**Creating Learning Environments**

**Ecology of the classroom**

The ecology of the classroom has a great effect on children’s classroom success. We will reflect on the elements that create a positive and supportive classroom environment, which in turn enhance the daily learning experiences of our students.

Ecology is the interaction between people and environment. All learning and behavior occur in context – everything in a child’s life affects how a child grows and develops. This may include the family, the socioeconomic background, religion, gender, race, etc.

The environment that we create within our schools and classrooms has a major effect on the students’ day to day functioning. We don’t have control over the home/neighborhood environment, but we do have control over the place where they spend at least a third of their time.

**Before We Begin …**

Take a minute to visualize your classroom environment. Think first about the physical space … How do you feel when you enter in the morning? How do you think your students feel? What do you like about it? What are the different spaces in your room? How is it decorated? How does it flow? Is it clear what the class is working on? What feels awkward in the space? Are there any “traffic jams?”

Now also think about the people in the space … How do the students get along in the different areas? What is the tone? How do kids speak to one another? When and where do the misbehaviors/problems happen?

**Components of Classroom Ecology**

1. General Management and Organization
2. Community
3. Instruction
4. Behavior Management
5. Teacher Style & Mindset
6. **General Management and Organization**

The design of the classroom sends a message to the people who use it. Ideally, our classrooms foster a sense of safety and acceptance and are organized to support the academic work.

• Is your classroom …warm? inviting?

Colors that are calming, spaces that have room to move, places to store belongings.

• Are all areas/materials accessible to all children?

Access to materials: labeled bins, designated areas, enough space to move around.

• Traffic patterns/crowd control

Rituals for moving from area to area

• Seating arrangements

Assigned spots, seating charts posted, desks that can be moved for various groupings. Also: variation and rotations.

• Personal space

Loft, designated “quiet corner” or “cool down” space

• Is it clear what the children are studying/working on?

Curriculum-related objects and information are displayed

**The environment of the classroom is largely impacted by the physical space of the classroom.**

• Lighting/air flow

Florescent vs. full-spectrum bulbs, “Warming” elements: plants, soft chairs, rugs, pillows

Fans/windows

• Noise

Student noise level • Hand signals, chimes, tennis balls on bottom of chair legs • Music

• Cleanliness/neatness

Classroom jobs, build in clean-up time

**Some of these elements we can control/some we can’t.**

Using the wall space to support the management of the environment (an example):

What to do when enter the room

– Monday to Wednesday (silent reading)

– Tuesday (choice day/ read/write)

– Thursday (Free write)

**Reflect/Think About … Other Strategies?**

**What do you do in your classroom to organize and manage the environment for student success? What else might be needed?**

**2. Community**

How do the students talk to one another and work together in your classroom? A positive, supportive community grows out of specific systems you have put into place.

• Classroom rules/norms

• Community building activities

• Traditions/rituals

**Guidelines for Creating Classroom Rules:**

Goal: Rules/norms set the tone and expectations for how community members will interact.

• No more than 4 – 6 rules

• Need to be measurable and observable

• Positive

• Are developed with the students

• Must be taught explicitly

• Should be posted, followed and revisited

• Compliance should be recognized/noncompliance must be dealt with

**Community Building Activities**

Goals: Students will find areas of commonality and celebrate differences

• Build inclusion

• Students will talk to other students that they don’t typically talk to

• Develop listening skills

• Promote creativity and fun

• Meta-awareness

1. **Instruction**

• Developmentally appropriate goals and activities

• Differentiated – multiple learners can engage in various ways

• Multiple modalities/Hands-on learning

• Small-group interaction

• Relevancy/Real-life connections

• Metacognitive – children learn about their own learning

**• Active engagement strategies**

Tell me, I forget; show me, I may remember; involve me, I understand.

Turn to Your Neighbor (TTYN), 12 Word Summary, Exit Ticket, role play, Spectrum/Continuum, Jigsaw, etc.

1. **Behavior Management**

As much thought needs to go into planning behavior management as goes into planning instruction.

• Assertive: create an environment in which students learn to choose the appropriate, responsible behavior.

• Proactive vs. reactive

• Behaviors have intentions

• Sensory integration issues (how is the physical space connected to the behaviors?)

**Guidelines for Positive Behavior Management**

1. Build positive trusting relationships with students.

2. Establish clear rules that define expectations for the classroom so that students know what is acceptable/unacceptable.

3. Teach students how to follow these rules.

4. Acknowledge when students do follow them.

5. Adopt a positive, assertive manner. Stay calm and consistent. 6. Ask parents and administrators for assistance.

**5. Teacher Style/Mindset**

This is reflected in the physical set-up of the classroom, but is also the “unconscious” ecology.

• “All children can learn” philosophy

•Growth/fixed

•Biases/assumptions

•Teacher-learner relationship

•Teacher’s view of authority/power

•Self-reflection

**Style**

• Do you get annoyed by students’ moving around the room?

• What is your tolerance for noise level?

• “Almost all of the negative behaviors perceived by teachers are actually typical of all children and youth at various stages of development”.

• Spilled paint – an annoyance, or an opportunity?

• Self-reflection

**Maintaining a good learning environment**

A learning environment is a diverse platform where users engage and interact to learn new skills.

**Components and Importance of an Effective Learning Environment**

Developing an engaging and positive learning environment for learners, especially in a particular course, is one of the most creative aspects of teaching. Typically, the focus is either on the physical learning environments (institutional) like lecture theaters, classrooms, or labs; or on different technologies that are used to develop online learning environments.

Typically, social, physical, psychological or cultural factors involved in a learning environment deeply affect the learners’ learning capabilities. If the learning atmosphere is not conducive to gaining new knowledge or skills, it will be hard for learners to remain engrossed or interested.

For example, stress significantly affect the cognitive functioning. When you combine stress with learning processes, the negative thoughts outweighs the positive ones.

## The Factors That Make A Positive Learning Environment

### Following are the prime factors that contribute to establishing an effective and positive learning environment. Let’s discuss some of the most important factors.

### Establish a supportive learning culture

Each member of the learning community should have the feeling of connectedness. They must feel that they are contributing to the overall environment while being a bigger and important part of a supportive learning culture.

For this, a proper support system or mentorship program should be developed that would provide them the required assistance whenever needed. The idea can also be supported by creating online discussion forums or online platforms where learners can gather and discuss various topics.

Learners can use these platforms to provide support to fellow members, to address concerns, and to express their ideas and opinions about some topic. Nevertheless, the modern learning platforms offer online training and ongoing education through resources that can be accessed and used by the learners on their own time.

### Address Learners’ Needs

Just like adults, learners also have some psychological needs for order and security, love and belonging, competence and personal power, novelty and freedom and even fun. It is important to meet these needs at all times and to help learners progress and be taught with a positive attitude.

Any learning environment, where instructors accommodate these intrinsic needs, learners tend to be happier and more engaging. There are less behavioral incidences than otherwise and this fulfilling learning atmosphere help learners in developing the right learning attitude while establishing positive relationships with peers.

### Keep it Positive

Learners respond far better to praise than punitive measures. Appreciation is the key to motivation, unlike humiliation, that is highly discouraging. Learners appreciate the freedom to express their opinions; similarly, the opinions of their peers also play a crucial role in defining their learning attitude.

That is exactly why actions like harassment or teasing are the number one cause for learners to drop out from the course rather than labeled as ‘dull’ or ‘stupid’ in front of others. While it is important to express opinions, it is also vital to remain positive rather than assault.

However, the best way to cut down this negative behavior, in a professional learning environment, is to start correcting the behavior without highlighting the names of the ones making mistakes.

### Provide Feedback

Feedback is the great way to connect with learners and to set their learning efforts in the right direction. Feedback is vital for learners as it helps them in tracking their progress and in changing their learning strategy accordingly. It helps them recognize their weak areas while improving the developed skills.

A feedback informs the learners where they are missing the mark and what is needed to be done. A feedback is not only a key to motivate the learner but this timely and consistent feedback ensures an interactive learning environment. It keeps learners involved and allows them to keep going while mounting a feeling of purpose and belonging.

### Celebrate Success

In addition to feedback and appreciation, another way to establish a positive and effective learning environment is to celebrate the learners’ success. This could be anything from a shout out to a big reward. When learners’ achievements are recognized and shared by the instructors with other learners, it creates a sense of achievement and fosters healthy learning behavior.

Instructors can easily take out some time on a weekly basis to recognize each student for any of the specific accomplishment.  This could also be done in the form of group activities or collective assignments or projects. In addition to the celebration, it is also important to discuss the processes or strategies used by the learner to achieve the objective. This will also act as a guide for others to use the same learning strategy and to improve their performance in the same manner.

### Safety

A good learning environment offers a safe platform for learners. Before you can expect learners to succeed academically, they should also feel safe both mentally and physically. While most of the schools take physical safety measures, not many learning platforms consider the mental safety of the learners. Safety in a learning environment goes beyond physical well-being. In order to maintain a safe learning environment, learners must feel supported, welcomed, and respected.

But many learning platforms and their codes of conduct don’t always consider or support the positive climate. For instance, strict disciplinary practices like suspensions negatively impact the morale of the learners and hamper their performance or likelihood of improvement.

Hence, building a positive learning environment is more about maintaining a healthy culture where the expectations are well communicated and learners are fully aware of the code of conduct.

### Employ Interactive Games and Activities

An effective learning platform is the one that establishes strong interactions and promotes collaborative learning culture. This means that it is imperative for instructors to maintain positive relationships with the learners while also ensuring healthy association among the learners.

This can be done by using the best way of encouraging group activities. Introduction of non-competitive games and activities break down the cliques within a learning environment. This also assists the new and shy students to have a sense of belonging. Such activities promote communication and collaborative working environment and establish cooperative learning structures. There are hundreds of proven group activities and games that can be introduced as classroom activities. These fun activities make learners interested in attending the class and help them learn and progress in a friendlier environment.

#### The Last Words

When you establish a learning environment, keeping these important factors in mind, it helps in developing a thriving learning culture. A positive learning environment is the one where learners feel involved and responsible for their learning while being comfortable enough to fully participate in group and individual activities.

Needless to say, when educators foster positive learning culture, learners are more likely to have the higher motivation that leads to better and more promising learning outcomes.

**Ten ways through teachers can create learning environment**

**Address Student Needs**  
Remember that students, like adults, have not only physical needs but also important psychological needs for security and order, love and belonging, personal power and competence, freedom and novelty, and fun.

1. **Create a Sense of Order**

All students need structure and want to know that their teacher not only knows his content area, but also knows how to manage his classroom. It is the teacher’s responsibility to provide clear behavioral and academic expectations right from the beginning —students should know what is expected of them all the time.

* Enter the classroom and become immediately engaged in a learning activity
* Distribute and collect materials
* Find out about missed assignments due to absence and how to make them up
* Get the teacher’s attention without disrupting the class
* Arrange their desks quickly and quietly for various purposes: in rows facing the front for direct instruction, in pairs for collaborative learning, in groups of four for cooperative learning, and in a large circle for class discussions

1. **Greet Students at the Door Every Day**  
   As students enter your classroom, greet each one at the door. Explain that you want students to make eye contact with you, give you a verbal greeting, and—depending on the age of the students. It also shows students that you care about them as individuals. If a student was disruptive or uncooperative the day before, it gives you an opportunity to check in, explain your “every day is a clean slate” philosophy, and express optimism for that class (“Let’s have a great day today”).

**4. Let Students Get to Know You**

Students come in to the classroom with preconceived perceptions of teachers. Sometimes it’s good, sometimes it can be an obstacle. I wanted my students to perceive me as a trustworthy. You can share with your students:

* Who you are
* What you stand for
* What you will do for students and what you won’t do for them
* What you will ask of your students and what you won’t ask of them

**5. Get to Know Your Students**  
The more you know about your students’ cultures, interests, extracurricular activities, personalities, learning styles, goals, and mindsets, the better you can reach them and teach them. Some ways of getting to know your students:

* Educate yourself about their cultures
* Talk to them
* Assign journal prompts and read and respond to them
* Attend extracurricular events
* Have students complete interest inventories or surveys
* Have students complete learning style and personality assessments
* Hold regular class meetings
* Play team-building games with students