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Theory into Practice

Civility in Classes and Sports

By

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If you ask teachers and coaches what they like best about their jobs, they will inevitably say it is the opportunity to interact with students and athletes and positively impact their lives. Teachers and coaches consistently express how much they cherish contributing to the intellectual, physical, and emotional growth of young people. Teachers' eyes sparkle when recounting how their students get excited about learning, achieve at remarkable levels, and overcome challenges to reach their potential. Coaches become effusive in their praise of athletes who demonstrate respect for others, hard work, and fair play. Basketball coaching legend John Wooden (Wooden & Tobin, 1972) always stressed he was a teacher, because coaching is teaching at an advanced level. While not everything translates easily from a class setting to a team setting, civility can and should.

School-aged children and adolescents often spend more waking hours with teachers and coaches than they do with their parents. This places an awesome responsibility upon teachers and coaches. In schools where approximately 25% of the American population can be found five days a week over nine months of the year, the attitudes, beliefs, and values of successive generations are shaped in life-changing ways. Historically, schools were expected to teach values, and as Tyack (2001) suggests, "School has continued to shape the core of our national identity" (p. 1). Many people agree

with Tyack that teachers and coaches serve pivotal roles in teaching and modeling civility. Physical education teachers have one-five hours a week with their students, coaches have longer and more focused hours with their athletes. Physical education classes and team practices and competitions provide a multiplicity of opportunities to teach and model civility.

Civility is a polite or courteous act, expression, or standard of conduct, including the display of respect and tolerance to everyone. Forni (2002) describes civility using descriptors such as agreeable, caring, compassionate, considerate, courteous, fair, friendly, honest, just, kind, mannerly, polite, respectful, and

tolerant. Brannigan (2008) suggests civility is the basis of society.

Civility represents the quality of our behavior with others in our collective household. This is serious business, for how we treat others signals who we are and what we value. Moreover, since the essence of ethics lies in how we are with others, civility and ethics are intricately linked....Civility is not peripheral to ethics, dealing merely with manners. True, civility does manifest itself in good manners, proper etiquette and politeness. But it also runs deeper and is more profound. Simply put, civility requires restraint, respect and responsibility in everyday life. Without these, we can

**They ask me why I teach, and I
reply: Where could I find more
splendid company?**

- Harmon, 1948

never act ethically....Civility cultivates a civic code of decency. It requires us to discipline our impulses for the sake of others. It demands we free ourselves from self-absorption. By putting ethics into practice in our day-to-day encounters, civility is that moral glue without which our society would come apart. (n.p.)

Teaching and modeling civility in classes and with sport teams is essential so students and athletes can learn the importance of and demonstrate civility in their interactions with others. For example, Coach Wooden taught his athletes to leave the visiting locker room exactly as they had found it to show respect for the host team and everyone associated with it, and especially those who would have had to clean up a littered locker room. Teachers and coaches showing civility honor the rights and dignity of each student and athlete without preference to ability level or disability, ethnicity, gender, national origin, race, or social class. Civility is shown by teachers and coaches modeling values like fairness, honesty, and respectfulness.

Civility is learned, and often the most valuable way to teach civility is modeling it. Coach Wooden (Wooden & Yeager, 2009) describes role modeling as mentoring. Civility is taught by mentors and learned by those being mentored. Serving as a role model demonstrates the give-and-take of civility, of treating the other person as you want to be treated. Here are a few guidelines for how teachers and coaches can model and mentor civility in their classrooms and with their teams.

- Civility requires being respectful. Civility is shown through respecting the inherent rights and dignity of every person. Civility replaces the tendency to focus on personal needs and desires with a deference to the wants and preferences of others. It means treating others the way you would like to be treated...only doing it first. The civil person is embarked on a lifelong quest to put others first.
- Beneficence means doing good, promoting good, and avoiding harm toward others. The civil person shows the moral courage to do each of these.
- Showing civility means having the fortitude to control personal attitudes, emotions, and actions, believing the best in others, and dealing positively with problems, fears, and unpleasant occurrences.
- The civil person shows courtesy, is considerate, gracious, and mannerly, admits mistakes, accepts constructive feedback, can be trusted and extends trust toward others, expresses gratitude, and demonstrates empathy.
- Civility is inextricably linked with the inviolate moral values of integrity, honesty, and fairness. Regardless of what others do or how they may act, civility is demonstrated through integrity, honesty, and fairness.
- A civil person models high moral character.

In a civil society, teachers and coaches dedicate themselves to ensuring that their students and athletes learn and demonstrate civility. When describing the surrender of the Confederate army to the Union army at Appomattox Court

House in Virginia in 1865, Miles, Dagley, and Yau (2002) emphasized the essentiality of modeling civility:

...Generals Lee and Grant demonstrated civility at a tense and decisive point in America's history, and by so doing, sped the reality of one nation. Each taught and encouraged civility as a means to social order by their leadership, clear talk, and example. (p. 469)

While it takes effort to model civility in everything we do, it gets easier with practice. Teachers and coaches can model civility for their students and athletes beginning with something as simple as a smile. Teachers: try smiling at everyone you meet, such as a warm and welcoming smile to each student arriving for class. Coaches: set a civil tone for an upcoming game by shaking hands, wishing the opposing team a good game, and smiling authentically. You may be surprised with the responses you get from students and opponents. Smiling is infectious and improves everyone's outlook on life. Whenever someone returns your smile, broaden your smile and nod approvingly. Expand this courtesy by acting with integrity while showing respect, and students and athletes will learn the importance of civility through your example.

The following suggestions for life are closely linked with living a civil life and can be instructive to teachers, coaches, students, and athletes:

- Establish and live by your values.
- Respect everyone.
- Be positive – believe in yourself and in others.
- Communicate effectively to solidify relationships and reduce misunderstandings.
- Be a friend and develop friendships.
- Work hard and persevere – without adversity, there would be no challenges; without challenges, no greatness.
- Help others.

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