

Creating a Covenant with Your Students

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What this is

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What it is

If you have been dealing with student attitudes that mix disengagement with disregard, you are not alone. Millions of educators around the world are in your position. One way to improve the situation is to make your expectations explicit. For the past several years, my students and I have agreed upon codes of behavior -either oral or written- regulating our relationship during the semester. In the absence of compelling reasons not to do so, choose the written covenant.

Why it matters

For some time disengaged, disrespectful and unruly student behavior that used to be confined to secondary schools has penetrated higher education. In college classrooms across the U.S., tardiness, unfamiliarity with assigned readings, and unjustified absences are routine. So are chit-chatting, e-mailing, and instant-messaging. In large lecture halls where ringtones jar and jangle, students have been spotted reading newspapers and even watching television on their portable sets.

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We know that the Internet plays a major role in the shaping of the young, but how many of us have a strategy in place to cope with the challenge that this development poses to education? In the last decade, first-year experience programs have been



sprouting at many two-year and four-year colleges. When expertly managed, they have been invaluable assets, helping students learn how to behave civilly with both peers and teachers. However, these programs are not enough. If we want to slow down the continuing decline of traditional civil interaction on American college campuses, we must bring new strategies to the classroom.

Many students are simply not prepared to engage in serious academic work, and they do not know how they are expected to behave on campus. Most of them bring a consumer mentality to school and very little concern about approval from the older generation. Professors may be contributing to the problem as well. We can be unfair, unhelpful, disillusioned, disengaged, arrogant, and sarcastic. And sometimes, just as the new breed of students is not prepared for college, we are not prepared for them. A written contract provides a solution for these problems.

How to do it

1. Writing your covenant

At the top of a sheet of paper, under the heading "What I Expect from You," list entries such as: "That you be punctual for every class." "That you do not receive or make telephone calls." "That you respect what I and your fellow students have to say." "That you come to class ready to ask and answer questions of substance on the day's readings." "That you are mindful of time constraints when making presentations." "That you concentrate exclusively on this course during class hours."

Use the bottom half for your own list of commitments, “What You Can Expect from Me”: “That I will be punctual for every class.” “That I will give everybody a fair share of my attention.” “That I will prepare you for your tests.” “That I will grade the quality of your work rather than the amount of time and effort you spent on it.” “That I will work to help you perform at your best.”

2. Making your covenant known

Read the covenant to your students on the first day of classes and ask them whether they are willing to abide by it. You can certainly make it part of the syllabus, but if you prefer a more memorable option, bring copies on separate sheets. Then, after the students’ approval, staple the sheets to the syllabi just before distributing them to your class. Either way, it is of utmost importance that you do not change the original stipulations during the course of the term.

3. Gaining respect

Your students are aware of their own edge over the older generation in the handling of all things digital. The smaller the gap between their competence and yours, the more respect you will receive, and the more in control of the class you will be. Take care of disruptions of any kind right away. Interrupt your class if necessary, and allow it to continue only after the disruptive behavior is corrected. It is unfortunate that teachers are reluctant to report egregious breaches in civility and ethics because they perceive them as personal defeats and fear that administrators will deem them unable to control their classes. This, of course, gives students the impression that they can act with impunity, which makes them repeat their behavior.

4. Standing firm

Keep exceptions to the rules to a minimum. If your syllabus says “No makeup tests,” explain that you really mean it, out of fairness to the contingent of students respecting the rule. Place plenty of emphasis on the notion that it is not acceptable to come to class without having read and assimilated the assigned material. Help your students prepare for their tests. They will be more likely to do well, which means fewer grade challenges. When students come to class unprepared, it does not necessarily mean that they have not opened their books. It is easy to mistake inability to study for a lukewarm interest in the subject; teach them what it means to study in earnest. Inform them that study is just another form of work. Show no tolerance for the antics of the overbearing, the mean-spirited, and the narcissistic.



Final Thoughts

Never cease to be clear-headed, temperate, considerate, and compassionate. Never argue or raise your voice. In a particularly difficult encounter with a student, imagine that you are being videotaped and that the resulting video will be used to train other teachers in the handling of such situations. While remaining engaged, you will perceive the hostility directed at you less as a personal attack and more as a management task.

When students are clear about what you expect, they are more likely to meet those expectations. By creating a covenant with your students, you proactively define the roles and expectations for both sides. A paper document makes commitments tangible, and obtaining the students’ agreement to the conditions gives them a meaningful stake in the class.

Additional Resources

- The ideas presented here are examined in more detail in P.M. Forni’s article, “The Civil Classroom in the Age of the Net”, published in *The NEA Higher Education Journal*, Fall 2008: http://krieger.jhu.edu/civility/civil_classroom.pdf

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P.M. Forni is a professor of Italian Literature at Johns Hopkins University, where he directs the Civility Initiative. The author of *Choosing Civility* (2002) and *The Civility Solution* (2008) he often speaks to college faculty, students, and staff. Visit his Web site <http://www.jhu.edu/civility>.