the classroom.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Classroom Incivility

Incivility is defined in the management literature as behaviours that are characteristically rude and display a lack of regard for others in a manner that violates norms for respect (Pearson & Porath, 2005). For students, incivility can be defined as behaviour that is rude and displays disregard of others, which violates the classroom norm for mutual respect. Specifically, Bjorklund and Rehling (2010) define classroom incivility as behaviour that is "not in accordance with the unity of the classroom community or is contrary to the well-being of the classroom community". Uncivil behaviour disrupts classroom learning, discourages the educator from teaching, discourages other students from participating, and jeopardizes the educator's goals for the period.

Because incivility is dependent on the eye of the beholder it can be interpreted differently by different parties (Cortina et al. 2001; Pearson et al. 2000). In other words, what one person considers uncivil may not be viewed the same way by someone else. Previous scholars also highlighted that there are some factors that influence the perception of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, such as cultural norms, values, and communication styles within a particular society (Ghosh, 2017; Mao et al. 2019). These differences can lead to differences in what constitutes uncivil behaviour.

Based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), students observe the behaviour of classmates and educators in the learning environment. Through observation, if they witness a behaviour being displayed and receiving social approval, they are more likely to imitate it and perceive it as normative or acceptable. For example, constantly observing behaviour in class, such as nodding or smiling in response to others, may lead students to perceive the behaviour as acceptable and normative. For a better understanding of classroom incivility, therefore, student perceptions about classroom behaviours need to be assessed.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Samples and Procedures

Data were obtained via survey questionnaire from 120 undergraduate students from at a public higher education institution. Each participant received a survey that included a cover letter outlining the study's objectives, anonymity and voluntariness of participation, as well as a self-reported questionnaire. The questionnaires were returned to the researcher directly. The majority of the respondents were Malaysian (94.2%), female (63.3%), and Malays (80.8%). About 63.3% of the respondents were 20 to 22 years old. The respondents' average year in university was 2 years (SD = 0.879).

3.2 Measures

A list of 23 student behaviours in the classroom generally regarded as uncivil was adapted from Bjorklund and Rehling (2009). Uncivil was defined in the survey as behaviour that is "not in accordance with the unity of the classroom community or is contrary to the well-being of the classroom community, including behaviours that distract the educator or other students, disrupt classroom learning, discourage the educator from teaching, discourage other students from participating, derail the educator's goals for the period, etc." (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2009).

In the survey, the same list of items was used multiple times with different instructions. First, respondents were asked to rate how often they engage with the behaviours while attending classes. Using five-point Likert-type scale, respondents indicate the frequency of their behaviour ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (many times). Second, using the same list of items respondents were asked to rate how frequently they notice their classmates engaging in classroom behaviours in the second part of the questionnaire. Respondents indicated their response on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (many times). Third, referring to the 23 behaviours listed in the third section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate which behaviours they regard as uncivil while in class. Respondents indicated their responses on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not uncivil at all) to 5 (extremely uncivil). Finally, respondents were asked to indicate which behaviours they considered to be the norm when attending classes referring to the 23 behaviours listed in the final section of the questionnaire. Respondents indicated their response on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

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The original measurement scales in the study were all in English. Given that Bahasa Melayu was the respondents' official language, giving a survey questionnaire in both English and Bahasa Melayu was a thoughtful approach to suit respondents' language preferences and ensure their understanding responses. The measurement scales were translated from English into Bahasa Melayu using forward translation (or direct translation) method by a professional translator. Because the translation was done by a professional translator and reviewed a proof reader, and no issues were found in the equivalence between the two versions, the translation accuracy was sufficiently met.

4.0 RESULTS

Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 21 (SPSS v21) was used to calculate the mean rating. Table 1 shows the mean ratings of the frequency of respondents' behaviours while in class, ranked in order of frequency from most frequent to least frequent. As shown in Table 1, respondents sometimes engaged in behaviours such as "nodding or smiling in response to others' comments", "displaying attentive posture or facial expressions", and "yawning" during attending classes. On the other hand, none of the respondents reported engaging in the behaviour of "coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs".

Table 1. Mean ratings on the frequency of respondents' classroom behaviour

Behaviour	Mean	S.D.
Nodding or smiling in response to others' comments.	3.90	.999
Displaying attentive posture or facial expressions.	3.69	1.121
Yawning.	3.30	1.082
Using gadgets for non-class activities (e.g.; tablet, iPad, laptop).	2.73	1.059
Eating and drinking.	2.65	1.066
Packing up books before class is over.	2.62	1.154
Text messaging.	2.61	1.169
Sleeping.	2.18	1.241
Reading non-class material.	2.17	1.015
Nose blowing.	2.13	1.130
Questioning the value of an assignment or activity.	2.12	1.039
Getting up during class, leaving and returning.	2.05	1.136
Arriving late and/or leaving early.	1.93	.994

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Displaying inattentive posture or facial expressions.	1.84	.889
Conversing loudly with others.	1.84	1.012
Nonverbally indicating dissatisfaction with an assignment activity or grade.	1.83	.984
Doing homework for other classes.	1.76	.961
Continuing to talk after being asked to stop.	1.73	.907
Swearing.	1.71	.982
Fidgeting that distracts others.	1.62	.927
Allowing a cell phone to ring.	1.59	.835
Discarding trash after class has begun.	1.59	.903
Making disparaging remarks.	1.57	.827
Nonverbally showing disrespect for others.	1.48	.809
Coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs.	1.00	.000

Note. 1 = (never) until 5 (many times)

Table 2 shows the mean ratings of the behaviours that respondents' classmates frequently engage in while attending classes. The behaviours were ranked in frequency order from most frequent to least frequent. As shown in Table 2, respondents reported that they sometimes observed their classmates engage in behaviours such as "nodding or smiling in response to others' comments", "displaying attentive posture or facial expressions", "yawning", "using gadgets for non-class activities (e.g.; tablet, iPad, laptop)", and "text messaging" while attending classes. However, the respondent reported that they had never seen their classmates engage in behaviours such as "fidgeting that distracts others", making disparaging remarks", "nonverbally showing disrespect for others", "swearing", and "coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs" while attending classes.

Table 2. Mean rating of the frequency of classmates' behaviour

Behaviour	Mean	S.D.
Nodding or smiling in response to others' comments.	3.90	1.095
Displaying attentive posture or facial expressions.	3.81	1.190
Yawning.	3.42	1.104
Using gadgets for non-class activities (e.g.; tablet, iPad, laptop).	3.23	1.198
Text messaging.	3.13	1.188

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Eating and drinking.	2.93	1.193
Packing up books before class is over.	2.93	1.109
Arriving late and/or leaving early.	2.78	1.226
Conversing loudly with others.	2.53	1.115
Nose blowing.	2.53	1.296
Continuing to talk after being asked to stop.	2.51	1.130
Sleeping.	2.46	1.256
Questioning the value of an assignment or activity.	2.44	1.060
Reading non-class material.	2.42	1.042
Getting up during class, leaving and returning.	2.41	1.104
Allowing a cell phone to ring.	2.26	1.049
Nonverbally indicating dissatisfaction with an assignment activity or grade.	2.19	1.056
Doing homework for other classes.	2.13	1.001
Displaying inattentive posture or facial expressions.	2.12	1.022
Discarding trash after class has begun.	2.06	1.031
Fidgeting that distracts others.	1.98	1.053
Making disparaging remarks.	1.95	.986
Nonverbally showing disrespect for others.	1.93	1.086
Swearing.	1.89	1.098
Coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs.	1.16	.502

Note. 1 = (never) until 5 (many times)

Table 3 shows the mean ratings of which classroom behaviours were regarded as most uncivil to least uncivil. As shown in Table 3, respondents rated behaviours such as “coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs”, “swearing”, and “nonverbally showing disrespect for others” as being the most uncivil behaviours, rating each with a 4 or more. Meanwhile, respondents rated behaviours such as “nose blowing”, “packing up books before class is over”, “using gadgets for non-class activities (e.g.; tablet, iPad, laptop)”, “getting up during class, leaving and returning”, and “yawning” as somewhat uncivil. The two lowest-rated behaviours, which are “nodding or smiling in response to others’ comments”, and “displaying attentive posture or facial expressions” were regarded as not uncivil.

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Table 3. Mean ratings of the behaviour perceived as classroom incivility

Behaviour	Mean	S.D.
Coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs.	4.73	.590
Swearing.	4.35	1.135
Nonverbally showing disrespect for others	4.04	1.162
Continuing to talk after being asked to stop.	3.98	1.191
Conversing loudly with others	3.93	1.128
Making disparaging remarks	3.80	1.105
Sleeping.	3.73	1.172
Arriving late and/or leaving early.	3.58	1.113
Allowing a cell phone to ring.	3.55	1.222
Displaying inattentive posture or facial expressions	3.46	1.270
Doing homework for other classes	3.37	1.115
Fidgeting that distracts others.	3.26	1.170
Reading non-class material.	3.14	1.056
Nonverbally indicating dissatisfaction with an assignment activity or grade.	3.13	1.137
Questioning the value of an assignment or activity.	3.12	1.086
Discarding trash after class has begun.	3.02	1.270
Eating and drinking.	3.01	1.041
Text messaging	3.00	.953
Nose blowing.	2.91	1.290
Packing up books before class is over.	2.88	1.117
Using gadgets for non-class activities (e.g.; tablet, iPad, laptop).	2.87	1.216
Getting up during class, leaving and returning.	2.83	1.261
Yawning.	2.63	1.054
Nodding or smiling in response to others' comments.	1.93	1.333
Displaying attentive posture or facial expressions	1.89	1.365

Note. 1 = (not uncivil at all) until 5 (extremely uncivil)

Finally, respondents were also asked to rate which behaviours they perceived to be the norm when attending classes as shown in Table 4, ordered from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Respondents rated neither agree nor disagree that “nodding or smiling in response to others’ comments” and “displaying attentive posture or facial expressions” are the norm when attending

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classes. Meanwhile, respondents strongly disagree that “making disparaging remarks”, “allowing a cell phone to ring”, “nonverbally showing disrespect for others”, “swearing,” and “coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs” are the norm when attending classes.

Table 4. Mean ratings of the degree of behaviour perceived as norm in classroom

Behaviour	Mean	S.D.
Nodding or smiling in response to others' comments.	3.79	1.194
Displaying attentive posture or facial expressions	3.74	1.226
Yawning.	2.98	1.115
Using gadgets for non-class activities (e.g.; tablet, iPad, laptop).	2.88	1.241
Text messaging.	2.88	1.149
Packing up books before class is over.	2.80	1.135
Eating and drinking.	2.79	1.144
Questioning the value of an assignment or activity.	2.58	1.034
Getting up during class, leaving and returning.	2.58	1.135
Reading non-class material.	2.57	1.051
Nose blowing.	2.51	1.160
Arriving late and/or leaving early.	2.43	1.128
Discarding trash after class has begun.	2.25	.998
Sleeping.	2.24	1.216
Nonverbally indicating dissatisfaction with an assignment activity or grade.	2.24	1.021
Doing homework for other classes.	2.18	1.045
Displaying inattentive posture or facial expressions	2.16	1.123
Fidgeting that distracts others.	2.08	1.078
Continuing to talk after being asked to stop.	2.07	1.207
Conversing loudly with others.	2.05	1.114
Making disparaging remarks	1.94	.946
Allowing a cell phone to ring.	1.94	.981
Nonverbally showing disrespect for others.	1.76	.935
Swearing.	1.63	.899
Coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs.	1.22	.553

Note. 1= (strongly disagree) until 5 (strongly agree).

5.0 DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to examine undergraduate students' behaviours in the classroom in terms of incivility engagement and observation. First, it is found that both respondents and their classmates engage in behaviours such as “nodding or smiling in response to others comment”, displaying attentive posture or facial expressions”, “yawning”, “using gadgets for non-class activities”, “eating and drinking”, “packing up books before class is over”, “text messaging”, “sleeping”, “reading non-class material”, “nose blowing”, “questioning the value of an assignment and activity”, and “getting up during class, leaving, and returning”. The similarity in behaviours between respondents and their classmates may indicate that they are influenced by each other's actions. Tartari et al. (2014) noted that people often look to their peers for clues on appropriate behaviour, social norms, and social approval. The findings thus highlight and support social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) that people in the same social environment, such as a classroom are exposed to similar influences, which might lead to students adopting similar behaviours.

Second, this study reveals that undergraduate students view behaviours such as “coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs”, “swearing”, and “nonverbally showing disrespect for others” as very uncivil. The agreement among respondents and their classmates to refrain from engaging in these acts demonstrates a shared awareness that the behaviour is unacceptable. Therefore, it can be concluded that these behaviours are considered disruptive, disrespectful, or damaging to the overall atmosphere of the classroom and relationships with others. Nevertheless, respondents and their classmates do engage in behaviours perceived as somewhat uncivil, such as “yawning”, “using gadgets for non-class activities”, and “packing up books before class is over”. The engagement of respondents and their classmates in a little inappropriateness suggests that the phenomenon of incivility exists in educational settings such as the classroom.

Finally, this study found that behaviours including “nodding or smiling in response to others' comments” and “displaying attentive posture or facial expressions” are regarded as norms in the classroom. Similarly, behaviours such as “yawning”, “using gadgets for non-class activities”, “text messaging”, “packing up books before class is over”, and “eating and drinking” are perceived as the norm in the classroom. When respondents and their classmates engage in behaviours perceived as both uncivil and the norm (i.e., “yawning”, “using gadgets for non-class activities”, and “packing up books before class is over”), it suggests an inconsistency in social norms within

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the classroom. Because different people may hold different views or beliefs about what is considered appropriate behaviour, it leads to conflicting perceptions of the same behaviour. The findings therefore highlight the need to help students develop a clearer understanding of what constitutes civil and uncivil behaviour.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In managing uncivil behaviour among students, a few strategies can be taken. First, the university should collaborate with faculty, administrators, and students to establish a code of conduct outlining acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in the classroom. That is, the university should provide a list of words and actions listed as acceptable and unacceptable to the students. For example, students must refrain from swearing, making insulting remarks to someone, chatting with someone else's after being ordered to stop and texting during class. To ensure full understanding, the university may request that lecturers clearly explain the code of conduct to the students in the first class meeting. In doing so, it can help the students fully understand what is expected of them in terms of conduct and behaviour in the classroom.

Second, lecturers should address uncivil behaviour as soon as it begins. In doing so, it sends a clear message to the rest of the students that uncivil behaviour will not be tolerated and helps to prevent uncivil behaviour from escalating and becoming more disruptive. Also, it contributes to the maintenance of a positive learning environment that promotes students' participation, cooperation, and respect for one another. Caldarella et al. (2023) found that reprimand action had a significant effect on improving student behaviour.

Third, all university members must model good behaviour, particularly lecturers. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), learning occurs through interaction with people, observation, as well as mental processes. Hence, modelling can be one of the effective strategies that can be used in the classroom because it allows lecturers to educate students about civil and uncivil behaviour. This helps the student gain a better understanding and practice appropriate behaviour in the classroom.

Some limitations of the current study should be noted. First, this study was done at a public higher education institution. Therefore, the findings may not generalize to other higher education institutions. To address this issue, future studies could investigate uncivil behaviour at other public

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universities, private universities, or colleges. This would enable comparison and a greater understanding of students' uncivil behaviours in the classroom.

Second, findings of the current study were based on Malaysian undergraduate students. Because incivility can be interpreted differently by different parties, it would be interesting to explore perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour from students from different countries, cultural norms, and values. For example, what is considered uncivil behaviour among Malaysian students may be regarded as incivility by students from Western countries. Thus, research using social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) is a foundational step towards understanding classroom incivility.

Finally, the main concern of this study is to look into undergraduate students' classroom behaviour. As a result, we are unsure of how uncivil behaviour affects undergraduate students' performance. Future studies, therefore, should examine the consequences of classroom incivility. For instance, it would be fruitful to examine the impact of classroom incivility on student academic performance. Researchers studying uncivil behaviour in the workplace have found that uncivil behaviour is linked to counterproductive responses (Han et al. 2022; Vasconcelos, 2020). Thus, future studies may also explore if classroom incivility may be linked to more serious withdrawal behaviours.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Overall, this study provides information on undergraduate classroom behaviour in our efforts to improve civility. The results showed which behaviours undergraduate students perceive to be uncivil and a norm, as well as how often they engage in and observe those behaviours in the classroom. Maintaining civility in the classroom is critical because it promotes a healthy and conducive learning environment for both students and educators. If incivility is not effectively addressed in an educational setting, it can have a negative impact on the workplace. Students who witness or engage in incivility during their educational journey may bring these behaviours and attitudes with them into their future workplaces. Therefore, it is critical to uphold civility in the classroom and eliminate uncivil behaviours.

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