

Creating a Positive Classroom Environment

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Abstract

Creating a positive classroom environment has long been a topic of research at the kindergarten through high school levels. However, less research is available at college/university level despite evidence that suggests its importance to the successful delivery of course content. Relevant information from the *Faculty Academic Orientation Manual* has been summarized to provide the backdrop for two paradigms. The journalistic paradigm *Who, What, When, Where, How and Why* is useful for assessing the characteristics of students and the challenges they face. A more recent paradigm *Situation, Purpose, Audience, and Method* (SPAM) presented by Dr. Laurie Rozakis has been adapted to facilitate utilization of data from the first paradigm. The use of such background data enhances the development of a positive classroom environment. Furthermore, the flexibility inherent in both paradigms permits the instructor to extrapolate additional information on an as needed basis. The expeditious delivery of course content to a focused, goal-oriented population in a positive classroom environment is deemed desirable. The paradigms expand available choices to faculty striving to achieve that goal.

Creating a Positive Classroom Environment

Introduction

Creating a positive classroom environment at the university level is almost universally considered the responsibility of the instructor whether full time or adjunct as a matter of professional courtesy as well as for pragmatic reasons. Veteran faculty members with or without pedagogical backgrounds have long since resolved the problem for themselves. However, first time ERAU Extended Campus instructors may experience anxiety when confronted with the reality that creating a positive classroom environment accompanies creating a syllabus, preparing lectures, activities, and examinations for the course content. Those who were hired for professional expertise but lack an instructional background and/or actual teaching experience also may be intimidated by the task. New faculty members are provided a variety of sources to turn to for assistance. Course monitors make available to the classrooms, sites and centers the course outlines that are the basis for the syllabus. The *Faculty Academic Orientation Manual (FAOM)* provides *Tips for New Faculty* as well as guidance for developing both syllabi and lesson plans online, in hard copy and on CDs (*FAOM*, 2003). Plans are moving forward to make CDs available to adjunct faculty (Clark & Valley, 2003). Center Directors and/or faculty advisors generally provide individual or group orientation meetings for new faculty members. Staff meetings provide opportunities for faculty to meet one another as well as to discuss issues. An observation conducted during a session may provide insights that promote the enhancement of the classroom environment. Student evaluations at the end of a session provide feedback to faculty members. Such offer needed assistance to new faculty members but may not allay underlying anxiety related to preliminary planning necessary for creating a positive classroom environment. Trial and error may become the model with somewhat unpredictable results for delivery of course content. Other aspects of a positive classroom environment are predetermined for a variety of administrative, maintenance, economic or other background decisions/reasons over which the instructor has little control. However, there exist paradigms that have been adapted to allow faculty members to

quickly assess relevant background information necessary to creating a positive classroom environment.

Background

Charting the course upon which a university embarks is a function of numerous factors that are considered administrative in nature with input from a variety of concerned groups, schools and departments. This in no way negates the need to recognize that underlying structure and organization of the university can impact the classroom environment. A brief summary of the background provided in the *FAOM* (2003) follows to assist the new faculty member who is preparing for the opening of his/her first class and subsequent sessions.

1. The organizational structure with its administrative hierarchy;
2. A clear sense of purpose expressed in the university's mission statement;
3. The provision of support services including type and accessibility;
3. The location of campuses, classrooms, sites, and centers;
4. Specific purpose(s) for which such are established;
5. Students whose profiles began changing with the introduction of the GI bill decades ago;
6. Current knowledge of the characteristics and needs of students to be served;
7. The viability and feasibility of course content;
8. The incorporation of technological advances in a rapidly changing world both in the classroom and for staff;
9. The demand for accessibility to university programs designed to maintain and improve skills necessary in a changing workplace;
10. The provision of staff prepared to deliver the course content in a positive classroom environment;
11. Ongoing provisions for professional growth and development of faculty;
12. Integrating adjunct faculty into the collegial community;
13. The economic feasibility of each program offered or dropped; and,
14. Concerns related to the economic health of both the university and the country.

Those aspects over which the faculty member has direct control are recognizing the challenges faced by today's students, maintaining a professional approach to course content, establishing appropriate academic standards, delivering course content in a meaningful context, measuring the outcomes of students' learning, and providing a positive intellectual classroom environment.

The University's Role

As indicated, the university provides the general direction and purpose for which it was established (*FAOM*, 2003). Governance, financial matters, curriculum development, support systems for students and faculty, and other administrative functions such as admitting students

and hiring qualified faculty are reviewed and updated according to demonstrated needs. Provisions for fixed campuses and non-fixed classrooms, sites, and centers are implemented. Periodic reviews determine whether the locations of classrooms, sites and centers continue to meet students' needs in a given area. Parameters are defined for programs, certificates, and degrees as well as the scope and sequence in which such shall be delivered. Provisions exist by which faculty members may offer comments, suggestions or proposals. Technological advances that affect access to libraries and professional publications as well as the delivery of meaningful course content are integrated across the university system to support both students and faculty. The university's role is multifaceted and engaged in overseeing the entire operation. In addition, the announced purpose, support, and function of each facet of the university is within the purview of the system. The new faculty member reaps benefits that are in place and will be made aware of opportunities to contribute suggestions, proposals, etc., to the ongoing assessment of the university's role.

The Problem

With administrative decisions forming the backdrop and support services providing the framework, the task of creating a positive classroom environment for a recently hired faculty member can be daunting. How does one deliver course content, evaluate student learning, and record the results in a positive classroom environment? Furthermore, what constitutes a positive classroom environment?

Available research which addresses the issue of creating a positive classroom environment is abundant at the pre-school, primary, junior high and high school levels but is less available at the college and university levels.

Issues presented in research about the creation and maintenance of a positive classroom from kindergarten through high school levels involve but are not limited to the factors that follow:

1. Safety from violence and bullies (Indicators, 2001);
2. Caring and supportive relationships with teachers and peers;
3. The use of teaching strategies "that meet students' basic and affective/motivation needs;" (Ridley & Walther, 1995) and,
4. "...Using student-directed form of discipline that teaches them how to make better choices" (Ridley & Walther, 1995).

Research topics that loosely parallel the preceding issues include the following:

1. Civility in the classroom (Richardson, 1999)
2. Surviving as an adjunct professor (Lyons, Kysilka, & Pawlas, 1999);
3. Large scale classroom scheduling (Mooney, Bardin, & Parmenter, 1996); and,
4. Helping students overcome their apprehensions about course content are available at the college and university levels (Richardson, 1999).

The importance of physical space in creating supportive learning environments (Chism & Bickford, 2002) clearly has applications at all educational levels. Such issues as the physical facility, furniture, etc., and the human comfort factor as components for creating a positive learning environment are addressed. However, many changes in the physical facility are often outside the instructor's sphere of influence for a variety of reasons. The most common reason involves the terms of the arrangements negotiated by the provider of space with the Extended Campus.

ERAU Extended Campus delivers quality programs to train professionals in the aeronautical industry in locations that span the globe. Therefore, questions arise:

1. Where are the classrooms, sites, and centers located?
2. Who controls the heating, cooling, lighting, number of electrical outlets, and, perhaps, the furnishings?
3. What is required to obtain needed technological training and appropriate equipment?
4. What do the classrooms look like?
5. Does the instructor have the ability to modify the physical arrangement of the classroom?
6. Finally, and more importantly, how does an instructor provide a positive classroom environment in such a global situation?

This is but a representative sample of questions that arise. Classrooms, sites, and centers are located anywhere that there exists the need to provide services to those who will pursue higher education in their chosen fields in the aeronautical industry. Determining need and making arrangements for suitable facilities are generally considered functions of the administrative arm rather than the instructional staff for obvious reasons. In addition to the preceding factors, the establishment of classrooms, sites and centers may involve negotiations with government agencies, bases, public schools and other universities as well as negotiations with businesses and existing public schools. The evidence indicates that much must be done before the instructor becomes involved with the physical classroom environment. Furthermore, there may exist external constraints that limit the manner in which the physical environment may be modified or

changed. However, rearranging the furniture and adding pictures, posters, charts, etc., related to course content can create a more casual environment or, if needed, a more formal environment.

Certain classrooms are fully equipped with state of the art technological hardware as an integral part of the physical facility. Others are equipped with only the most basic equipment. However, the instructor determines what equipment is needed for delivery of course content and requests that it be made available. Timeliness of the request is essential for procuring needed equipment.

Creating a Positive Classroom Environment

Creating a positive classroom environment is no less important at the college or university level than it is in kindergarten through high school although, as noted earlier, there are fewer current research resources available to those engaged providing instruction in institutions of higher learning. Generally, however, there exists more academic freedom with regard to choosing how to create a positive classroom environment that is conducive to intellectual growth and development. Distance learning presents an altogether different set of challenges for providing a positive learning environment. However, I defer to in-house sources of reliable information regarding the challenges of delivering instruction in a positive environment through distance learning.

Therefore, let us begin with an examination of three major factors within the instructor's sphere of influence that impact a positive intellectual classroom environment. The factors are the students, the instructor and the course content. It follows that the more information one has about each of these factors the more likely it is that one will provide the appropriate classroom environment.

Two Paradigms

Relevant factors may be examined by utilizing an existing paradigm, by combining selected items from two or more paradigms or by creating a paradigm specifically for this task. The journalistic paradigm *Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why* employs specific questions to extrapolate data. It is an effective tool for obtaining information regarding the characteristics of the student population. A significant benefit derived from analysis of data obtained through use of the journalistic paradigm is the enhancement of the classroom environment. Analysis of the data can

be expedited by using a modified version of SPAM (Rozakis, 1999) paradigm appropriate to course content.

The use of the journalistic paradigm elicits questions about students that follow:

1. Who are the students?
2. What are their characteristics, goals and objectives?
3. When do they have access to the classroom?
4. Where are they?
5. How do they learn?
6. Why do they choose to obtain a college education in this manner?

Answers to the preceding questions are obvious to long-term adjuncts or full-time instructors for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Extended Campus. This likely is not true for the newcomers to the teaching staff lacking background knowledge of the military forces or of aeronautics. Nor are the ramifications for creating a positive classroom environment immediately apparent to those who have little experience with either.

Characteristics frequently shared by such students include but are not limited to the following:

1. Most are self-motivated;
2. Such students often possess, technical and/or managerial skills;
3. Most demonstrate a strong work ethic;
4. The majority of them have goals that they wish to achieve;
5. Many, if not all, recognize the need to develop a higher level of skills, training and education;
6. Most believe that they can and should develop such skills;
7. There exists dissatisfaction with their current possibilities for advancement; and,
8. Many believe that they can do certain jobs better than they are being done but are denied the opportunity to prove themselves because they do not meet required educational standards.

The goals and objectives of the student body often include the following:

1. To find an appropriate program in an accredited institution of higher education which can provide the needed skills, training, certificates and/or degrees;
2. To enroll in a program which can be completed while working full time;
3. To maintain family and/or community life (not an easy task); and,
4. To complete the degree in the same or less time than offered by more traditional educational settings with the flexibility to take longer should life intervene.

Extended Campus students find that access to the classroom is governed, not only by the schedule for classes, but such things as the number of hours worked as well as the shift worked. Work related travel sometimes interferes with the student's ability to attend all scheduled classes

during a given session. Often family and community commitments must also be considered. Although certain family and community commitments may be scheduled to fit the necessary time frame for participation in a classroom, hours on the job may not be negotiable. Hence, ERAU offers options to assist students. Courses are scheduled for evenings or weekends. Distance learning is available as well.

Where are the students who embark on such an educational journey? The number of classrooms, sites and centers located around the world that comprise the Extended Campus of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University provide ample evidence that the students are also located around the world.

How do such students learn? They learn from practical experience, from classroom interaction and activities, from textbooks, labs, and through research as well as through electronic media and distance learning. Indeed, they learn in much the same manner as students in a more conventional setting. The difference is they bring an array of experiences that more traditional college freshmen often do not have.

Why do students choose to obtain a college education in such a challenging manner? Schedules at work and home, money, time for study and research, distance traveled, and financial resources must be juggled and budgeted. Unexpected emergencies must be dealt with whether or not they interfere with the educational process. As might be expected, the answers are many and varied. Experience and maturation provide the impetus to make positive changes through appropriate higher education for almost all such students. A sense of accomplishment as well as being prepared to accept greater responsibility on the job, better pay, better benefits, and a higher standard of living enter the equation. Whatever the reasons, most such students are ready to work and are focused on their goals. Therein lies the both the reward and the challenge for the instructor charged with delivering course content in a positive environment.

Instructors who create a positive classroom environment deliberately or intuitively consider the aspects of the classroom found in the paradigm SPAM. The situation is assessed to determine whether one or several of the previously discussed challenges should be addressed. Other factors to consider are time, place, and duration of the delivery of course content. Such

assessment provides the foundation for clearly establishing the purpose(s) for which students arrive in the classroom. Communicating purpose to students necessarily involves a concise statement of requirements and procedures. Included are the following: goals and objectives for the course of study, expected student outcomes, attendance requirements, expected level of involvement in classroom activities, tests, exams, special projects, grading procedures used for determining grades and late work policies as well as applicable penalties. Traditionally, such information is available to students through inclusion in the course outline and the course syllabus that is based on the course outline. Instructor initiated informal discussions and questionnaires provide ongoing monitoring of the utility of the syllabus. Such information is useful when revising, editing, and updating a syllabus to make it more "user friendly."

Learning as much as possible about the audience, i. e., students who are enrolled in the class, is key to determining the methods of delivery of instruction to the students. Certain general characteristics already have been presented but do not address individual differences. The opening session lends itself to using index cards or short questionnaires to obtain e-mail addresses and/or brief biographical sketches of information that students may wish to share. When asked, most are willing to share with the instructor what they wish to obtain from the course. Such information often serves as a guide for the inclusion of relevant in-class discussions, activities, and research topics or project and the subsequent selection or modification of method(s) of delivery of instruction.

A variety of background issues that are not directly related to the delivery of course content or the creation of a positive classroom environment occasionally impact both. The instructor must determine how to address such issues to prevent or minimize negative impact within the classroom. Such commonly occurring issues follow. Occasionally, students question the necessity for mastery of goals and objectives. Such remarks necessitate reminding them that mastery addresses the issue of credibility. Because students generally arrive after a day at work as well as having begun the day with responsibilities at home, the underlying cause of confusion regarding mastery of course objectives may lie elsewhere. Therein lies the problem as well as the solution. The students may arrive tired, frustrated by the day's events or because they are not as

well prepared as they wish to be. Or they may be hungry having skipped a meal to arrive on time. However, they have arrived. Some issues lie outside the realm of the instructor's ability to change, alter or solve. Acknowledge that and begin with one that can be alleviated such as one or more missed meals. Determine through a brief class discussion whether it is possible to solve the problem as a group or individually by permitting food in the classroom. Include the provision that the room be left in its original condition. Hunger satisfied often diminishes the feeling of fatigue and sets the stage for learning. Discussions and activities that involve individual or group responses at or near the beginning of the class develop awareness among students that participation is expected. Such activities also serve to refocus attention on long-term personal goals thereby relieving some stress that originates from external sources. On rare occasions, it may be necessary to provide a few minutes for quiet reading or review. Another enhancement to a positive classroom environment is to recognize the individuality of each student by providing occasional, brief opportunities for each to share with the class and the instructor personal information of his/her choosing.

Busy students occasionally need to be reminded to contact the instructor and/or the office should an emergency arise whether it is job related or otherwise. E-mail with the address included on the cover sheet of the syllabus is now an accepted and convenient way to contact the instructor. It also provides to both students and instructor a venue to discuss assignments, ask questions regarding missed assignments, late work, etc., as well for other aspects of a given course of study. E-mail has the added advantage of permitting students to turn in assignments on time when job related travel or emergencies might impede that effort. Ignoring these and other background issues is generally non-productive with regard to creating a positive classroom environment.

Armed with information regarding the situation, purpose and audience, the instructor is ready to select the appropriate methods of delivery of course content from an array of possibilities that includes but is not limited to the following:

Instructor directed/facilitated

1. Traditional lecture;
2. PowerPoint presentation;

3. Summaries, quizzes, discussions;
4. Use of interactive media, audio, video, CDs, charts, graphs, demonstrations, drawings, photographs, etc.;
5. Writing/speaking activities--summaries, parodies, creative writing assignments, interviews, memos, evaluations, plans; etc. and/or,
6. Assignments requiring additional research.

Group learning or cooperative activities—may be teacher directed or student initiated

1. Small group activities completed in class with reports back to the class;
2. Longer term cooperative learning activities involving research, demonstrations, presentations, etc.;
3. Student directed panel discussions, presentations, demonstrations, etc.; and,
4. Interactive group activities—discussions, analyses, evaluation, proposals, justifications, refutations, etc.

Assessment of Students' Progress

Key to creating a positive classroom environment is fair and accurate assessment of students' progress in the course using a variety of assessment tools. Ideally, selection of evaluation tools is determined before the course begins. However, the instructor should reserve the right to adjust the scope and type of evaluation based on students' needs. Many textbook publishers provide multiple choice, true-false, short answer or other basic tests used for measuring vocabulary and basic concepts. Guidelines exist for assessing oral presentations. Rubrics exist that may be adapted to focus on overall objectives. Instructor developed short essay and long essay examinations provide opportunities to evaluate students' progress at the basic or core knowledge as well as at the higher critical thinking levels of intellectual growth. Certain courses lend themselves to assessment through performance of specified tasks within the context of the field or laboratory. Research and presentation of the results through written and oral presentations individually or as a cooperative effort expand the scope of assessment of students' progress. Portfolio assessment is another alternative that may be used for larger ongoing projects such as that of graduate level research projects. Finally, clear, concise communication with students regarding purposes and methods of assessment is crucial to maintaining a positive classroom environment.

Desirable Instructors' Attributes

What are desirable instructor attributes? Both appropriate educational training and/or work experiences are primary attributes. It follows that the instructor refine expertise regarding

course content. More importantly, it is necessary that the instructor possess the ability to adapt delivery of instruction to meet the needs of students. Often, formal educational backgrounds are varied and have been interrupted by family matters, work-related activities, community involvement and/or military obligations. Recent enrollees in entry level courses often require short reviews of study skills, basic vocabulary and concept review and/or building, and historical background where applicable. This applies to requisite courses as well as elective courses. One needs also to consider the learning modalities as well as the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains of students enrolled in the class (Johnson, 2002). Striving to deliver instruction through the use of activities that address the various learning modalities and domains is a crucial aspect of providing a positive learning environment. Delivery of course content has moved beyond the traditional lecture that demands little of students beyond listening to lectures and responding to examination questions. Nor should the instructor disregard the very real possibility that one or several students may possess expertise related to technological advances or to other aspects of the course content. Incorporating such expertise into class activities and assignments provides many benefits to the students as well as the instructor. Such exchanges of information, techniques and expertise enhance the classroom environment by providing opportunities for students to play to their strengths while overcoming deficits.

Enthusiasm for course content inspires students to strive for a better understanding of subject matter. Compassionate professionalism provides a role model that will influence future student behaviors whether or not it appears in the syllabus. Other desirable instructor attributes include the following. Acknowledge the sacrifices made by the students, their families, friends, coworkers and supervisors. It bolsters their commitment and drive when it falters. Clearly stated directions for presentations, examinations and projects ensure a more thorough and consistent effort on the part students. Entertain questions about assignments. Engage students in finding answers. Facilitate discussion, cooperation and teamwork. Of such a positive classroom environment is made.

Summary

Faculty members engaged in creating a positive classroom environment for the first time have little need for detailed flow charts to establish the university's hierarchy and role in day to day classroom operations. However, it is advisable to have a general overview of the underlying organizational structure and its mission. Such background factors do influence but are not the final arbiters for creating a positive classroom environment. Ideally, physical space, choice of furniture, lighting, temperature, etc. are integral components in a positive classroom environment. The reality is that faculty members deliver course content in existing classrooms over which they may have little control. Creative arrangements of furniture in classroom space offer alternatives to the existing arrangement. The addition of appropriate posters, charts and pictures may enhance the environment. Lighting and temperature controls may be fixed with little that can be done to modify either.

Other, initially, more important factors needed for the creation of a positive classroom environment are as follows:

1. Background knowledge of the students and their characteristics;
2. Empathy for the challenges facing adults as they reenter the world of academia;
3. An appreciation for the support provided to them by family, friends, and employers;
4. Enthusiasm for both teaching and course content;
5. Current knowledge of the course content;
4. A delivery plan that utilizes a variety of methods and techniques;
5. A fair and consistent plan for evaluation of student learning using a variety of measurement instruments;
7. A well-planned syllabus to guide the students; and,
8. A willingness to strive to encourage and inspire students to succeed in their academic endeavors.

Conclusion

Resources are available at the local and university levels to assist both the new and veteran faculty members with delivery of course content and/or research projects. The use of resources is encouraged with ongoing communication from the university to classrooms, sites, and centers. Such information is typically forwarded to instructors via office mail or e-mail. Both adjunct and veteran faculty members are encouraged to share their expertise by submitting papers for the annual symposium related to teaching effectiveness. From such come research, paradigms, models and suggestions used successfully in classrooms to deliver course content in a

positive intellectual environment. The adaptation of both the journalistic paradigm and SPAM exist because ERAU actively encourages professional growth and development of its adjunct and full time faculty. What better milieu exists for a faculty member to begin a college level instructional career in which to create a positive classroom environment?

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