Incivility as a Barrier against Learners' Achievement in Virtual Settings: Stressing an Overlooked Concern and a Call for Research

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Dear Editor

Students' incivility in higher education is a serious issue with undesirable impacts such as disturbed learning, interruption in the learning and teaching environment, and stressful relationship between teacher and learners (1). It is basically defined as disruptive and unreasonable behaviors which cause psychological or physical distress, turning into threats if no action is taken to deal with them. It may further involve any behavior or verbal statement with negative impacts on teacher and students' health, adversely affecting their occupational relationship, thereby disturbing the teaching and learning process (2).

Common uncivil behaviors are categorized in a bottom-up hierarchical continuum by their severity; the lower categories include misbehaviors such as eating, sleeping, talking in the class, and sidestepping the assigned tasks. The higher categories contain severe misbehaviors such as fights with students and faculty (3). These negatively impact the rapport, ethics and learning environment, and threaten the tranquility of instructors, students, and the academic community (4).

After the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown of universities and higher education institutes, around 1.2 billion students were led to virtual classes around the world. Virtual learning management systems (LMSs) provided online and offline opportunities for learning and were widely applied in university education. In Iran, due to its less popularity before the Covid-19 outbreak and poor infrastructure, LMS implementation encountered substantial barriers and major challenges, which hampered its full potential. Stakeholders in education were taken into virtual instruction to compensate the unavailability of real classrooms (5). LMS users faced challenges such as low speed Internet, expensive data traffic, unavailability of competent instructors, and unfamiliarity with educational software, which altogether disrupted the routine instruction in some universities (6). In addition to these shortfalls, the Covid-19 outbreak severely disturbed the faculty-student relationships and undermined the students' learning outcomes.

The renovation of instructional tools and methods required both faculty and students to act peacefully and patiently in virtual instruction, but a trial-and-error approach to virtual learning and teaching was on the rise. Misunderstanding and mutually aggressive actions and reactions still continues to severely harm academic relationships; also, deprivation of real face-to-face encounters sometimes led to unacceptable misbehaviors, the nature of which is radically different from those in real classrooms. Therefore, novel personal approaches were

shaped to understand mutual uncivil behaviors of the faculty and students towards each other.

For instance, faculty members perceived "unresponsiveness, dishonesty, unreasonable expectations, and disruptive behavior in virtual classes" as reflections of students' uncivil behaviors, while students complained of "unresponsiveness, inappropriate classroom management, unfair academic assessment, disruptive behavior in virtual classes and inappropriate interactions with students" as incivility examples on the part of instructors (7). In order to deeply understand the nature and reflections on this instructional hassle, we recommend the exploration of this issue by academic research at universities in particular (8). Educational weaknesses in dealing with virtual incivility can revolutionize the relationships and turn it into effective instruction if all stakeholders understand the nature of virtual communication and revisit their own roles in such an environment. University administrators may keep on evaluating such behaviors and provide instructors with constructive advice to enhance the quality of the course content and classes in virtual settings.

Conflict of Interest
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