

## Why is classroom climate important?

In a study of award-winning college and university teachers, Worley, Titsworth, Worley and Cornett-DeVito (2007) determined that one of the four key elements in **instructional communication competence** was how these successful teachers “effectively manage their classroom climates” and use communication “to create and to maintain a positive learning climate in their classes” (p. 215).

Research in this area has been conducted in both educational psychology and instructional communication. It has been labeled as classroom environment (Trickett & Moos, 1973), communication climate (Gibb, 1961), and classroom climate (Rosenfeld, 1983). Regardless of the discipline or label, research has consistently demonstrated that this perception of social-psychological interaction in a classroom is closely related to the success of student learning.

Whether it is done deliberately or inadvertently, instructors generate a prevailing mood or atmosphere in their classrooms that influences students’ motivation and engagement.

This workshop is intended to:

- Promote an understanding of what a supportive classroom climate is;
- Introduce instructors to the types of communication behaviors that help create a supportive climate; and,
- Encourage instructors to reflect on their own communication behaviors and work to create a more supportive climate their classrooms.

## What exactly is a supportive classroom climate?

Stuart & Rosenfeld (1994) provide a concise overview of the concept of classroom climate:

“Teachers help create a supportive climate to the extent they offer help and friendship to the students, talk openly, express interest in their ideas, trust them, are accessible, encourage their questions and comments, and provide confirming responses. Teachers help create a disconfirming climate by not behaving in a supportive way, and by expressing a lack of respect or caring for the students.” (p. 88).

According to Myers (1995), “students’ perceptions of climate rests [sic] on how well teachers establish an environment in which mutual interaction is valued, encouraged, or supported” (p. 193). In his study of teacher affinity-seeking behaviors, Meyers found that “students who perceive their instructors as being supportive may be more likely to view the classroom environment as being supportive as well.” (p. 195).

Schultz (1979) found that students characterize their “ideal” classroom climate as one with considerable emphasis on relationships, especially teacher support which is defined as “the amount of help, concern, and friendship the teacher directs toward the students.”

Moos & Trickett (1987) explain that “routine, everyday events help to shape a person’s perceptions of climate” (p. 2). So whether it is the way an instructor presents the syllabus, interacts with students before/after class, responds to questions during class, explains assignments, or reviews for the exam, students observe a wide variety of ordinary occurrences that form their perception of classroom climate.

## Classroom Climates Created by Award-Winning Teachers

Worley et al. (2007) reported the results of their observational study by using a framework established by Rawlins (2004) and Davis and Titsworth (2006) which characterizes the learning environment as a series of opposing tensions in the classroom.

### Instrumentality vs. Affect

Extreme **instrumentality** is described as an “overly formal and distant teaching style.” Such teachers normally maintain tight control by using lecture-based teaching formats that allow little or no spontaneity or interaction with or between students.

In contrast, the award-winning teachers observed by Worley et al. (2007) spent considerable time developing a classroom climate that established **affect**:

- Teachers knew students’ names regardless of class size
- Students congregated around the teacher both before and after class
- Teachers created perception of shared interests and shared experiences by requesting/sharing appropriate personal examples
- Teachers demonstrated strong enthusiasm for the subject and teaching

According to Davis and Titsworth (2006), affect is created with “personal questions, concern with student learning, knowledge of names or the application of nicknames, humor, shared interests, and sheer enthusiasm perceived by students” (p. 20).

## Classroom Climates Created by Award-Winning Teachers (continued)

### Judgement vs. Acceptance

**Judgment** is characterized by “criticism, condescension, belittlement, dismissal, and subjective grading (Davis & Titsworth, 2006, p. 12).

In contrast, the award-winning teachers exhibited **acceptance** with the following behaviors:

- Teachers exhibited active listening
- Teachers provided student validation and praise
- Teachers encouraged questions and developed thoughtful responses
- Teachers spent time answering and analyzing questions from an exam
- Teachers maintained an open and supportive climate
- Teachers were willing to take time and make effort to listen

In summary, the award-winning teachers were the ones “who ‘took the time’ to engage students in conversation, to listen thoughtfully to stories and experiences, and to make an effort to engage the class in relating the content to their students’ lives” (Worley et al., 2007, p. 217).

## Supportive Communication Patterns

There are six communication patterns that are associated with the type of communication climate that reduces defensiveness in others and thus creates a supportive communication climate (Gibb, 1961):

**1. Be descriptive, not evaluative.**

Avoid giving direct criticism. Use I-statements. Be specific. Explain or clarify rather than judging.

**2. Be problem-oriented, not controlling.**

Resist the urge to be directive or tell others what to do. Invite others to help solve a problem collaboratively.

**3. Be spontaneous, not strategic.**

Be straightforward, direct, and honest. Avoid manipulation and hidden agendas.

**4. Be empathetic, not neutral.**

Show that you understand and relate. Avoid indifference.

**5. Be equal, not superior.**

Treat others with respect and politeness. Avoid demeaning or belittling others.

**6. Be provisional, not certain.**

Encourage openness to new possibilities. Avoid absolutes. Make suggestions rather than telling someone how to do something.

## **Instructor Immediacy**

While classroom climate is an attribute attributed to a particular classroom experience, a different line of instructional research has focused on the attributes or characteristics of the instructor or teacher which promote a positive learning environment.

**Instructor immediacy** is generally described as communication behaviors that enhance the sense of physical and psychological closeness that students have toward a particular instructor. This perception is closely associated with instructors whom students perceive to be likeable and approachable. Researchers have identified specific verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that promote a sense of immediacy:

### **Verbal Immediacy**

- Uses students' names
- Uses "we" instead of "I"
- Talks to students before/after class teaching
- Uses personal examples
- Uses humor in class
- Solicits input from students
- Willing to change topics as needed
- Willing to have unplanned talks

### **Nonverbal Immediacy**

- Maintains eye contact
- Smiles
- Moves around while
- Uses vocal variety while talking
- Uses relaxed body posture
- Uses gestures while talking
- Touches others while talking
- Is animated while talking

Instruments to measure verbal and nonverbal immediacy have been developed and validated. There is a substantial body of Communication research that has demonstrated the connection between both verbal and nonverbal immediacy and positive outcomes related to classroom climate and affective learning.

## Confirming Responses to Students

Responses to student comments and remarks can be either confirming or disconfirming (Cissna & Sieburg, 1995). This happens when you provide an indication about whether the individual student and his/her input are valued *regardless* of the content of their message.

Disconfirming messages include:

- Failure to notice or offer a response
- Offering an interrupting response
- Offering a tangential response
- Offering an impersonal response
- Offering an incoherent or incongruous response

Types of confirming responses:

- Recognizing the other, does not require agreement but you notice his/her presence
- Acknowledging the other, does not require agreement but you respond in a direct and relevant way
- Endorsing the other, requires agreement

Think about your own responses in the following situations:

How do you give a confirming response to a wrong answer?

How do you give a confirming response to an inappropriate remark?

How do you give a confirming response when a student delivers a lame excuse or a late paper?

## **Discussion:**

### **Is there really no such thing as a stupid question?**

A number of people I know are always quick to say to their students:  
“There is no such thing as a stupid question.”

When people say this, what exactly do you think is the intended meaning or purpose of this statement?

**Stupid** is defined as:

“foolish, senseless, annoying or irritating” (*Random House*)

“marked by a lack of intelligence or care, foolish or careless” (*American Heritage*)

**According to these definitions of stupid, is there such a thing as a stupid question?** Give examples of something you would consider to be a “stupid” question in a classroom setting:

What is important is how you actually respond to “stupid” questions from your students. If you are confirming and respectful, THAT creates a supportive classroom climate.

## It is the little things that add up!

Remember it is the “routine everyday events” that form the students’ perception of the classroom climate.

- **Learn their names.** There is something about making the effort to learn a student’s name that shows them you value their presence in class. They can post pictures on the MySCSU course homepage to help you.
- **Be available and accessible.** Come early to class. Stay late if you can. Linger in the hall. Encourage them to come during office hours.
- **Make connections with individual students.** Collect basic personal information about their hometown, their student activities, and their part-time jobs so you will have something to ask them about.
- **Provide confirming responses to students even when you do not agree with what they are saying.** When they do speak in class, let them know you are glad to hear from them. If they give inaccurate information, lead them gently in the right direction or ask other students for an opposing view.
- **Be willing to share personal examples when they are relevant.** Some self-disclosure is a good thing. It helps students relate and encourages them to provide examples from their own experiences.
- **Be as transparent as possible about your grading practices.** When you return papers or exams make time to explain how you graded and what you were looking for. Then invite them to discuss it with you individually if they want more clarification.
- **Be willing to address student concerns even when they are not directly related to the content of your course.** Advising and registration, explaining professorial ranks, understanding general education requirements are all conversations that can show your students you are willing to help them with their concerns.
- **Admit that you are still learning too.** It is important that students know that you do not always have all the answers. Sometimes you learn as much from them as they do from you.
- **Always be willing to acknowledge and answer a “stupid” question.** It is more about your attitude and your willingness to respond than it is about whether or not the student should know where to find the information or should have been listening.
- **Do something spontaneous once in a while.** Take the students outside, send them out of class for an exercise or activity, allow them an unexpected extension on an assignment. Show that you know how to be flexible too!

- **Add qualifiers to your statements rather than speaking in absolutes.** According to my experience . . . , The research I have read suggests . . . , Based on what I've learned so far. . . Try to sound open to new ideas/possibilities.
- **Smile and laugh.** Use humor and tell jokes (if you are good at them). Make fun of yourself if you are comfortable with that.
- **Do not be afraid to admit you are wrong or you made a mistake.** I often make it a point to make a public admission and apologize to students when I can. We are only human.
- **Help students get to know each other.** Whether it is through activity partners, discussion groups, or seating arrangements, give students a chance to learn each others names and interact in class.
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Presenter Contact Information:

Dr. Linda Sampson  
Associate Professor  
Communication Department  
B019 Engleman

SampsonL1@SouthernCT.edu  
203-392-5560 (work)  
203-389-6686 (home)

## APPENDIX: Classroom Climate Questionnaire

*Instructions: Please circle the appropriate response under each of the following statements.*

1. My teacher helps me understand the reasons for his/her opinions.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. My teacher has favorite students.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. My teacher is neutral and detached when a dispute arises.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. My teacher is straightforward and honest.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. My teacher makes me feel that s/he is interested in the problems I face.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. My teacher focuses his/her attention on the problems which have to be solved.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. My teacher manipulates us or uses "psychology" on us.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. My teacher is very certain of his/her ideas.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. My teacher can see the subject we are studying as we see it.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. My teacher judges us by what kind of motives and values we have.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. My teacher makes us feel we are not intelligent.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. My teacher can change subjects as questions are asked.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

13. My teacher frequently does not tell us his/her purpose for an assignment.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

14. My teacher makes me feel s/he understands me.

## Creating a Supportive Classroom Climate

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Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

15. My teacher does not like to discuss controversial ideas.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

16. My teacher treats us as equals with him/her.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

17. My teacher very infrequently changes his/her mind.

Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree Strongly Disagree

The Likert scale is scored from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

Items 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 15 are *reverse* scored. Total scores can range from 17 to 85.

A higher score indicates that students perceive a more supportive communication climate in the classroom. A lower score indicates that students perceive a more defensive communication climate.

The Communication Climate Questionnaire focuses specifically on the relative supportiveness and defensiveness of the communication climate as defined by Gibb (1961). It was developed and tested by Rosenfeld (1983) and Rosenfeld & Jarrard (1985).