

## Create an Inclusive Learning Environment

Source: Carnegie Mellon, Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence

<http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/design/teach/learningenvironment.html>

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“ The first question is: Can learning take place if in fact it silences the voices of the people it is supposed to teach? And the answer is: Yes. People learn that they don't count.”

– Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*

The teaching-learning process is an inherently social act, and as instructors we need to be mindful of the quality of the social and emotional dynamics in our course, because they impact learning and performance. In fact, a well-established body of research has documented the effects of a “chilly classroom climate” on some students or groups of students, in particular women and other minorities (Hall, 1982).

### Impact of climate on learning and performance

Listed below are some of the ways in which classroom climate can impact learning, positively or negatively:

***Climate regulates the circulation and construction of knowledge.*** For instance, in an inclusive climate all students are more likely to volunteer different perspectives and thus enrich discussions; conversely, if some students or groups feel that their contributions are not as valued as those of others, they will withdraw from the conversation. As an example, women in technical fields often report feeling undervalued compared to their male peers.

***Climate impacts meta-curricular and citizenship skills.*** In a productive classroom students can learn to work in groups with students different from them in ways that facilitate the development of skills such as leadership, communication, and conflict resolution. At the opposite end of the spectrum, non-inclusive learning environments facilitate the perpetuation of stereotypes about students from other groups.

***Climate engenders emotions that impact learning.*** In a productive class, the learning experience is characterized by excitement for discovery, joy, satisfaction and pride at one's accomplishments. All these positive emotions have the effect of motivating students for further learning. Conversely, if the predominant emotions in a class are fear, shame or embarrassment for being wrong, or boredom and apathy about the content, these negative emotions will be highly demotivating to students (Ford, 1992).

***Climate can channel energies away from learning or toward it.*** For instance, if gay or lesbian students feel it is not safe for them to be out in class, they tend to carefully monitor their participation for fear of inadvertently exposing themselves, limiting their engagement with the material. Conversely, in classes

where they feel free to be themselves, they often capitalize on their personal experience of having challenged conventional assumptions by engaging with the material in creative ways (Renn, 1998).

***Climate communicates expectations placed upon students.*** This is relevant because people tend to perform in relation to the expectations placed upon them. When students perceive that the instructor thinks they are smart and capable, they meet those expectations – the so-called Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). Conversely, when students perceive that expectations placed on them conform to stereotypes (e.g., African-American students are less capable), they will underperform, regardless of their actual capabilities – the stereotype-threat effect (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

***Climate communicates power dynamics.*** In productive classes, instructors use their authority to empower everybody to take ownership in the learning process. Conversely, if some students or groups of students feel that their perspective is not represented in the readings, or is belittled when it is voiced, they might withdraw from the class. The ultimate form of resistance for people who feel powerless in a hostile environment is the refusal to learn (Kohl, 1994).

***Climate impacts student persistence.*** When the cumulative direct and indirect messages students perceive communicate that they are not as able as other students and don't belong in the course, students are less likely to stay in the course, the major, and even in the university (Tinto, 1993).

### **Strategies to create a productive and inclusive climate**

***Examine your assumptions.*** It is very common for instructors to assume that students share their own background, but this is not necessarily so. Do you find yourself addressing students as if they all share your religion, sexual orientation, or economic class? [More on assumptions and their impact on learning \(doc\).](#)

***Learn and use students' names.*** Even in large classes, you can start with a few names and build up. At the very least, let students know you are making an effort to do so.

***Model inclusive language.*** For instance, avoid using masculine pronouns for both males and females. When you use American idioms, explain them for the benefit of non-native English speakers.

***Use multiple and diverse examples.*** Multiple examples increase the likelihood of students relating to at least one of them. Take care to include examples that speak to both sexes and that work across cultures.

***Establish ground rules for interaction.*** This will assure that other students are also being inclusive and respectful. In order to generate maximal buy-in into the ground rules, you can involve the students in the process of establishing them. You will still need to enforce the ground rules and correct students for the occasional non-inclusive or disrespectful comment. [Strategies for how to handle "hot" moments in the classroom \(pdf\).](#)

***Examine your curriculum.*** Are certain perspectives systematically not represented in your course materials (e.g., a course on family focusing only on traditional families, or a course on public policy ignoring race issues)? Neglecting some issues implies a value judgment (hooks 1994), which can alienate certain groups of students.

**Strive to be fair.** Especially in courses with multiple sections and TAs, it is crucial to be perceived as fair, both in grading and in implementing course policies. Perceptions of unfairness can induce feelings of learned helplessness (Peterson et al., 1995), which are highly demotivating for students.

**Be mindful of low ability cues.** In their efforts to help students, some instructors inadvertently send mixed messages (e.g., “Sure, I’ll be happy to help you with this, I know girls have trouble with math”). These cues encourage attributions focused on permanent, uncontrollable causes, which diminish students’ self-efficacy. Instead, it is more productive to focus on controllable causes, such as effort.

**Provide accommodations for students with disabilities.** Instructors are required by law to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Contact [Equal Opportunity Services](#) for more information.

**Don’t ask people to speak for an entire group.** Minority students often report either feeling invisible in class, or sticking out like a sore thumb as the token minority. This experience is heightened when they are addressed as spokespeople for their whole group, and can have implications on performance (Lord & Saenz, 1985).

**Practice inclusive classroom behaviors.** Of course we as educators are not out to intentionally exclude anybody from the educational experience. However, many researchers report small unconscious behaviors – “microinequities” – that certain student groups experience repeatedly. For instance, women report that instructors tend to interrupt them more often than men, ignore them more often, call on them less often, ask them more recall questions and less analytical questions, acknowledge their contributions less, and build on their answers less (Hall, 1982). These microinequities add up and have a highly discouraging effect on those students.

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