

# Creating Engaging Environments

## **Encourage Student-Student Interactions**

Research has indicated that student retention is optimized when voices other than that of the instructor is heard. Furthermore, students learn important speaking skills when this behavior is encouraged. Additionally, classrooms that encourage student to student interactions facilitate knowledge construction. Chickering and Gamson (1987) also indicate that learning environments that engage students and encourage student to student interactions lead to greater learning. For example, role playing activities, case studies, and simulations encourage this type of interaction.

## **Solicit Student Input**

Students more often feel a sense of ownership or belonging when their ideas are incorporated into the classroom discussion. Garcia and Pintrich (1996) suggest that environments tended to be perceived as more engaging when students are provided opportunities for input. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, et al. (2005) have also suggested that getting to know students and using their input builds a sense of community and facilitates the learning process.

## **Provide Clear Expectations/Standards for Student Performance**

Tinto (1987) found that productive learning environments that are characterized by or include a discussion of expectations for student behavior tend to be very productive and engaging. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that communicating clear expectations and constructing assignments and experiences so that students are sufficiently challenged sparks their sense of self-determination and aids in learning. For example, communicating that students have historically performed well on this task and that you can too if you approach this assignment in a systematic way.

## **Create a Positive Classroom Environment from the Get-Go**

Researchers such as Carol Dweck and Barbara Fredrickson have found that when students are in a positive mood and frame of mind they are more engaged in learning. In addition, students tend to be more creative and better at problem solving. One way to create a positive classroom environment is do invite students to recall one moment or event that went well over the weekend, the week, or the day of the class. Then, have students savor the experience—recalling the

vividness of the moment or event, including their feelings and sensory experiences. Students may also be invited to share those experiences with their peers. The instructor can then move into course discussion.

### **Use Humor Appropriately**

Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) found that use of humor significantly improved retention of materials. Ziv (1988) and (Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin, 2010) also found humor to have positive effects on cognitive abilities and learning within classroom environments.

### **Engage Through Routine and Ongoing Feedback**

Introduce the role of feedback as a way of monitoring and exploring learning and engagement, which go hand in hand. The more students are engaged the likely they are to learn. One way to increase engagement is through routine and ongoing feedback. One way to do this is to say: “An important aspect of our class will be to have an ongoing conversation about two things. The first relates to the content itself. What is being learned? What specifically has come across for you that is either new or represents an evolution of something you already know? The second thing is our process in class. How is the process we are using to learn the content? What is working? What could we do differently that would help with deepening the connection to the course content? When it comes to feedback about engagement (process), keep in mind that students may be apprehensive out of fear of hurting the instructor’s feelings or repercussions for speaking up. One way to address this by saying: “When it comes to us talking about how the learning process is going please understand that I value feedback. It is an opportunity for me to change things up to better fit how you learn. It’s part of my professional development. I’m not perfect and expect to learn along with you. Your feedback is part of my learning process.”

During each class, periodically pause to gain feedback about those two things:

1. Content/Outcome: What specifically is coming across and being learned? What difference can the learning make for the student?
2. Engagement: How is the approach of the instructor and the process of learning?

It is then important that the instructor respond to the feedback and make adjustments accordingly. Because we are using routine and ongoing feedback adjustments may occur class to class.

### **Acknowledge First**

When students contribute to discussions and perhaps have interpretations of course material that are inaccurate (e.g., a student provides a definition that is incorrect) or potentially inflammatory to others, acknowledge the student first before offering a correction or different view. Acknowledgment involves attending to what students have communicated both verbally and nonverbally. It lets them know that their experience, points of view, and actions have been heard and noted. It also serves as a prompt by encouraging further communication. A basic way to acknowledging is to say, “Uh huh” or “I see.” Another way is to reflect back, without interpretation, what was said. For example, one might say, “You feel strongly about that” or “I heard you say this issue makes you angry.” Acknowledgment can also be conveyed by attending to nonverbal behaviors. For example, one might say, “I noticed your expression when you spoke about your experience with the topic.” Acknowledgment increases the likelihood that the student will feel heard and subsequently be open to the modification of their answer or difference of opinion. An example of using acknowledgement before offering a different perspective might be, “This sounds like an important issue for you. And I wonder if there are other points of view that are different but also valid.” Or, “Thank you for your answer. This is a tricky concept that students often find confusing. Let’s see if I can clarify it a little better.”

Some specific ways to acknowledge include *paraphrasing* and *summarizing*. *Paraphrasing* can be used as a way to confirm what has been said by using a condensed, nonjudgmental version of what the youth or other involved has said. *Summarizing* offers a way to check out what has been said by pulling together what a student or other has said over a period of time (i.e., a few minutes of conversation or different segments from different points of a conversation). Summarizing provides a brief synopsis to acknowledge, clarify, and gain focus.

### **Use Positive Language**

Language is a vehicle for learning and change. Consider everyday language as it relates to interactions with students and colleagues. Although certain terms are an important part of various disciplines (e.g., pathology, rule, cure, etc.), when such terms are used to in the context of engagement they can inhibit learning. Instead of viewing describing a student as “resistant” consider the student’s behavior as communication about his or her learning style. Then try to generate alternative views that will create opportunities to engage the student. Using the example above, the student might be viewed as, “having a persistent difference of opinion.” After reframing the student’s form of communicating or relating, consider ways of engaging the student differently. Also consult with colleagues to generate more ideas. Below is a list of words that can both inhibit and promote engagement.

<b>Deficit-Based</b>	<b>Positive</b>
Fix	Empower
Weakness	Strength

Limitation	Possibility
Pathology	Health
Problem	Solution
Insist	Invite
Closed	Open
Shrink	Expand
Defense	Access
Expert	Partner
Control	Nurture
Backward	Forward
Manipulate	Collaborate
Fear	Hope
Cure	Growth
Stuck	Change
Missing	Latent
Wrong	Utilize
Resist	Future
Past	Horizontal
Hierarchical	Appreciate
Treat	Facilitate
End	Beginning
Judge	Respect
Never	Not yet

Limit	Expand
Defect	Asset
Rule	Exception

### ***References***

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## **Building Engaged and Inclusive Environments**

*I've learned that people will forget what you said,  
People will forget what you did  
But people will never forget how you made them feel – Maya Angelou*

The student who is an engaged and active classroom participant is more likely to learn because the one who does the work is the one who learns (Terry Doyle, "Learner-Centered Teaching")

2011). Engaged learners apply concepts, make connections, and transfer knowledge and skills to diverse settings. Engaged learners become lifelong learners. However, students must feel safe in order to risk becoming involved in classroom processes (Cox, 2009). Inclusive classrooms are ones in which students believe that their contributions and perspectives are valued and respected. The following are ideas and strategies that may help you create an engaged and inclusive classroom.

*Bain, K. (2004). What the best college teachers do. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.*

*Cox, R. (2009). The college fear factor; How students and professors misunderstand each other. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.*

*Doyle, T. (2011). Learner-centered teaching; Putting the research on Learning into Practice. VA: Stylus.*

## **Icebreakers, Team-Building and Cooperative Learning**

Icebreakers are an effective way to help students feel more comfortable in your classroom and to get to know one another better. They are fun and interactive sessions that are held at the beginning of the semester.

Icebreakers create a more relaxed environment and allow students to share ideas and participate more fully in the course. Students become more engaged in the classroom and so contribute more effectively towards a successful outcome.

Icebreakers also:

- Help establish rapport with students and encourage a more productive learning environment
- Help create a positive group atmosphere
- Energize and motivate

When choosing activities consider what you want to achieve with an icebreaker. Will you set the tone for your students or lead into course content in engaging ways? Icebreakers do not always go as planned. Flexibility and willingness to learn is part of building a positive and open learning community.

**Introductory Ice Breakers are used to introduce participants to each other and to facilitate conversation amongst the participants.**

- **The Little Known Fact:** Ask participants to share their name and one little known fact about themselves. This “little known fact” becomes a humanizing element that can help break down differences such as status in future interaction.

- **True or False:** Ask your participants to introduce themselves and make three or four statements about themselves, one of which is false. Now get the rest of the group to vote on which fact is false.
- **Connecting Stories-** finding common experiences or themes between people. <http://www.icebreakers.ws/small-group/connecting-stories.html>
- **Unique and Shared-** helps students see that they have more in common with their peers than they realize. <http://www.icebreakers.ws/team-building/unique-and-shared.html>

## Teambuilding

Teambuilding can help students start working together more cohesively towards shared goals.

- Connects and engages students.
- A ‘student-centered approach’ encourages team- work and cooperation among students.
- Encourages collaborative work with peers

## Team Building Icebreakers

These icebreakers help to start interaction within the group.

- **Interviews:** Ask participants to get into twos. Each person then interviews his or her partner for a set time while paired up. When the group reconvenes, each person introduces their interviewee to the rest of the group.
- **Problem Solvers:** Ask participants to work in small groups. Create a simple problem scenario for them to work on in a short time. Once the group have analyzed the problem and prepared their feedback, ask each group in turn to present their analysis and solutions to the wider group.
- **The Human Web:** The facilitator begins with a ball of yarn. Keeping one end, pass the ball to one of the participants, and the person to introduce him- or her-self and their role in the organization. Once this person has made their introduction, ask him or her to pass the ball of yarn on to another person in the group. The person handing over the ball must describe how he/she relates (or expects to relate) to the other person. The process continues until everyone is introduced. To emphasize the interdependencies amongst the team, the facilitator then pulls on the starting thread and everyone’s hand should move.
- **Ball Challenge:** This exercise creates a simple, timed challenge for the team to help focus on shared goals, and also encourages people to include other people. The facilitator arranges the group in a circle and asks each person to throw the ball across the circle, first announcing his or her own name, and then announcing the name of the person to whom they are throwing the ball (the first few times, each person throws the ball to someone whose name they already know.) When every person in the group has thrown the ball at least once, it’s time to set the challenge – to pass the ball around all group members as quickly as possible. Time the process, then ask the group to beat that timing. As the challenge progresses, the team will improve their process, for example by standing closer together. And so the group will learn to work as a team.

- **Hope, Fears and Expectations:** Best done when participants already have a good understanding of their challenge as a team. Group people into 2s or 3s, and ask people to discuss their expectations for the event or work ahead, then what they fears and their hopes. Gather the group's response by collating 3-4 hopes, fears and expectation from pairing or threesome.

For more information on this strategy: [teambasedlearning.org](http://teambasedlearning.org).