

DEVELOPING/Developing/Establishing Classroom Culture Using Safe Spaces!

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ABSTRACT

“What Wall Street figured out, is that colleges are producing a large number of very smart, completely confused graduates. Kids who have ample mental horsepower, an incredible work ethic and no idea what to do next.” ...Ezra Klein

Classroom culture must continually and organically develop to improve and enhance the learning process. We need to bond the cultural elements of learning as they apply to each of our classrooms. The challenge then to each of us, is to employ the unique cultural elements relevant to our individual classroom environment that organic and appropriate.

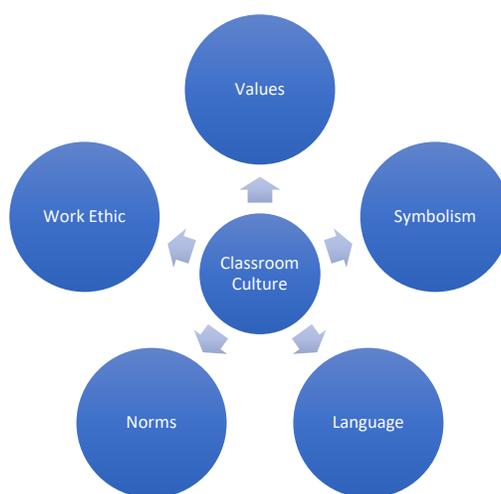
INTRODUCTION

As facilitators of learning, all of us committed to managing our classrooms efficiently and effectively both in terms of time and subjects. Managing involves planning the activities in the classroom, organizing them in a way that allows us to accomplish the designed tasks over a given period of time, direct discussions and interactions in the classroom efficiently and control the activities in such a way that they do not deviate from the planned course of action. The question becomes by establishing a highly efficient classroom management system, are we really developing a classroom culture favorable to improve the learning process? Does an efficient classroom management system necessarily develop a favorable classroom culture that promotes improved learning? To better understand this query, we need to harness the meaning of culture and its elements to our classrooms. We need to connect the cultural elements of symbols, language, norms (mores, laws, folkways and customs), rituals, values, work ethic, and artifacts as they apply and are relevant to classrooms settings [1]. The following illustration may help us transfer some of these relevant elements in a model for a classroom culture that enables higher and improved levels of learning. Ergo, “Classroom Culture” can be defined as the collection of symbols, values, work ethic, norms and language used to collectively to improve the organic learning environment in a classroom.

CLASSROOM CULTURE MODEL

The process of learning manifests itself in change in one’s behavior due to an experience. According to Richard Gross [5], Learning is the act of acquiring new or modifying and reinforcing existing

knowledge and behaviors, skills, values or preferences which may lead to a potential change in synthesizing information, attitude or behavior relative to the type and range of experience [4, pp 304]. Ergo, an essential part of learning in classroom is germinated through the behavior of our students that we encourage in our classrooms. In his book *Hit Refresh*, Satya Nadella talks about how he is attempting to influence and establish a fundamental cultural change at “Microsoft” rediscovering its “Soul” with one essential human quality...” Empathy” in the company’s quest for new energy, new ideas and continued relevance and renewal. One of his challenges is to alter the pattern of organizational thinking from the previous “Know it all” mode to a present “Learn it all” philosophy [7].



In the same vein, each of us must establish a “Culture” in our classrooms that is succinct and meaningful to our students. This cultural word or phrase must encompass many of the elements that honor varied student experiences, shared inquiry and dialogue, social and emotional safety, a sense of openness and cultural humility, a commitment to avoiding and challenging stereotypes, and a willingness to let students define their own identities. Often, in our quest to control our classrooms, we may overlook to establish a culture that is “learning friendly”. We may configure a number of rules and consequences handling various types of classroom disturbances that often hinder the learning process. Using our own classroom experiences, thinking back on classes that we enjoyed and those that challenged us, what do we recall the most? I can guarantee that your classroom memories revolve around the “aha moments” that you experienced in each of your classes rather than all the mundane exercises that you were subjected to. Ergo, along with managing a classroom, establishing a nourishing culture becomes a very important cog in the process of learning. We must allow our students to realize as many “aha moments” in our classes by providing them a classroom cultural environment that allows them to ENGAGE.

According to the Glossary of Educational Reform,

“Student Engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education.”

Often times the lack of student engagement and academic achievements are regarded as individual student traits or characteristics rather than the results of how teachers structure their classroom instructions [10, pp. 571-581]. Teachers often attribute student disengagement and poor performance to the students. Students are blamed for their low grades because of their laziness and lack of engagement. Some of the lack of student engagement may be attributed to individual student differences, however,

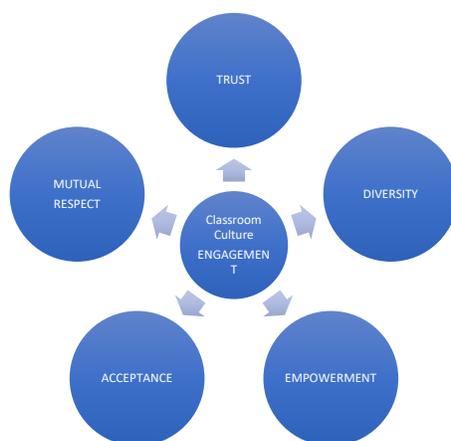
more and more research attribute student engagement and academic performance at least in part to how teachers promote classroom interactions [9]. Teachers who create a positive emotional climate for learning demonstrate that the classroom is a safe and valuable place to be and are enthusiastic about learning and as a result students feel more connected and engaged in learning and become more successful academically. Teacher emotions are associated with their sense of efficacy and classroom management styles and strategies as well as job satisfaction. We need to move beyond teacher demographics and credentials as predictors of student engagement and performance, which have limited associations with student success. Classroom social process, the instructional and organizations aspects of the classroom environment, along with a teacher’s ability to encourage higher order thinking and well-defined parameters for classroom behavior that promote student outcomes all have been well researched [2, pp. 1069-1077] [8, pp. 83-98] [9] [11, pp.145-181] [3].

The key to getting students to participate is to provide them “Safe Spaces” in the form of our classrooms, that are well organized and characterized by mutual respect, trust, diversity, acceptance and empowerment. The elements to consider in creating a “Safe Space” are [6]:

1. Listen and be emotionally present
2. Use ability-appropriate and challenging situations (focus on challenge at hand)
3. Educate others about creating a safe space, both through words and through modeling
4. Be sensitive to the relationship between students’ abilities and their personal life, and
5. Some instructions must be unconventional

The Challenge...

How can each of us harness a unique cultural framework incorporating the various cultural elements pertaining to our individual classroom environment in creating a learning environment that is organic and timely? Below, I have provided a framework that I have consistently used in my classrooms that have yielded fairly successful results as student feedbacks indicate. The key word in my classroom setting is “ENGAGEMENT”.



IMPLICATIONS

Given that learning is an organic and dynamic process, the variables and implications are any in facilitating learning, thus necessitating the classroom environment to be a highly pliant and diverse. Authentic exchange of information and acquisition of knowledge cannot occur unless we as facilitators

of learning attend to the fostering the emotional intelligence components in our students. These emotional intelligence components of self-awareness, social awareness, social skills, empathy and internal motivation need to be nurtured and cultivated through highly engaging classroom cultural. When a classroom environment is characterized by warm, respectful, and emotionally supportive relationships, students perform better academically in part because they are emotionally engaged in the learning process. Classroom culture is central to learning.

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