

Maximizing the Student Learning Environment:  
A Positive Learning Environment for Evening and Weekend Students

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Abstract

This paper is not about the physical classroom, but about adult students approaching the difficult work that is learning. It is not about the classroom conditions schools provide, but about the actions teachers take that define the classroom learning environment.

Where there was once only the traditional classroom with chalkboards, tables and chairs, there are now two new learning environments: the upgraded classroom environment and the distance learning environment. The paper is primarily concerned with teaching in the modern classroom and creating a proper learning environment for students who come to class for long evening sessions or all-day weekend sessions, and who come from the ongoing postmodern culture in which entertainment seems to be omnipresent.

In searching for the proper classroom learning environment, teachers usually find that the challenges lie not so much in optimizing the physical learning environment, but in how to shape the *emotional* learning environment that determines how students feel and think, or more importantly, how well teachers influence how students feel and think. Creating a proper learning environment hinges on how teachers develop relationships that make students want to come to class, pay attention, participate and seek to understand the knowledge that is available. There are many obstacles to this endeavor.

The paper demonstrates that competent leadership is the primary process teachers must implement to effect an environment for adult learning. Virtually all of the challenges to successful

classroom teaching can be approached effectively using leadership skills that most teachers already possess but have underutilized because of various conditions involving the physical classroom and academic administration matters. By focusing on the cultural and attitudinal commonalities among students, a teacher who exercises sensible leadership methods will be able to bring the vast majority of students into a teamwork-based learning experience.

A checklist of fourteen proven straightforward actions for teachers culminates the paper, concluding that the key ingredient to an effective learning environment in the modern classroom is a good teacher who employs a leadership process that motivates students to learn despite long sessions, the distractions of the ongoing culture and numerous outside contentions for students' time.

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This paper is not about the physical classroom, but about adult students approaching the difficult work that is learning. It is not about the physical classroom conditions schools provide, but about the actions teachers take within it. It begins by examining the relationships between students and teachers that define the learning environment of the classroom.

First things first: Students must see that their work will lead to valuable outcomes. No amount of entertainment will replace that. Even before a teacher presents the course material, students develop perceptions about the learning environment that will affect their emotions, attitudes and actions throughout the session and the term. Many educators, including University of Edinburgh (U.K.) professor of cognitive psychology Martin Westhead (2002), acknowledge that a properly structured learning environment can allow the learner to focus on the material being presented, and that while some of the organizing techniques educators use are obvious, most are learned and developed over time.

In Search of a Proper Learning Environment

The academic world is changing fast, at least in appearances. Where there was once only the classroom learning environment, we now have two new learning environments: the “upgraded” traditional classroom environment and the innovative new distance learning environment.

In many respects, little seems to remain of the old ways of teaching college courses, and yet basic truths aren’t going away; the academic content of most college courses moves ahead very gradually. Most textbook writers, publishers, course designers and teachers prefer to evaluate change carefully out in the “real world” before jumping in feet-first and adopting

educational fads that may soon fall by the wayside. Change does not always come quickly to academe, and for good reason.

At the same time, there is dramatic—perhaps overwhelming—change taking place in what teachers in traditional classrooms once considered their protected turf: the classroom learning environment.

#### That Was Then . . .

Ever since Socrates, the university professor has usually maintained a powerful influence on the nature of teaching and the characteristics of the learning environment where teaching occurred. Teachers of past eras were awarded great respect for their knowledge and skills; in some cultures today, that respect is still evident. Whether in the early one-room schools of rural America or the ivied halls of great universities, teachers of the past inspired learning in the non-changing classroom environments in which most of us grew up and felt comfortable in the process of observing, listening, thinking, speaking and learning.

Teachers of the past conveyed understanding and knowledge to their students in very modest surroundings that contained little more than desks, chairs, dusty chalkboards, bright natural lighting from wide windows, and perhaps a few large wall charts. Teachers and students alike were comfortable in that environment; it was predictable and it provided what they considered a proper forum for lecturing, discussion and experimenting. Even though few got A grades, student morale was good. Teacher enthusiasm was matched by student interest and performance. Open disagreement with the teacher was neither acceptable nor common. In that bland physical environment there was always a healthy, non-adversarial *emotional environment*. That was then—up until the beginning of what is commonly called the “postmodern era.”

#### And This Is Now.

Everything has changed. The preceding cultural era—the so-called “modern era” of the past two centuries—has all but ended. During that earlier time, man developed a belief in reason, sober analysis, appropriate standards and values, and the notion that higher education formed the intellectual center of our culture. But as previously noted, that was then--and this is now. We have begun the “postmodern era” and it is here to stay.

We are now engulfed in an intellectual and cultural revolution in which a good-natured idiot, Forrest Gump, earns his actor-portrayer over 30 million dollars and in which Star Trek, angels and UFOs make for best-selling books and movies. People really fly to the moon and wars are conducted in real time on home TV screens. Most of Jules Verne's fantasies have become reality; fantasy and reality seem to have merged and both have become very entertaining. Students who grew up on *Sesame Street* and MTV place a very high value on being entertained. In one survey, half the students polled chose *entertainment* as the trait they valued most in a college teacher (Sacks, 1997, p. 55).

In the classroom, the academic culture has also undergone change. Where students once walked into the classroom wearing team sweaters and Eton jackets for 50-minute daytime sessions three or four times a week, they now arrive wearing work and leisure clothes—everything from business suits, military uniforms and flight suits to blue jeans and cutoff shorts—for four- and five-hour evening or all-day weekend sessions. The clothing isn't important, but the hours and the conditions under which these students come to class is both important and different from what the learning environment used to be. However, it's not so much about the tremendous changes in the physical classroom environment that must be reckoned with today. It's about the changes in the *emotional environment* that are precipitated by both the conditions under which these students come to class and the culture of which they are very much a part.

#### That Other Learning Environment

From the teachers' perspective, one could go on for weeks or months discussing "the learning environment," and never actually talk about a real classroom. A recent search on the worldwide web using the keywords *learning environment* revealed nearly three million listed sites under that category! Well over 90 percent of these references are not about a physical classroom environment with walls and desks, but about the literally millions (yes, millions!) of computer programs and web sites dedicated to the distance learning environment or its many aliases that include the "virtual learning environment," "multimedia learning environment," "virtual school," and "cyberschool." We have WebCT, Blackboard and many other online teaching tools to choose

from. Anyone with a personal computer can now create and market yet another version of distance learning. Anyone trying to research *learning environment* on the worldwide web is likely to think that virtually all higher education has been converted to online instruction. It is not.

This paper is not about distance learning, however. It is about the places where most students still attend college classes—the college classrooms at campuses and learning centers. No matter how much notice and interest are given the worldwide web and the electronic classroom, the fact remains that people still come to real classrooms to see and hear real professors lecture, discuss course material, conduct experiments and administer oral and written exams. There is something very important still going on where teachers can look students in the eye and differentiate between a glow and a glaze.

#### The Real Classroom

The “real” classroom still has walls and desks. But it has been endowed with new tools intended to create a better learning environment that offers students a richer assortment of data and information. We now have computers in the classroom, LCD projectors, videos, TVs and a handful of other audio and video devices that transform the drab physical classroom environment into a colorful display aimed at fulfilling the old Chinese adage that “one picture is worth a thousand words.” Whiteboards and colorful markers have long since replaced most dusty chalkboards. PowerPoint slides with transitions, animations and sound effects provide a brilliant array of templates and formats. Classroom lighting to enhance on-screen displays is also gaining popularity, and teachers are learning how to use projected information interactively.

For students who come directly from work--hungry and tired--to attend a five-hour evening session, the teacher now has a fair chance of holding their attention and engaging them in interactive discourse and perhaps participation. Many teachers today would shudder at the thought of holding a five-hour session without these versatile (but expensive) and entertaining tools. But at least as many teachers may have reached their threshold of tolerance for new teaching tools. It appears we have indeed attained a stable balance between drabness and titillation. Everyone—student and teacher alike—is familiar with what is available and knows how to use the “electronic classroom” for learning and teaching.

## The Classroom *Emotional* Environment

However they are used, the various elements of the *physical* learning environment clearly play a role in how a teacher develops the *emotional* learning environment that always exists and is even more critical to keeping students tuned in for long hours of mental work when they would rather be somewhere else. Sadly, comparatively little has been written about the emotional aspects of the learning environment. It is nevertheless obvious to anyone teaching in today's college classroom that there is a prevailing attitude among students that cannot be ignored.

Teachers must be aware of the emotional environment that exists in their classrooms every minute of every hour and be able to influence the human factors that affect learning. We can review the preceding in three simple observations:

1. The typical classroom learning environment doesn't really need any more new physical upgrades. These will come along as new or better such devices are made available, but most of the physical changes will likely be in degrees of performance, such as brighter projectors, better lighting and softer chairs. Therefore . . .
2. To improve the learning environment, we must now look toward the emotional environment that affects what students think and feel about being in the classroom. What people think and feel depends on their perceptions. No two people view reality and arrive at the same perceptions because perceptions depend on assumptions influenced by past experience, attitudes and personal needs--external factors that are out of a teacher's ability to control. But a teacher can still identify students' feelings by observing their attitudes in the classroom. Consequently . . .
3. Our ability to create a proper learning environment hinges on how well we are able to assess how our students feel and think, and then respond to them in ways that make them want to come to class, pay attention, participate and seek to understand the knowledge that is available.

A few authors have begun to describe how the external environment—the prevailing American culture—affects the learning process in this postmodern era. The students are different now; they are sharp and capable, but they bring with them the experiences of their primary and secondary educations and the greater culture to which they belong. Their music reflects both anger and the desire to rebel, and yet they conform closely to the postmodern culture's trends.

We might refer to them as “Generation X,” but we must never underestimate their abilities and their potential to be enthusiastic about learning. Those who went to war in Iraq recently proved that with the right motivation, these young adults can learn difficult tasks and perform under dangerous and uncomfortable conditions. If anything, it is we who should learn from them about what it takes to create the right learning environment. We must therefore begin by learning what our students expect.

#### Matching the Learning Environment to the Existing Culture

Our students grew up being entertained sixteen hours a day. Grade schools and high schools have learned how to compete with big screen TV, video games and discordant music with angry lyrics. The learning environment in most of these schools includes an ample assortment of classroom audiovisual tools designed to enhance learning. But the children didn't bring these tools to the classroom; the schools did, and the children became accustomed to them. When these children head for college, they fully expect a similar physical learning environment. We must remember that the students know what they like or think is better for their individual learning experiences, even though the schools and teachers make the decisions about it.

#### My Culture Is Your Culture

For the most part, we are in the same culture as our students are in, whether we like it or not. It is not within our capacity to change it, and so we must recognize it and build on it rather than try to fight it. Perhaps, like fish who cannot see the water they swim in, we don't see the prevailing culture because we're immersed in it. When we fail to recognize what that culture is, we run the risk of being described as “out of it,” or “just don't get it.”

For too long, students have regarded themselves as “customers” who believe that since they spend the money and the time, they should have more to say about the rigor of a course or even what grading standards should apply. Teachers are often willing to bend to this “consumerism” view, not only to avoid conflict with students, but to avoid the wrath of administration when an unsatisfied student drops out. Students must be made to realize and accept that the marketing model doesn't extend to academic performance and grading.



Additionally, we can no longer ignore the distance learning world, even in our traditional classrooms. Many of today's students already have experience in using computers for learning; they are at least familiar with distance learning and they probably like the convenience of learning at their own speed and when they have time. For some, the traditional classroom's rigid schedules may seem like a forced intrusion into their lives that is revealed in how they react, sit, dress and participate. As more students experience online courses, traditional classroom courses are likely to be more difficult to conduct.

#### Teachers' Real Strengths

Most teachers are not trained psychologists. Our individual approaches to a better learning environment must therefore not rely on complex theories about learning or teaching. Whatever a teacher does to create a positive learning environment will have to be consistent with the students' vision for a good learning environment that is based on what they bring to the classroom emotionally and culturally.

The truth is that our strengths are in the knowledge of the disciplines we teach, along with some talent and desire for imparting that knowledge to others. But there are no formal standards or measurements for teaching methods and style; what works for one teacher doesn't necessarily work for another. It's all about relationships and how teachers manage them. Along with professional knowledge, teachers are also responsible for transferring knowledge to people who are still learning how to learn and who like to be entertained. Like it or not, today's teachers must recognize that to manage a better learning environment, they will have to accept a new role in the classroom. Is there an overlooked proven approach, or must we concoct yet another "flavor of the month?"

#### Organizational Classroom Leadership

We are far beyond the point of having to discover or invent new and exciting ways to create a positive environment for learning in the classroom. We already possess the needed skills; we only have to realize where our strengths lie and identify what students expect.

Even though college students enter the classrooms as individuals, their emotional and cultural backgrounds are very similar to one another. Nevertheless, they do not automatically become a learning organization. Learning is an individual, personal event, even when students learn in groups. However, group learning tends to be unbalanced; one student may learn while another may be either overwhelmed or bored. People as individuals don't support one another very well, nor do members of an undefined group. We see this in businesses; certain people tend to dominate and create informal group structures called "good ole boy networks." These are undefined groups that lack accountability as well as authority, and they usually fail to satisfy formal organization needs for a cooperative, enthusiastic work force. Moreover, there is a tendency for such group activity to address only situation-specific issues and gravitate to the level of a complaint department that runs mostly on emotional responses like "ain't it awful?" This is not how a learning organization functions.

#### A Learning Organization

A learning organization is (by definition, at least) organized. There are designated activities and measured outcomes for the individuals in the organization. In *The Fifth Discipline*, author Peter Senge (1990) holds that individual learning is enhanced greatly when it happens in a structured and interactive manner. The individual supports the organization and the organization supports the individual as they actually help each other learn. But it only happens when there is formal organization with specified outcomes and, above all, leadership. In an informal group without leadership, the same individuals would achieve very little. The key word is leadership.

Classroom leadership is much more than being in charge and getting students to recognize the teacher's authority based on grades. In fact, grade inflation has diluted that source of authority; teachers must now rely on something else. Even excellent knowledge may not serve a teacher's leadership needs well. Students today have access to enormous bases of data and information through books and the internet that may outshine teachers' specific backgrounds. Today's search and research tools can make students better students, but these tools do not directly enhance teachers' ability to lead them to knowledge. Likewise, impressive and entertaining audiovisual tools may enhance the delivery of knowledge, but they don't create a

leadership position for the teacher who wields them. Therefore, another approach to leadership is required.

### Capitalize on the Stronger Similarities

Classroom teachers do not have enough time or ideas to deal with each student's individualities. Therefore, successful classroom leadership requires the ability to capitalize on the stronger similarities of culture and emotional need among students. Teachers must be able to bring students into an organizational relationship wherein their cultural similarities are exploited to achieve outcomes that they recognize as beneficial to each individual. Otherwise, they will revert to their differing personal needs and form unorganized groups or clusters whose behavior is unpredictable and possibly rebellious. In other words, classroom leadership means bringing them together using their commonalities, in order to avoid divergence because of their differences.

However, there is a difference between theory and process. Classroom leadership requires some straightforward leadership methods that most teachers already know how to do but haven't been utilizing—specific actions—that can bring the vast majority of students in any classroom together in a cooperative learning effort. These methods focus on getting students to work together through leadership and recognition of the learning goals and commonalities they possess. If this makes sense to the teachers, they will try it. And even if only some of these methods prove useful or successful for a teacher, they will still inspire a good emotional environment for learning. They are things that all teachers know how to do. We simply have to make them part of a continuous process.

### A Continuous Leadership Process

The following checklist describes straightforward actions for exploiting the cultural commonalities of college students in a process that relies on the leadership abilities that most teachers already possess. Together, these actions can bring students into an organizational framework for learning that they will perceive as a very positive learning environment:

1. As much as possible, cause students to learn through discovery and invention. It takes too long to share knowledge with them and then have to persuade students to accept it.

2. Use Socratic teaching methods. Ask questions of the entire class, but look for opportunities to draw individual students into organized discussion. Never allow this method to cause one student to feel like s/he is being “picked on.”
3. Work through organizations, not groups, individuals or situations. It takes too long to handle every individual problem, and left unresolved, issues devolve into unmanageable situations.
4. Keep the student organizations smaller than the entire class. The whole-class organization should only be used for Socratic lecture periods; everything else should be organized into teams small enough for students to collaborate without allowing slackers to hide. Two or three students per organization usually works best.
5. Specify small-team term projects where feasible. These will generate deeper, wider research as well as experience in subdividing work and sharing presentation load. Where there are common goals and no places to hide, students tend to rise to the occasion and reinforce each other’s learning. They will also detect and curb others’ use of fanciful or plagiarized sources of information.
6. For very small class sizes, assign every student the task of primary presenter and another student as assistant/backup presenter. The same team could then reverse roles with the backup becoming the presenter for a second report. Thus, an unforeseen absence will not result in a blank spot in the session, and students will still collaborate to accomplish the project.
7. Make the term project a major part of the course grade—so they don’t trivialize it. Have students deliver their reports orally using audiovisual aids. You’ll probably be surprised to note that the rest of the students respond better to a presenting student than they do to some of your own lecture questions--this is ample proof that the organizational leadership concept is valid.
8. Develop a way to get students to take competent notes. It has been noted by many teachers that students seem to have lost the art of traditional note taking. They expect handouts of the course materials including PowerPoint slides, which they will annotate during discussions, lectures and audiovisual presentations. Project slides that leave room for added comment and if possible, leave some detail out of the handout version to encourage added material from the slides and discussions.

9. Use simulation software that can be assigned to teams of students. Many textbooks now include CD-ROM software with operational or learning simulations that students can use cooperatively to create solutions for in-class presentation on LCD projectors. Remember that doing is learning.
10. When a formal term project is not the right thing for a course, require that students create and present chapter reviews using the team concept. To keep the course topics current, have them include a number of reviews of recent articles from relevant publications and online sources.
11. Avoid “canned” case study term projects as much as possible. Emphasize research projects that examine course concepts and methods in the real world. Allow students to test the validity of their ideas in actual application. This will reduce the tendency for students to feed back what they think the teacher wants to hear. Real-world information is much more useful than a haystack filled with data bytes, and it tends to be very surprising and worthy of discussion.
12. Teachers have a responsibility not only for sharing knowledge about course topics, but also about teaching students how to think. Make sure students know that the answers are usually not as important as learning how to ask the right questions and arriving at true cause-and-effect analysis.
13. Establish the rules of engagement at the start of the term. Let students know that what they bring through research and discussion will constitute a major part of the knowledge being presented. Let them know that sex, religion and politics are not suitable topics for comment or discussion. This includes citing sources or works by authors that some students might consider contrary to their political or religious beliefs. Reiterate the school policies and good sense concerning sexual harassment and other social issues. Above all, never criticize the current trends in music!
14. Remember at all times that the teacher is the leader, even when s/he delegates leadership to students for team activities. Students will not respect the teacher who constantly backs down on assignments, attentiveness, attendance and grades. Without respect, the teacher can no longer lead. If students sense that a teacher fears the student course critiques, they know s/he

can be intimidated. Finally, make sure the students know you are their ally when outside issues disturb the learning process.

### Conclusions

Academics and authors agree that the college classroom learning environment is critical to a successful learning experience, especially when students attend long evening and weekend sessions. The physical classroom offers teachers some flexibility, but it is usually beyond teachers' ability to change. However, the classroom *emotional* environment is entirely within teachers' power to use if they implement a few simple leadership principles and methods.

In the current academic climate, much is being said about teachers' academic credentials. Accrediting agencies are bringing greater pressure on schools to verify teacher credentials and apply rigid certification methods for each teacher for each course. But there is still the need to motivate teachers about the intangible aspects of classroom teaching. Schools must never become complacent just because their faculties are duly certified, and schools should never allow administrative chores to interfere with the actual delivery of courses. In short: let the teachers teach.

University of California professor Dr. Clifford Stoll (1996), author of *Silicon Snake Oil*, asserts: "The most important part of every classroom is a good teacher and motivated students." He further maintains that there is no work-free learning and no "smart icon" on the computer screen—there is no shortcut to wisdom. He clearly decries any aspect of a classroom that gets between the student and teacher.

The learning environment is also the teaching environment. It's not all student-focused; effective leadership inspires a good learning organization in which teachers can feel good about what they do. When teachers feel good about their work, students perceive their confidence and concern, and are willing to follow.

Let us continue to lead and teach.

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