



CLASSROOM CLIMATE



Photo: Max Klingensmith (www.flickr.com)

This handout introduces classroom climate – its key aspects and how it relates to student learning. Although the handout provides some suggestions for how to improve classroom climate, its primary purpose is not to provide an exhaustive list of resources or prescriptive ‘tips.’ It is rather to provide an analytical lens to unpack the complexity of classroom climate for further exploration.

The case study below taken from the research project, *What I Learned in Class Today: Aboriginal issues in the Classroom* (Crey & Perreault, 2007), identifies a classroom scenario that took place at UBC Vancouver. This situation, although troubling, is not uncommon and it directly impacted this student’s experience in the course and the classroom climate more broadly.

What would you do if you were an instructor in this situation?

Excerpt taken from a student interview with Vicki George:

We were talking about First Nations stuff, so there's totally First Nations content in the course and in this particular discussion. And for some reason, this non-First Nations student stands up and has the floor for about 10 minutes. . . . He said, "When Aboriginal people walk into a room, they are considered political. They're just political, that's just the way it is." . . . I said:

You know, when Aboriginal people walk into the room, they're Aboriginal people. If you choose to think of us as political, that's something different. And that's a general statement, it's an assumption, it's a stereotype. You know, I could just say, "You as a White person, when you walk into the room you're political." What does that mean, exactly? Like, what are you getting at?

He couldn't answer me, and as I was responding to his rant, I didn't even get to the, him talking about Black people. I was just dealing with this comment, this one comment. There was others. So as I was listening to him and after I made my response, I had another student on the other side of me say, "Be quiet, he has a right to say what he wants." So I looked at her and I went, "Excuse me, I have a right to say something too, and it's called a response, and I was responding to his racial comments. So don't tell me to be quiet." . . .

And at one point the instructor did say, as she's scanning the room and looking at all of us, "Is there anybody who wants to respond to this?" She was actually, the way that it was posed was that, you know, she was just hoping and pleading that somebody respond to him. . . .

And there was this paper that was due in that class, and I seriously for one week I was so angry about what had happened in that classroom, and I was so angry about the way it was . . . poorly dealt with that when I wrote that paper for that class, . . . that day would come back, and how it just made me angry. And so I just, I couldn't even do it.

This story illustrates the multi-dimensional factors that inform difficult classroom situations and how those situations resulted in a negative classroom experience for the student, Vicki, and continued to impact her ability to learn beyond the class time. Classroom climate does not always encompass blatant uncivil behaviors or explicit stereotypes directed towards a certain group of people, like in this incident. It can also include more subtle incidents or factors, such as the tone instructors set, omission of certain perspectives in the course material, implicit stereotypes expressed in class discussions, and the demographics of the class. Regardless of how explicit or implicit classroom dynamics may appear, it is crucial for instructors to understand the complex ways in which different elements of the classroom interact with each other to impact student learning.

What is classroom climate?

As well as instructors, students are not only intellectual but also social and emotional beings. Likewise, the classroom is not a static intellectual space but rather a multi-dimensional and

dynamic space. Ambrose et al. (2010) define classroom climate as “the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn” (p. 170). As Figure 1 illustrates, different aspects of the classroom climate and student development – intellectual development and social identity development in particular – interact with each other to have an impact on student learning and performance.

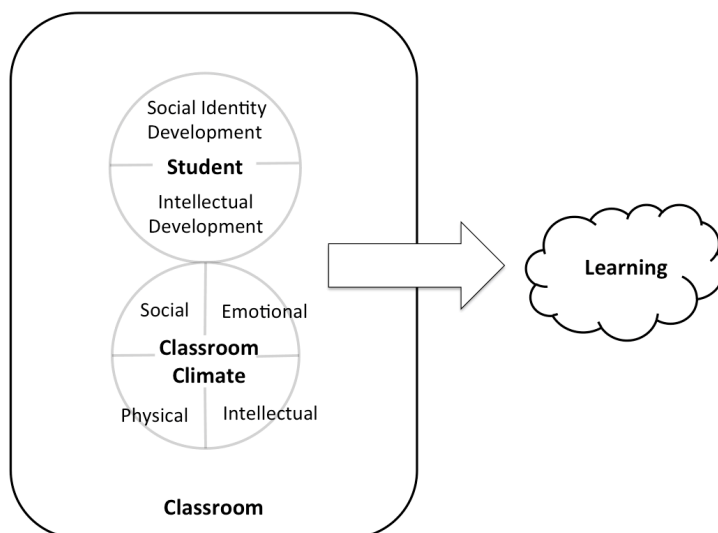


Figure 1: Interactive Effect of Student Development and Classroom Climate on Learning (Adapted from Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 157)

These elements of the classroom environment are not mutually exclusive but rather interactive with one another, but instructors may attend to the following aspects of student development and classroom climate to consider how each aspect is related to teaching and learning:

- **Intellectual development** – Depending on where students are at in their intellectual development, they could react to course content or a class discussion differently to shape a particular climate in the classroom.
- **Social identity development** – For college-level students, social identity – identification with certain social groups – is one of the most salient areas of development, and different ways in which each student sees him/herself can create a unique classroom dynamic.

The classroom situation illustrated in the beginning of this document shows how students’ intellectual development and social identity development interacted with social, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of classroom climate. As for **intellectual development**, it is possible that students in this particular class brought in different levels of prior knowledge related to the First Nations course content. The student who commented, “When Aboriginal people walk into a room, they are considered political,” and another student supporting him might have had a limited understanding of the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal communities.

In this scenario, the students' different **social identities** combined with their different levels of knowledge created a conflicting **emotional and social climate** in the room. As an Indigenous person, Vicki was offended and upset by her classmate's stereotypical comments about Indigenous peoples. Equally upsetting was the gesture from another classmate who told her to be quiet when this situation escalated. It is likely that these classmates did not have a fully developed sense of their social identities – how they are positioned in systems of privilege and oppression, especially in relation to Indigenous peoples. The student who singled out Indigenous peoples as political and the other student supporting him suggest their white normative perspective, which assumes that “whites occupy an unquestioned and unexamined place of esteem, power, and privilege” (Bell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 907). Having been in a social position that has allowed them to hold an unquestioned self-image as “normal” and “non-political,” they probably did not recognize what it meant for them to say what they said from their social locations and felt defensive against Vicki who challenged their entitled attitudes.

It is also likely that this incident raised various emotions for the rest of the students in the class, such as confusion, discomfort, and anger. In addition, the incident made an adversarial social climate – Aboriginal vs. non-Aboriginal people. A lack of proper intervention by the instructor (e.g., stopping the conversation to take a moment to unpack what is going on) implicitly, if not wittingly, supported a social climate in which students could make comments that would offend or silence each other. In this particular incident, the classroom situation had a lasting negative impact on students' relationships with one another as well as Vicki's relationship with the instructor.

The **intellectual climate** of the classroom became unproductive for all of the students in the class because the stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples and positionality of the over-dominant male student were never questioned or unpacked. Failure on the instructor's part to do so resulted in the class's lack of opportunity to understand why the stereotypes may be incorrect and problematic and what it really meant that the student made such remarks.

Most troubling though was the impact that this classroom scenario had on Vicki and how it impacted her long after the class time was finished. It is also quite likely that other students' intellectual engagement in the course was also disrupted as a result. Those students who lacked an in-depth understanding of Indigenous issues might have seen the incident as a mere personal conflict, rather than a conflict with broader socio-political implications. Some might have been discouraged from learning more deeply about the topic not only during the class time but also afterwards as a result of this incident. Without supportive follow-up by the instructor, they might have left feeling threatened or overwhelmed by the emotional and political intensity associated with the topic and not wanting to go back to learn more about it.

Lastly, but not the least, the **physical** aspect of classroom climate is an important area of consideration. The physical aspect includes classroom type (e.g., an auditorium, a small classroom, a lab), layout (e.g., students sit facing the front of the room, students sit in small groups, everyone sits in a circle), and medium (e.g., face-to-face, online).

Among these physical dimensions of the classroom, classroom climate in an online space deserves special attention as online interactions are increasingly integrated into our teaching and learning practice. Some studies report that an online classroom environment, in which student identities are anonymized, helps their class participation because an environment as such frees them from anxiety of others' eyes of judgment – including fear of being stereotyped or prejudiced based on their appearance or social identities, or being judged of their opinions or mistakes (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011; Sullivan, 2002). On the one hand, anonymity could indeed help to reduce students' unproductive performance anxiety and self-consciousness and allow them to push their boundaries and freely explore new ideas or practice newly learned skills. On the other hand, it is equally possible that, because of this anonymity and sense of security behind computer screens, some students could feel freer to express their views that may be offensive or harmful to others, and other students are likely to remain bystanders (Straumsheim, 2014, 2015).

We can only speculate how Vicki's class discussion might have gone if had it been in an online setting. Whatever the case might have been, it is pivotal to remember that, cyberspace cannot be a completely anonymous and neutral space, where we can completely detach our interactions from our social context, such as race and history (Jenkins, 2002). UBC Indigenous new media scholar David Gaertner (2014) is critical of the notion of cyberspace as a landless territory and argues that it is crucial to acknowledge one's social, physical, and historical location even when operating in online environments. As he structures his class in a way to make students critically reflect upon how these factors affect their interactions facilitated by technologies, an online learning environment, given its contextual complexities, requires an intentional pedagogical approach.

In sum, regardless of whether the classroom is online or face-to-face and whether or to what extent our identities are visible to each other, our classroom interactions, as well as our bodies, are deeply embedded in our social context that shapes who we are in relation to each other. Land, body, history, and classroom environment are intricately interconnected with one another to influence student learning, much like the aforementioned spheres of classroom climate – social, emotional, intellectual, and physical – do.

What do empirical studies say about classroom climate?

It may be clear in the example above why classroom climate plays a significant role in student learning and performance. However, here are more examples from empirical studies highlighting different aspects of classroom climate and how and why classroom climate matters.

- **Classroom microaggressions by students and instructors:** A recent study (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015) found microaggressions (brief and commonplace indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate derogatory slights and insults toward the target person or group) in nearly 30% of the observed college classrooms. Classroom microaggressions were more likely to be delivered in the institutions with the highest concentrations of racial/ethnic minority students, and instructors were the most

common perpetrators. While cultural/racial as well as gendered microaggressions were also witnessed, the most frequent types of microaggressions were those that attacked the intelligence and competence of students.

- **Consequences of classroom incivilities:** Hirschy and Braxton's study (2004) shows that students' uncivil classroom behaviors (e.g., disrespectful disruptions, insolent inattention) affect not only classroom climate but also other students' achievement and persistence. According to them, those students who frequently observe classroom incivilities become less committed to their intellectual and academic growth, and their sense of belonging to or effort to succeed at their institutions is also undermined.
- **Implications of a broader social context:** A study by Huston and DiPietro (2007) shows implications of a broader social context outside the classroom for classroom climate and students' learning experiences. The study reports that instructors' failure to address a collective crisis (e.g., the 9-11 terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina) in their social context negatively affected students' learning by causing feelings of frustration, disappointment, or apathy. In contrast, students appreciated instructors who responded to a collective tragedy in a humane way, even if the recognition was in a simple form (e.g., one minute of silence).
- **Implications of instructors' social identities:** Instructors' social identities have important implications for classroom climate. Studies show common challenges that minority female instructors experience (e.g., student hostility, resistance) in teaching social justice issues in university classrooms (Dua & Lawrence, 2000; Rodriguez, Boahene, Gonzales-Howell, & Anesi, 2012). It is also reported that female faculty and faculty of color are more prone to experience classroom incivility than their white, male colleagues (Alexander-Snow, 2004).
- **Questions about the classroom as a 'safe space':** Some scholars argue that the ideal of the classroom as a 'safe space' is not only impossible but also unproductive, especially in teaching and discussing social justice issues (Barrett, 2010; Boler, 1999; Redmond, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). They assert that feeling 'unsafe' is an inevitable and necessary process in critically and actively engaging with inequalities and oppressions in society, which we are socialized not to see or to see as 'normal.' Lowe's (2015) study demonstrates that students can be sensitized to discomfort in learning about sensitive social issues and that positive learning experiences do not necessarily involve positive emotions.

What can instructors do to improve classroom climate?

Instructors may not be able to fully predict or control factors that are brought into the classroom or what actually happens there, but they have a great deal of control over, and responsibility for, the classroom environment they create.

To create a respectful and productive classroom climate, you may explore strategies suggested by Ambrose and colleagues (2010), which include:¹

- Resisting a single right answer/Embracing ambiguity
- Encouraging learners to base their opinions on evidence
- Examining your assumptions about learners (e.g., unconscious bias of students' abilities)
- Not asking individuals to speak for an entire group
- Modeling inclusivity (e.g., Using inclusive language and diverse examples, integrating different perspectives into course content)
- Establishing and reinforcing ground rules for interactions (i.e., The instructor and/or the students identify a set of expected classroom behaviors, especially in discussions)²
- Preparing learners for sensitive topics by explaining why it is valuable to discuss the topics despite potential discomfort and tension
- Addressing tensions early as they emerge and turning them into learning moments (e.g., Unpacking a learner's insensitive comment by explaining its possible impact on some others despite a lack of a malicious intent, taking a time out when a heated moment arises to allow learners to write their reflections)

A critical consideration for creating ground rules for discussions

Ambrose et al. (2010) along with others (Brookfield, 2006; Ewert-Bauer, 2011) suggest the creation of ground rules as an effective strategy to establish and maintain an inclusive and respectful classroom climate. Although this strategy can be helpful in some contexts, it still needs to be practiced with critical considerations.

According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), common ground rules, such as affirming everyone's perspectives, assuring everyone feels heard, are underpinned by an assumption that "it is possible to create a space that is experienced by all students as respectful, validating, and protective" (p. 2). However, they argue that, when all voices do not carry the same weight due to unequal levels of power attached to our multiple and intersecting social identities, it is more likely for ground rules to reflect the interest and needs of dominant groups than making space for marginalized voices.

For example, we may return to the classroom situation that Vicki described here. We do not know whether the particular class had ground rules for discussions and what kinds of rules it might have had. However, if the class had had rules such as "respect different views" and "agree to disagree," what, and who, might the rules have helped in the situation? The rules could have supported, more than Vicki, the white male student who made problematic remarks and the other student who supported him and silenced Vick by saying, "Be quiet, he has a right to say what he wants." It is more likely that the rules would have functioned to allow these

¹ Please see Ambrose et al. (2010, p. 180-186) for full descriptions of these strategies. The book is available in both hard copy and electronic copy at the UBC Library.

² See "A critical consideration for creating ground rules for discussions" below for further considerations.

students to feel ‘safe’ by legitimizing their voices without critically questioning their knowledge claims and entitlement to holding and expressing whatever opinions they had.³ The rules could have prevented the whole class from making moral judgment by allowing them to fall to moral relativism (Ruitenberg, 2007).

The context of this argument by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) is connected to approaches taken in social justice education, but their concerns have broader application, considering that different social identities of the instructor and their students interact with one another in any classroom. If the intention of creating ground rules is to establish an inclusive and democratic classroom climate, reproduction of unequal power relations in the classroom is a relevant and valid concern for any instructor. An alternative classroom strategy presented in the article by Sensoy and DiAngelo may help you think about how you could navigate complex power dynamics in your classroom.

Resources and services at UBC

- **Classroom Climate Series** (<http://ctl.t.ubc.ca/programs/all-our-programs/classroom-climate-series/>) - A year-long series of workshop sessions offered by Indigenous Initiatives at the Centre of Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) at UBC. This series offers the UBC community the opportunity to challenge their own assumptions about what they have learned about Indigenous peoples, become more critically aware of their teaching and research practices, and learn more about how they engage with topics that challenge their own social location within the institution. The wiki page compiles session information and related resources for each session topic.
- **What I Learned in Class Today: Aboriginal Issues in the Classroom** (<http://www.whatilearnedinclasstoday.com>) (Crey & Perreault, 2007) – Videos of interviews with UBC students and instructors discussing difficult conversations on Aboriginal issues in their classrooms. Includes discussion topics and facilitator guide that help conduct discussions on the issues addressed in the interviews.
- **Contact us: Indigenous Initiatives, CTLT** (<http://ctl.t.ubc.ca/programs/aboriginal-initiatives/>) – Indigenous Initiatives collaborates and partners with units, departments, faculties, and groups across campus to create a respectful and productive classroom environment, particularly in teaching and discussing Indigenous issues and issues related to cultural and social diversity. Please contact Amy Perreault (amy.perreault@ubc.ca), Strategist, Indigenous Initiatives, Hanae Tsukada (hanae.tsukada@ubc.ca), Educational Developer, Classroom Climate and/or Janey Lew (janey.lew@ubc.ca), Educational Developer: Indigenous Initiatives with questions or interest.

³ See also “Questions about the classroom as a safe space” (p. 6 of this document).

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