Non-Threatening Classroom Environments

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What makes a classroom environment threatening to students? That depends on the student. Some may find the subject itself threatening—it may be embarrassing, distasteful, or just too difficult. Others are threatened because they think that everyone in the class knows more than they do. The personalities of some students threaten or intimidate fellow students. Opinions expressed on a topic may all be on one side of an issue and that can intimidate students who disagree—“I’m the only one who doesn’t agree with this.” Instructor mannerisms and styles of communication, course requirements or structure sometimes threaten students’ comfort level. Language and cultural factors are well-documented as further barriers to creating a non-threatening classroom environment for all. And finally some students are intimidated by class size. If it’s really big they may be afraid to participate; if it’s really small they may be afraid they’ll have to.

So what makes a classroom environment non-threatening? Recently we asked our students this question and after a discussion of their responses we came up with this description. “A non-threatening classroom environment would be one in which each participant feels safe and free to learn within the limits of the instructor’s design for the course.” We don’t claim that this is a conclusive definition, but it is a place to start.

What can we do to create this kind of environment? We believe it is possible to mitigate most of the feelings of discomfort by paying attention to the factors we can control in the classroom environment. In our experience, the introduction we give of ourselves to the class and how we approach the first five minutes of the first class session sets the tone for that class. Research has shown that many students will have formed an opinion of the class by the end of that first five minutes. We should do all we can to be welcoming to the students and to establish an atmosphere of initial rapport and caring.Does this preclude being firm or “tough”? Not at all. Showing genuine interest in students and their diverse strengths and weaknesses can establish an initial safety zone. Policies and requirements of the course can then be explained. Establishing ground rules appropriate to the course’s design and purpose can extend the safety zone into areas such as class discussion (i.e. one person speaks at a time, two-minute limit on comments, attack the argument instead of the person) and electronic communication courtesy and protocols (i.e. phone calls to professor end at six; emails Monday through Friday answered within 24 hours).

As classroom environment issues emerge, they can be approached proactively. We recommend requesting student feedback anonymously on threat levels and triggers, and if appropriate discussing that feedback in class. Some issues threatening the learning security of a classroom can be dealt with privately, such as an overbearing student who needs counseling, but others must
be confronted as a class, such as an endemic trend toward sarcasm in discussions.

Finally, what about the impact of a threatening environment on the professor? Students can intimidate, cause embarrassment and discomfort, even totally shake the confidence of seasoned classroom veterans. The first step is to recognize that there is a problem and take action as soon as it occurs. If not, it will almost certainly get worse. Bringing in an experienced assessor and mediator (may be someone from the Teaching & Learning Center) to proactively work with both the students and instructor to identify the problem and to suggest solutions for both parties has proven itself a constructive approach.

Although our discussion of non-threatening classroom environments, what they are, why they emerge, how they diminish learning and how more constructive climates can be created produced few definitive, one-size-fits-all answers, we felt enriched by our discussion. Reflection on this key question is well worth the effort. What role does each of us play in creating a non-threatening learning environment? Which factors can we control and which must we seek to understand and ameliorate idiosyncratically?