

## Chapter 3

# Assessment and Civility: Using Ethos as a Tool

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Civility in computer-mediated communication, especially in the computer-mediated classroom, has been a topic of numerous inquiries. For this reason, teaching of the means and reasons for civil computer-mediated communication has become increasingly necessary. To accomplish this, the chapter will explore past research which indicates major sources of incivility that have emerged in computer-mediated culture. The chapter will then argue that civil discourse is also the most effective and useful form of discourse and show that needs to be communicated to students. This chapter then offers concrete means of teaching civility in computer-mediated communication by teaching civility as tied to the rhetorical concept of ethos already taught in the Public Speaking class.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

An educator's lament about the lack of civility among students is nothing new. As early as 95 AD Quintilian spoke of "Barbarisms" that might occur in students' speech and recommended that educators attempt to educate these linguistic habits out of students (2006). Hogarth's engraving entitled *Students at a Lecture* from 1736 depicts a scene which allows us to know that uncivil behavior among collegiate learners is hardly a recent phenomenon (Hogarth, 1736). If we are to accept the idea that education serves a purpose in preparing our students for civil society, we should probably expect that they come to our classrooms with less than civil habits. It is at least partially our job to help the students to overcome these habits and prepare them for civilized life.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss one of the ways in which we might do that. This chapter will show that although the lament of educators regarding civility is nothing new, the need to work with our students to produce civil discourse has taken on a new urgency due to the well-publicized instances of cyber bullying and the growth of social media as a means of interacting. As our communities have become increasingly hybrid digital/physical communities there has come a special need to relearn the lessons

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of civility from the past. This chapter examines the application of one ancient concept and considers the implications of that concept for today's digital communities and the learners in them. Specifically, this chapter looks at the conceptual correlation that exists between civility and the Aristotelian concept of *ethos* in order to find ways to add civility to our curriculum as a learnable and assessable skill. This chapter will use as its example a means of assessing civility as *ethos* within a computer mediated classroom which focuses on Public Speaking, but we believe that using the concept of *ethos* as a tool for assessing civility will be more broadly applicable.

## **BACKGROUND**

While the necessity of requiring the teaching of civility has been incumbent on educators for millennia, or possibly longer, the need for teaching civil communication, especially civil computer mediated communication, has never been greater. The popular news outlets abound with stories of what is probably the least civil of all computer mediated communication, online bullying. *Fox News* derides "a West Virginia high school's 'Queen of Charm,' who created a Web page that suggested another student had a sexually transmitted disease, and invited classmates to comment" (2012). *MSNBC* talks about a 16-year-old girl, "a self-described atheist, [who] has been the target of cyberbullying and threats" after a judge required that a religious banner at her high-school be taken down (2012). *Headline News* discusses the plight of a young man for whom online bullying "led to despair, self-mutilation and thoughts of suicide" (2011). *CNN* expounds on a litany of such stories:

*Such behavior remains in the spotlight after the recent death of Jamey Rodemeyer, a 14-year-old boy from Williamsville, near Buffalo, who last week took his life after what his parents say was years of bullying over his sexual orientation.*

*Last year, Phoebe Prince, 15, of Massachusetts, took her own life after being continuously bullied at school and online. The online bullying continued even after her death, as people left vindictive comments on her Facebook memorial page.*

*An 18-year-old Rutgers University student, Tyler Clementi, killed himself by jumping off of the George Washington Bridge in September 2010 after two classmates posted and broadcast a secretly-taped video of his sexual encounter with another man (Debuquoy-Dodley, 2011).*

The *New York Times* captures the public outcry when telling the story of a 14-year-old boy bullied online to the point of suicide and claims that: "His story is a classic case of bullying: he was aggressively and repeatedly victimized. Horrific episodes like this have sparked conversations about cyberbullying and created immense pressure on regulators and educators to do something, anything, to make it stop" (Boyd, 2011). This public outcry for civility in computer mediated communication, especially in the computer mediated communication of young people, demands careful attention from those of us working in the education industry.

That is not to say that the academy has been deaf to the pleas of civil society to return civility to our communication. To the contrary, the concept of teaching civility in the classroom (Baldwin, 2007; Braxton, 2004; Gonzalez & Lopez, 2001; Rookstool, 2007; Connelly, 2009; Schneider, 1998; Lampman,

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