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# Management of students' uncivil behaviors in academic environments: A context-based educational intervention

Fatemeh Farzi, Shirin Hasanvand<sup>1</sup>, Fateme Goudarzi<sup>1</sup>,  
Monireh Tahvildarzadeh Gavgani<sup>2</sup>, Yaser Mokhayeri<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract:

**BACKGROUND:** Incivility has been raised as a growing concern and a hot topic in nursing education. The aim of this study was to determine the effect of a context-based educational intervention on the nursing students' civility index and their perception of uncivil behaviors.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS:** This quasi-experimental study was done from 2019 to 2020 in Khorramabad, Iran. A context-based educational intervention focusing on problem-based scenarios was conducted for 4 weeks. Clark Civility Index for Students and Classmates (2017) and Clark Incivility Scale in the University Environment (2014) were used. Data were analyzed using Stata, descriptive statistics, and paired *t*-test.

**RESULTS:** There was a significant difference between the mean score of students' civility index before and after the intervention (8.31 points increase,  $P = 0.004$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the mean score of the civility index for classmates before and after the intervention. Furthermore, the mean score of students' perception of incivility after the intervention increased by 5.88 points, which confirmed the significant effect of the intervention in improving students' understanding of uncivil behaviors ( $P = 0.018$ ).

**CONCLUSIONS:** Considering the effectiveness of the problem-based scenario along with other strategies such as journal club and self-learning in increasing the awareness of civility and improving the civility index, the use of these strategies is recommended in order to reduce incivility.

## Keywords:

Incivility, intervention, nursing students, problem-based learning, scenario

## Introduction

Incivility is not a new topic for nursing students and teachers, but it is a growing concern and a hot topic in nursing education.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Academic incivility is considered violent, disruptive, rude, and destructive behaviors as well as failure to take action in necessary circumstances.<sup>[3]</sup> Clark and Springer define uncivil behavior as obscene speech or inappropriate actions that can range from insulting and abusive

statements to explosive and violent behaviors.<sup>[4]</sup>

These behaviors are seen in different types. Uncivil behaviors of any kind and for any reason have devastating effects such as increased stress levels, headaches, insomnia, weakened immune systems, mood disorders, low self-esteem, suicide, anxiety and depression, cognitive impairments such as inability to concentrate and learn, and behavioral changes including dismissal, revenge, and violence. In addition, it causes

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Student Research Center,  
Lorestan University  
of Medical Sciences,  
Khorramabad, Iran,  
<sup>1</sup>Department of Nursing,  
Lorestan University  
of Medical Sciences,  
Khorramabad, Iran,  
<sup>2</sup>Department of Health  
Information Technology,  
School of Allied Medical  
Sciences, Lorestan  
University of Medical  
Sciences, Khorramabad,  
Iran, <sup>3</sup>Cardiovascular  
Research Center, Shahid  
Rahimi Hospital, Lorestan  
University of Medical  
Sciences, Khorramabad,  
Iran

## Address for correspondence:

Dr. Shirin Hasanvand,  
Department of Nursing,  
Lorestan University  
of Medical Sciences,  
Khorramabad, Iran.  
E-mail: [hasanvand.sh@lums.ac.ir](mailto:hasanvand.sh@lums.ac.ir)

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disruption in professors' interpersonal relationships with students decreases job satisfaction, and increases student absenteeism.<sup>[5,6]</sup>

The goal of health-care professionals is to provide safe care and promotion patient safety.<sup>[7]</sup> If academic incivility remains unknown, it may develop and create temporary or permanent threatening situations and ultimately "threaten the patient safety." Nursing educators are morally obligated to ensure that students acquire basic skills in creating a healthy work environment and thus ensuring safe care.<sup>[8]</sup> In addition, with the continuation of uncivil behaviors in students, they may enter the professional workplace without enough knowledge about it and turn into immoral people.<sup>[9]</sup> Since the process of professionalization and familiarity with ethical standards begins in educational environments,<sup>[10]</sup> approaches that prevent the occurrence of such behaviors in students are of particular importance.

Based on the evidence, many quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted in the field of incivility, which have mainly focused on identifying this problem and realizing its nature, severity, and importance.<sup>[11-14]</sup> Few intervention studies have been conducted on the management of such behaviors in academic settings. In the study of Clark *et al.*, problem-based scenarios of challenging clinical environment were developed by nursing teachers and displayed online for nursing students. The results of this study showed that this intervention has been an effective way to increase students' awareness and perception of incivility and to promote its management by students.<sup>[1]</sup> Another study was conducted by Woith *et al.* (2012) using the journal club as an effective intervention on the perception of uncivil behaviors by nursing students. The results of this study also indicated the effectiveness of the intervention.<sup>[15]</sup> Another intervention study was conducted by Kerber *et al.* in 2012. The findings of the study showed that the journal club increased peoples awareness of civil and uncivil behaviors, improved assistance to other students, and developed adaptation skills.<sup>[16]</sup> The results of a mixed exploratory study by Jenkins *et al.* in the United States revealed that the mean of adjustment behaviors increased after journal club. Students' description of civility was in the form of five themes of respect, equality, care, constructive communication, and working with each other.<sup>[17]</sup> Abedini and Parvizy conducted a quasi-experimental study in Iran. The results showed that group discussion can be used as a suitable strategy to promote academic civility.<sup>[18]</sup>

It was found that in different studies, various strategies such as problem-based scenario and journal clubs have been used. The results of the study by the authors regarding students' and teachers' views on strategies

for promoting civility indicated that increasing students' awareness is the first priority in both groups. Furthermore, considering the cultural dimension of the issue, it seems that using methods appropriate to the educational context is a more sensible solution. Thus, considering the importance of the subject and the results of the previous study conducted by the authors in educational setting,<sup>[2]</sup> this study was conducted to determine the effect of a context-based educational intervention on the students' civility index and their perception of uncivil behaviors.

## Materials and Methods

This one-group quasi-experimental study was conducted in the first semester of the 2019-2020 academic year in one of the universities of medical sciences in Western Iran

Out of the total number of students, 45 were studying in the second semester and chose the course of nursing ethics and professional behavior. They were selected by the whole enumeration. The inclusion criteria were as follows: willingness to participate in the study, being at least 18-year-old, studying in the third semester of nursing school and passing at least one internship course in a clinical environment. If a student wanted to leave the study or missed one of the educational intervention sessions, they were excluded from the study. Before the intervention, the objectives of the study were explained to the students and the informed consent were taken from them. The research tool was completed by the students during the first session as a self-report in 10 min. The first part of the demographic information included age, sex, marital status, residency status, and grade point average of the units they have passed. Clark Civility Index for Students and Classmates (2017) was the second tool of the study. In this tool, students are asked to report the frequency of occurrence of civil behaviors in themselves and their classmates according to the 5-point Likert scale (5 = always, 4 = usually, 3 = sometimes, 2 = rarely, and 1 = never). The points of the items are added together, and according to the score obtained, the person is placed in one of the following groups in terms of civility index: 100-90 (very civil), 89-80 (civil), 79-70 (moderately civil), 69-60 (mildly civil), 59-50 (uncivil), <50 (very uncivil).<sup>[19]</sup>

The tool was translated from the original language into the target language after obtaining permission from the scale designer. After combining the translations by a panel of experts, the tool was translated back from the target language to the original language. After pretest and cognitive interview, the final version was approved by the scale designer. To examine the content validity index (CVI), the tool was provided to 10 experts (6 nursing faculty members, 2 sociologists, and 2 psychologists). They were asked to rate each item

for its relevance to the structure. The items were graded numerically from 1 to 4 based on their relevance criteria. The minimum CVI for items was 0.8 and the CVI for scale was 0.94. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed to be 0.94 with an intra-cluster correlation coefficient, and its Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

The next tool was the psychoanalyzed Persian version of the incivility in nursing education-revised of Clark *et al.*(2015). It includes a 24-item list of uncivil behaviors related to nursing students who are asked to rate the level of uncivil behavior based on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = non uncivil, 2 = somewhat uncivil, 3 = moderately uncivil, and 4 = highly uncivil). The mean is calculated separately for each item.<sup>[3]</sup> In the study of Mohammadipour *et al.*(2018), the CVI of all items on the scale was >0.78 and it was 0.91 for the whole scale. Using an intra-cluster correlation coefficient, the stability of the instrument was revealed to be 0.91 and its internal consistency was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha of 0.86.<sup>[20]</sup> Role-playing has been considered as an active learning strategy in the field of uncivil behaviors and a strategy for self-knowledge.<sup>[21,22]</sup>

In this study, senior students used a problem-based scenario focusing on a situation between several students (7 senior students) and a teacher (a postgraduate student) to demonstrate some common uncivil behaviors such as cheating, inattentive behavior in class, distracted classmates, using mobile phones, unpreparedness for the class, etc., so that all participants (junior students) could see the desired scenario. The scenario was developed based on the experiences of the role player students and under the guidance of the teacher [Box 1]. This scenario was reviewed with the help of several faculty members and senior students. Senior students practiced their roles in the presence of the teacher several times to be able to present it to junior students, and the final version of the play was prepared. After performing the role play, a debriefing session was held to discuss different perspectives and the possibility of providing feedback to students.<sup>[23]</sup> They were asked to share their views from this experience. Students were encouraged to express their feelings about the teacher and learners. Finally, the students' information was summarized by the teacher and transmitted to the students.

To prepare the students for the simulation, two articles about incivility, its causes and consequences were first sent to the participants via WhatsApp 2 weeks before the role playing. After reading the papers, the students discussed the papers in groups in the conference room. Furthermore, to familiarize the learners with the current situation, a study that was previously conducted in the same context was discussed by the learners in a separate meeting.<sup>[2]</sup>

Then a handout about professional ethics in academic environment was sent to the students via WhatsApp with key points of civil behaviors, uncivil behaviors, examples of uncivil behaviors, causes of uncivil behaviors, consequences and management of uncivil behaviors, factors affecting the relationship between student and teacher, factors affecting the presence of students in theoretical classes, students' duties toward teachers, students' ethics in Islam, students' duties toward teachers taken from Imam Sajjad's law treatise, professional ethics of professor's professional ethics in higher education, Requirements, of teaching professional ethics from the perspective of different universities in the world, requirements of teaching professional ethics from the perspective of Islamic teachings, ethical codes for nursing students in Iran and the world, and students' legal charter. The content of this handout was discussed in groups. Finally, the learners' reflective response to the intervention was examined in the form of a focus group. This educational intervention, which emphasized the problem-based scenario with the help of role-playing, was performed for 4 weeks on Tuesdays at the time of cultural discussion in the university. Stages of the study are presented in Figure 1.

Data were analyzed using Stata 14 MP (Statacorp, College Station, Texas, USA), descriptive statistics (frequency distribution, percentage, mean, and standard deviation), and analytical statistics (paired *t*-test). Results were reported at a significant level of 5%.

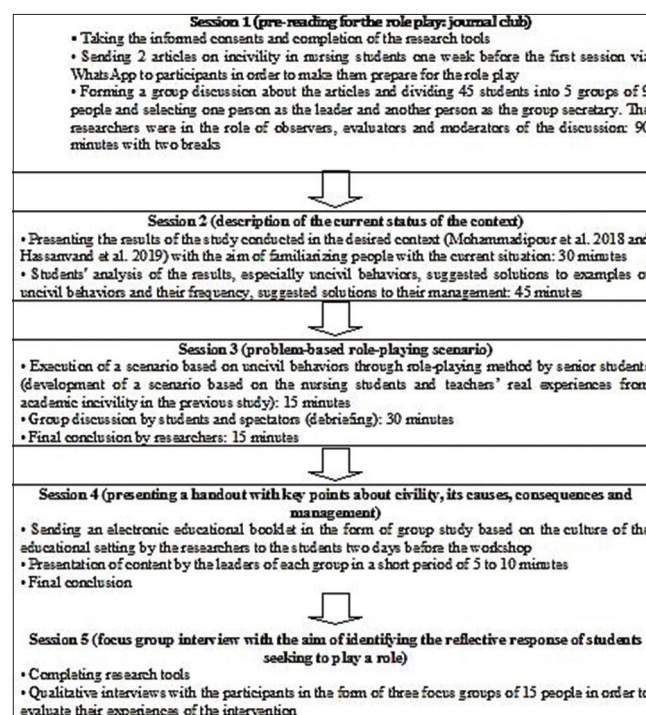


Figure 1: Stages of the study

**Box 1: Scenario**

Teacher	Students	Content of the scenario
	Sepideh Narges Zahra Mehrnoush Mohammad-Reza Amir-Hossein Seyyed-Reza	After entering the classroom and greeting the students, the teacher starts talking about the topic which is the treatment and control of diabetes. Zahra is listening to music using a hands-free headset. Teacher: Zahra, what were we talking about? Zahra is silent. Teacher: I think if you take the hands-free out of your ear and put away your cell phone, you will be more attentive. The teacher continues the lesson. Mehrnoush and Narges share their ideas on the subject with the teacher. Suddenly, Seyyed-Reza's cell phone rings and he leaves the classroom without taking permission. The teacher notices Mohammad-Reza's improper way of sitting and tells him, "Please, sit correctly in the classroom.". Seyyed-Reza, meanwhile, enters the classroom without permission and takes his seat. Teacher: Seyyed-Reza, aren't you supposed to turn off your cell phone or at least put it on silent mode? You leave and enter the classroom without permission. Seyyed-Reza is just silent. The teacher continues teaching. Amir-Hossein: Teacher, this has nothing to do with us. This is doctor's job. We are just nurses. The other students confirm his idea. Teacher: You as a nurse should have complete information about diseases and the process of diagnosing and treating them, because patients want this information from you and you should reduce their anxiety through giving the necessary information to patients, and because patients' information is improving with the advancement of technology you have to be one step ahead of them. The students continue talking with their classmates. The teacher continues the discussion and realizes that Mehrnoush is reading a pamphlet about another subject. Teacher: Mehrnoush, what are you reading? Mehrnoush, I have a midterm exam. I haven't studied at all. Teacher: You are not allowed to study another subject during this class. Please, close your pamphlet. Following these conversations, Amir-Hossein and Sepideh say: Teacher, is it possible to cancel the mid-term exam. Exam schedule is very busy. Teacher: No, it is not possible to cancel the exam. If the exam is cancelled, you will not study. Midterm exam is for reviewing the subjects and being prepared for the final exam. Do not worry about the exam and score. Seyyed-Reza: teacher, isn't it possible to assign some homework instead of the midterm exam? Teacher: No, guys, please finish the exam discussion. The only assistance that I can give you is postponing the exam. Mohammad-Reza: professor, the time is up; we are going to miss the bus. Seyyed-Reza starts eating cheese puffs. Teacher: Seyyed-Reza, what are you doing? This is class! The teacher tries to calm down the class and continue teaching, but due to the commotion of the students, he decides to end the discussion and take a quiz about what has been discussed. Quiz sheets are distributed among the students. Amir-Hossein asks Sepideh to answer the questions. She is also talking to Zahra. The teacher moves Amir-Hossein to another seat. Mohammad-Reza does not answer the questions. Teacher: Today you were in class. At least, you should know the answers to some of the questions. Mohammad-Reza: Excuse me teacher, do you have a pen? The teacher is silent and gives him a pen. Teacher: Amir-Hossein, you are not writing anything, you are just waiting for the answers to the questions from Sepideh. ... Please hand in the sheets. The examination ends and the class is dismissed. Students leave the classroom in a hurry following the teacher.

**Ethical considerations**

In order to observe ethical considerations and keep information confidential, anonymous questionnaires were used, and a separate code was assigned to each questionnaire. Ethics code (IR. LUMS. REC.1398.168) was obtained from Lorestan University of Medical Sciences.

**Results**

The average age of students was 22.46. Forty-eight point eight percent of these students were female, 95.5% were single and 88.8% were native people of Lorestan province. The mean of their grade point average was 14.59. Paired *t*-test showed that the mean score of students' civility index had a significant increase of 8.31 points after the intervention, but there was no significant difference between the mean score of civility index for classmates before and after the intervention. Furthermore, the results of the paired *t*-test showed that there is a significant difference between the mean score of perceived incivility before and after the intervention with a 5.88 points increase after the intervention [Table 1]. This fact confirmed the significant effect of the intervention in improving students' understanding of uncivil behaviors.

Primary codes extracted from the analysis of group interviews with students are presented in [Box 2].

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of a context-based educational intervention on nursing students' civility index and their perception of civility. To prepare the students for the scenario, the journal club was used for students. Kerber *et al.* (2012) considered the civility journal club as a strategy to increase students' awareness of uncivil behavior. In their mixed study, the journal club was held for 69 nursing students; and the findings showed that the journal club increases awareness of uncivil behaviors, improves adaptation skills, and increases the use of problem-based and rational approaches in stressful situations.<sup>[16]</sup> Jenkins *et al.* used six 65-min journal club sessions with some active learning strategies for senior students. Students had useful experiences in the field of civility journal club.<sup>[24]</sup> The results of a study by Wendy *et al.* (2013) also revealed that holding sessions such as journal club is effective on nursing students' awareness of academic incivility and reducing the occurrence of these behaviors, which is consistent with the findings of the present study. In particular, presenting the journal club

**Table 1: Comparison of the mean score of civility index for students and classmates and the mean score of incivility perception in nursing students before and after the intervention**

Variable	Mean			
	Before intervention	After the intervention	Mean of score increase	Significance level
Students' civility index	71.97 (16.09)	80.28 (8.73)	8.31	0.004*
Classmates' civility index	50.40 (17.41)	57 (13.96)	6.60	0.79
Perception of incivility	66.13 (13.47)	72.02 (11.34)	5.88	0.018*

Level of significance: \*p< .05

### Box 2: Some primary codes extracted from the analysis of group interviews with students

#### Initial codes

The need to familiarize students with incivility at the time of entering the university, holding monthly meetings and civility workshops, mutuality of incivility, students' familiarity with uncivil behaviors in the form of textbooks before the first semester, the effectiveness of the case scenario compared to other methods, the effectiveness of the scenario on sensitization, the possibility of self-assessment, the possibility of reviewing and rethinking their behaviors, the possibility of observing civil behaviors as an external observer, having a fun aspect, the need for education on interpersonal, the need for education on the way of communication between male and female students in the university environment, the need for education on conflict and stress management for teachers and students, the need to change students' beliefs and attitudes toward incivility, students' familiarity with some uncivil behaviors from the student's point of view such as studying the pamphlet of another subject in class and, sleeping during the class, etc., familiarity of students with the rights of learners

in the lower semesters, adding academic incivility courses to the curriculum, and dealing with uncivil behaviors in accordance with the regulations can reduce uncivil behaviors.<sup>[15]</sup>

Following the implementation of the problem-based scenario, it was found that the students' civility index from the students' point of view was at the "average" level before the intervention, and this index was upgraded to the "civil" level with an increase of 8.31 points after the intervention. The results also confirmed the significant effect of the intervention in improving students' understanding of the importance of uncivil behaviors. The results of this study were in line with the results of the study conducted by Clark *et al.* they introduced a problem-based scenario as an effective way to increase awareness of incivility.<sup>[11]</sup> Another study conducted by Hogan *et al.* (2018) found that using the "Blended learning resource" can be effective in increasing awareness and adaptive response of nursing and midwifery students toward incivility in the clinical environment.<sup>[25]</sup> Furthermore, the findings of the mixed study of Abedini and Parvizy showed that the use of problem-based scenarios can increase students' perception of uncivil behaviors and reduce the occurrence of these behaviors.<sup>[26]</sup>

After the implementation of the scenario, a handout with the content of Islamic culture in the educational

environment of Iranian students was sent to the students as a self-study resource and its content was discussed in small groups in a face-to-face meeting. In a similar study, Abedini and Parvizy analyzed the effect of group discussion and self-study on the civility of nursing students. The results showed that in both groups, there was an improvement in the rate of perception of incivility and its occurrence, but the average perception and frequency of uncivil behavior in the group discussion team was significantly higher than the self-study group.<sup>[18]</sup> In the present study, self-learning was also discussed in a meeting.

Thus, in the present study, based on the available evidence and texts, different strategies were used focusing on the problem-based scenario. The results showed an improvement in the students' awareness of uncivil behaviors as well as an increase in the civility index among learners. In confirmation of the present study, Rutherford *et al.* have considered three strategies of including incivility in the educational curriculum, problem-based learning, journal club presentation and cognitive practice as well as the use of training courses in health-care centers, nursing management and legislation as effective strategies for increasing incivility awareness and perception and reducing uncivil behavior.<sup>[27]</sup>

In this study, the authors used their previous experience to identify uncivil behaviors and applied strategies to promote civility in the participants. Finally, at the end of the intervention, students' opinions about the intervention were examined in the form of a focus group. The need for training in communication skills, especially in the relationship between male and female students in the university environment, conflict, and stress management for teachers and students were among the codes extracted, which were also emphasized in the qualitative part of Abedini's study.<sup>[26]</sup> The need to get acquainted with incivility at the time of entering the university and holding frequent civility training sessions was another important point that was mentioned in interviews with students. In the study of Jenkins *et al.* students also wanted civility training sessions to be added to the curriculum in the first semester before uncivil behaviors turn into habit in learners.<sup>[24]</sup> The results of the study showed that the participants' understanding of some uncivil behaviors increased and they become

aware of these behaviors after the intervention. These results were compatible with the results of the study by Abedini and Parvizy.<sup>[26]</sup>

The present study was conducted using students' self-report questionnaires. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, there was a possibility of dishonesty in answering and reduction in students' participation. Therefore, it was tried to tackle this problem as much as possible through distributing the questionnaires by people out of the research team. The workshops overlapping with the nursing students' other classes was another problem that was solved by holding workshops at the time of cultural sessions in the university (on Tuesdays from 10 to 12).

## Conclusions

Considering the effectiveness of the problem-based scenario along with other strategies such as journal club and self-learning in increasing the understanding of civil behavior and improving the civility index, using the results of this study is recommended to reduce incivility, especially in nursing students, due to their serious responsibility in health-care system and patient safety.

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## Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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