



Creating an Environment for Student Learning

What It Is

While classrooms are socially complex environments, they can generally be considered in terms of three dimensions:

- **Physical:** Students are comfortable and undistracted by sensory stimuli such as noise. Seating and workspaces are arranged to compliment planned activities, and to promote student interaction.
- **Emotional/Social:** Students feel secure in expressing their ideas, attempting unfamiliar tasks, and interacting with peers.
- **Intellectual:** Students personally invest in their own learning, and are enthusiastic for subject matter.

Why It's Important

A positive classroom space and culture:

- Improves student motivation, enthusiasm and engagement
- Encourages students to take intellectual risks
- Helps students interact with, and learn from, each other
- Increases likelihood that students will seek help and support beyond the classroom.

1. Set-up the physical environment

If classroom space is utilized well, students will be more likely to participate in activities and engage with a task.

- **Move chairs and desks around the room** as needed (if possible). Remember to arrive at the classroom with enough time and consider the time needed to move furniture back when you're done.
- **Move yourself around the room, too.** You'll create a more dynamic environment, and model active engagement with the discussion.
- **Move the students when it becomes advantageous.** Sometimes a task you assign calls for it, other times you may want them to stretch their legs to revitalize the energy level. (It requires class time, but can really be worth it!)
- **Use board-space strategically** for certain items at each class meeting. For instance, designate a space for the daily agenda, warm-up activities that students can do as they arrive, or reminders for after-class action items.

If the room just doesn't suit your needs:

- **See if a different room can be arranged.** Contact Room Scheduling at 475-7600.
- **Acknowledge that a problem exists** with the physical space, even if you can't fix it. Let your students know that you care and that you'll persevere together.

2. Be authentic

- **Be honest about yourself**, your personal style of communicating, teaching, and handling conflict. Allow your personality to be revealed in your teaching.
- **Reflect on good teaching practices** that you have experienced and identify specific techniques you would like to try. Remember, though, to stay true to who you are. It's not about adopting someone else's persona.
- **Share your passion.** Personal anecdotes about your own excitement and struggles with the subject matter can help students find ways to intellectually connect with you and will model active engagement.

3. Be explicit and consistent

- What do you expect from your students this semester? What should your students expect (and not expect) from you? See our *Setting and Fulfilling Expectations* *handout* for techniques to set and communicate these expectations.
- What would you like to see (and not see) in terms of student behavior in the classroom? How do you want students to interact with you, and with each other? See our *Promoting Civility* *handout* for ways to handle disruptive behavior.



4. Show (and tell) that you care about your students

- **Talk directly to students.** Make eye contact and use a student's name when possible. This is one way to identify a student as a member of your classroom community, not an anonymous face on a large campus.
- **Find out from students what they need to succeed** in the class. This may work best after the first big assignment because students often don't know what they need until their beliefs are tested or challenged in some way.
- **Acknowledge difficult material** and let students know you want to help them learn how to tackle it.
- **Recognize the pressures of a competitive campus;** students will naturally be concerned about grades. Design activities that will help your students perform well on graded assignments/tests, but will also focus on content mastery.
- **Give feedback on graded assignments** (not just a score). Let students know you want to help them improve for next time—and then show them how! [NOTE: For written assignments, consider giving intense feedback on a single paragraph in a rewriting setting and let them revise it. This will help students incorporate your suggestions into their own paper. See handout on *Minimal Marking* for more information.
- **Personalize encouragement.** Take the time out to offer support in-person (if possible) or in written form. Offer tips to the class for continued improvement and/or invite students to come speak with you individually.
- **Show concern.** If you notice a student seems to be struggling (e.g., falling grades, absenteeism, tardiness, etc.), take the time to ask how they're doing. Then listen to their response; they may need help connecting to other resources on campus.
- **Reward students** when they meet expectations or contribute in a meaningful way. Ignoring success is a sure way of telling students you don't really care and can even have the effect of extinguishing positive behaviors. (Using praise can feel artificial, so be guided by your own personal style. Practice modifying your tone of voice and facial expressions until you can sincerely communicate "That was great" vs. "Pretty good" vs. "I'm looking for something more.")
- **Be sensitive to students' pride and fears.** Avoid any tone of condescension. You'll find that taking a respectful approach with students encourages them to take risks in the learning process.

How college students define "developing rapport with your students"

- Showing a sense of humor
- Being available before, after, or outside of class
- Encouraging class discussion
- Knowing their names
- Sharing personal insights and experiences with the class
- Relating course material in everyday terms and examples
- Understanding that students occasionally have problems arise that may hinder progress

5. Keep your cool

- **Take a deep breath.** Teaching involves a great deal of "thinking on your feet." If you enter a classroom feeling overwhelmed and frustrated—or become that way during class—you might become flustered and say something reactionary. If you become agitated, try taking a few breaths and let yourself consider your response. Your example during stressful times is a powerful model to students.



- **Leave your ego out of it.** Looking good at a student's expense is the surest way to create a tense, anxious climate that inhibits participation. Avoid taking things personally.
- **It's okay not to know.** Oftentimes we simply do not know the answer to a question or are at a loss for how to respond. It's okay to admit this. You might say, "I'm not sure about the answer to that. I'll have to get back to you." This can also demonstrate to students that learning is an ongoing process.

Some content adapted from "Creating Positive Emotional Contexts for Enhancing Teaching and Learning" by Buskist & Saville, Auburn University.

