

## Creating a Safe and Engaging Classroom Climate

For learning to occur when the class material is controversial, both tension and safety need to exist. There needs to be a safe classroom environment, so that students sense they can speak their minds.

However, safety is not the only consideration. When students move out of their comfort zone to what Pat Griffin refers to as "our learning edge," they can expand understanding, take in a new perspective, and stretch their awareness. Students' internal reactions to class activities and classmates—feelings of annoyance, anger, anxiety, surprise, confusion, or defensiveness—may be signs that their way of thinking about things is being challenged. Tension in the classroom, when it does not get out of control or explode, can prompt learning. Safety is not a goal in itself, but a prerequisite for the kind of classroom climate that can result in learning.

There is much that a teacher can do to promote a safe, engaging classroom climate:

- Arrange the classroom in a way that maximizes interaction; ideally, students should be seated in a circle or horseshoe shape that maximizes the amount of eye contact students can have with each other.
- Encourage but not compel participation in whole class discussions. The teacher may state that s/he will not call on students individually to participate, and students have the right to not participate. The teacher can bring people into discussion indirectly—using prompts, eye contact, and statements such as "Let's hear from the back (or second) row" or "Let's hear from some people who haven't been talking." Perhaps most importantly, do not expect minority students to educate their peers, to speak for their race or group.
- Introduce the concept of triggers.
- Model learning about diversity.
- Actively intervene in the class when necessary.

**Teachers can state their hopes for students in the class** (not the same as either learning objectives or class norms). These could include students':

- Developing their abilities to understand the perspectives of others;
- Developing mutual respect;
- Making a commitment to understand positions that they do not understand from the context or point of view of their peers;
- Taking risks in speaking honestly in the class in the service of their learning.

**Class norms** can be introduced in detail the first day of class and reinforced during the semester. Examples of class norms used by faculty members are:

- Students should respect confidentiality—personal information or student comments should not get shared outside the classroom;

- Students should listen respectfully to different perspectives-let people finish sentences before responding;
- Students should respond to what has been said, not the person saying it-responses should not be personalized;
- Students should use "I statements" (such as "I believe that . . . ) rather than generalizing or playing the devil's advocate (but don't you think that. . .?);
- Students should speak for themselves and not for others (including groups to which they belong);

### **Model learning about diversity**

Mark Kiselica, a psychologist who conducts multicultural training, stresses the importance of teachers self-disclosing their own journey in becoming more culturally sensitive and knowledgeable. Kiselica states that "the process of developing multicultural awareness and sensitivity is a journey marked by fears, painful self-reflection, and joyful growth," and students can learn from an instructors who share their mistakes, incidents that led to their learning, and what they have gained from the process.

There is a fine line for teachers between presenting oneself as a learner on a journey toward greater diversity awareness and self-awareness and an expert who has reached expert status on issues of diversity and multiculturalism. Students often react favorably to the first, almost always negatively to a person who wants to be seen as the authority on these issues.

### **Actively intervening in the class when necessary**

There will be times in every course, even those in which students are generally in agreement with the aims of the course and the class norms, in which the instructor will have to intervene. This may involve redirecting students when students are not using "I statements," over generalizing about a group of people, or treating their own experience as applicable to all situations.

A safe learning environment is not only fostered at the start of the course but maintained during the course of the semester. In many classes, there are critical moments that can confirm in students' minds how safe the classroom is, how committed is the teacher to equitable participation and student learning. This may happen the first time one student harshly criticizes another, or the first time a loaded question is directed to the teacher. If the instructor intervenes in a way that is effective, this can set the stage for more honest student interaction.

Griffin, Pat (1997). Introductory module for the single issue courses. In *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook* , Adams, Maurianne, Bell , Lee Ann, and Griffin , Pat, eds. New York : Routledge, pp. 61-81.

Kiselica, Mark S. (1999) Reducing prejudice: The role of the empathic-confrontative instructor, In *Confronting prejudice and racism during multicultural training* , Mark S. Kiselica, ed. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, p. 140.