

## **Nurturing an Environment for Learning**

Barry Van Veen

You make a big difference in how well students learn in this class. Your attitude and the culture you promote are critically important for student success.

### **Attitude**

Your role is to come alongside or partner with the students in their learning process. The fact that you know the material does not grant you higher status. We are equals in terms of our intrinsic value even though we have different roles in the classroom.

Our world values competence and discourages the vulnerability associated with admitting you don't know the answer(s). Students come in with this mindset and it hinders their learning. This classroom is to be a place where open inquiry and admitting ignorance is encouraged. Here are a few ways you can promote a healthy learning culture:

- 1) Show respect. Try to learn as many names as you can and use their names when talking to students. Be careful about privacy in the presence of peers. Asking how someone did on an exam, or even asking about them missing class, not turning in an assignment, etc, can be embarrassing if others are in hearing range.
- 2) Be cheerful. Welcome questions and interaction with a smile. Let your body language say that you are approachable. You may not feel like it all the time, but acting this way in spite your feelings will often create the very feelings you lack.
- 3) Accept everyone. The classroom is to be a judgment-free zone. Accept the student wherever they are at in their state of understanding the material, and work with them to move them forward. Whether they are lacking some prerequisite knowledge or they prepared for class is should not change your attitude toward them. That is in the past and making them feel bad about it is only going to hinder their learning now and in the future. If they are asking you a question, then they are moving in a positive direction and we want to encourage them.
  - Keep in mind that a student may be struggling academically due to adverse life events. I've had students facing serious mental/physical illness, a parent dying of cancer, living out of a car with a small child, and so on.
  - If you encounter someone with life circumstances that could have a significant impact on their ability to succeed in the course, please encourage them to talk with me, or ask permission to share what you've learned with me. Often I can help.
  - Similarly, if you find a student is consistently unprepared for class or lacking important prerequisites, please let me know and I'll work with them to see if we can address the issue.
- 4) Promote a growth mindset. Openly acknowledge that the material is difficult, but that with hard work, help, and perseverance everyone can succeed. Set the expectation that there will be many questions and that it is normal to wrestle with the material to reach understanding. Never state or imply that someone doesn't belong here because they are struggling.
- 5) Treat every question as a great question. A question indicates the student is engaged and trying to learn. It also indicates they trust you enough to be vulnerable

revealing that they don't understand a topic. Reward them with an engaged and positive response.

## **Methods**

A few practical suggestions that I have found important and effective:

- 1) Be prepared. Review the material and the in-class exercise before you come to class. Try to anticipate likely questions and think through your approach to answering them. If you think you spot errors in Moodle exercises, please let Akhil and I know immediately.
- 2) Use questions to answer questions. Whenever appropriate, guide the student into discovering the answer to their question rather than simply telling them the answer. This requires you assess what they know as a starting point, and then ask questions that help them extrapolate their existing knowledge to solve the problem at hand.
- 3) Ask for feedback. Explicitly verify the student's question is addressed. You can ask, "Does that make sense?" Often their body language will tell whether they now get it. You can say, "You aren't convincing me that I've explained this clearly. Does any part of this need clarification?"
- 4) Get help. If you don't know how to answer a question, are having trouble explaining anything, or the student is not following your logic, bring another instructor into the discussion. You may be misunderstanding the student's question or the student may not be clearly describing the underlying issue that is bothering them. No one expects you to have all the answers. You seeking help models the very growth mindset we seek to promote in the classroom.
- 5) Ask questions. If you are not busy responding to questions from students, take the opportunity to ask questions of the students. Ask them to explain something from the exercise, such as why the graph on the screen looks a certain way, or how this problem connects to something else in the course. Or simply check in and ask how it is going. Often your initiation will give the student the courage or opportunity to ask a question.

## **Safety**

- 1) Advice on helping emotionally distressed students is available at: <http://www.uhs.wisc.edu/umatter/faculty/helping-students.shtml> If it becomes clear that the student is at immediate risk of suicide, please call 911 and stay with the student until help arrives.
- 2) If you have reason to believe a student is at risk of harming others, please contact University Police. If the risk is immediate, call 911.