



# Creating A Nurturing Classroom Environment

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*Teachers can accommodate differences in student learning styles by creating an environment in which individuals feel free to be themselves.*

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This article began when I started kindergarten 42 years ago, and my folks had to take me out of school because I was so afraid of my kindergarten teacher that I became physically ill. When we moved, I started back to kindergarten. My new teacher helped me feel good about me and her—and learning. Mostly because of how she was, I learned to like going to school and learning.

I'm also writing this because of my decision early in life "never to teach." When I thought about teaching I remembered how I felt and to some extent still feel as I walk into a public school building. I feel vaguely apprehensive because the places seem drab, cold,

regimented, impersonal, and I have a number of other visceral reactions that are difficult to pinpoint with words. Despite all this, I stayed in schools as a student for about 25 years and have stayed another 16 as a counselor, and finally, a teacher.

One of the things I have discovered in these last 16 years is that neither I nor many of my colleagues feel much more nurtured by our school environments than I felt much of the time as a student. I am not knocking the system or the folks in it either. For the last ten years, I have been searching for and finding ways that make the educational process a more fun, exciting, and nurturing place to be for myself and my students.

I have learned a lot from several people who in the last ten years have been sharing in person and in the literature their research, experiences, and ideas about how to accomplish what I also have been trying to accomplish. Two of

the concepts I have encountered that I find most exciting and valuable are referred to in the literature as cognitive style and hemispheric functioning. These refer to the variety of ways we gather and process information from our environment(s).

## Your Style, My Style

As a simple example of the type of information being provided by these approaches, I would like to talk for a moment about you and me. You have probably noticed, whether you have focused on it or not, that I have a particular style of writing and that you have a particular reaction to me and my style. Some of you are enjoying my style and feeling in sync with me. Some of you may be turned off by my style or are having difficulty following my way of presenting ideas. Some may have already stopped reading!

I discover as I write, since I

know there is no way that I can know and respond to each of your styles or strategy differences, that I am trying very hard with my own style to create a particular environmental context for us. I am trying to create an environment between us that communicates my respect for you and your differences from and similarities to me. I want to express my nonjudgmental recognition of our differences. I also want to let you know that I know that there may be some problems in this communication between us with which we both must struggle if true communication is to take place.

I have a less helpless but similar feeling when I step into a class of 30 students to whom I am committed to teach a certain amount of subject matter in a restricted period of time. Earlier on, in trying to cope with my feelings of both helplessness and responsibility, I searched frantically for ways to "objectively" measure the differences among the students in my classrooms. Someone, somewhere, must have developed a test that would identify individual differences, and tell me what I could and should do with those differences that would fit in with whatever subject matter I happened to be attempting to teach to those 30 persons who were waiting to be "taught" by me. I am still looking, and probably you are too. My hunch is that our search is to be a long one. I have decided that I can't wait for the perfect tool, and that I don't have to wait in order to increase my effectiveness in my classroom a whole lot.

To create the environment I am talking about, I must both believe and communicate my belief to my students that we all take in and process information in our own unique ways and that we are entitled to be who we are. I must give active and respectful attention to whether or not I can label or measure these differences.

These individual persons are also different from each other, and frequently *very* different from us, the teachers. They are also like us and like each other in ways that we as teachers can attend to without any measures or other technical assistance.

### Obstacles to This Good Environment

This process of creating an optimum learning environment isn't easy. I would like to share with you some obstacles. You can then add your own knowledge of additional personal obstacles.

The major obstacles for me are my "hidden agendas" and those of my students. In the early days of my teaching these hardly ever got brought out into the open in the classroom. Some of the students' "hidden agendas" are the stereotypes of teachers and classrooms they have developed from past interactions between themselves and their educational experiences. These attitudes make it difficult for them to see any particular class as a potentially new and exciting experience. Rather, their experience is viewed through their accumulated image of how *their* classroom is. Unless their images become an open topic for discussion, no matter how different I am as a teacher, the students don't recognize, believe, or trust the differences. These differences don't fit the image(s) and expectations that they brought in with them, and are only vaguely aware of within themselves. Lack of self-awareness results in, for most of us, acting automatically on our past experience. It is hard to deal with my own and/or others' automatic behavior, and that automatic behavior certainly gets in the way of fully experiencing the present. Knowledge of this human phenomenon has led to the development of a variety of kinds of awareness exercises teachers can use for the classroom.

For example, I sometimes ask students to close their eyes and allow an image to form of the classroom with which they are most familiar. Then, asking them to stay with that image, I suggest they see themselves in that room, attend to where they are sitting in the room, how the chairs or desks are arranged, how the teacher looks, and how they are feeling about her or him. Still staying in their fantasied classroom, I ask them to look around, notice whether the room feels warm or cold, what the colors in the room are like, and how they feel sitting in that fantasied room. Then I ask them to allow themselves to return to the present, slowly open their eyes, and look around our actual here-and-now room and notice differences and similarities. Then I invite them to share their fantasies and compare their fantasy with the "reality" of our classroom. As I lead the fantasy, I also experience my own images, which helps me model the sharing. I then allow them to know who I am and how I would like the class to be for me and them. I invite them to react to my wants and to contribute wants of theirs. Then we make a commitment to work at creating a place where we would all like to be.

A more structured way of examining the same issues is to ask students some specific questions about their expectations—either orally (which I like best because it begins to get them acquainted with me and each other) or in writing.

In addition to the "hidden agendas" phenomenon, another potential obstacle to the creation of a nurturing environment is the background of the teacher. I discovered early in my teaching career that teachers are frequently not as comfortable as we should be in the classroom, particularly when meeting students face-to-face. Most of *us* did not have these kinds of nurturing experiences as students, and most teacher educa-

tion institutions never helped us learn how to communicate who we are and how we feel to students, or even that it is legitimate and desirable to do so.

There is a substantial amount of literature these days that indicates that we tend to teach both how we were taught and how we ourselves tend to learn most comfortably. This added to the risk of being open about who we are is a bit scary for most of us. Many of us need some assistance to acquire the confidence and skills to be comfortable with more open interpersonal communication.

As a psychologist, I have had lots of training in this area, and I find it difficult to adequately transfer these skills into a classroom with 30 students. It is so much easier to make rules, keep a tight ship, and lecture. But I cheat both myself and my students out of half of the educational process if I don't try, and keep on trying.

I would also like to say that this open kind of classroom atmosphere does not lead to the chaos so many fear. In my experience, it leads to a reduction in the student-teacher adversary relationship that causes many of the disciplinary problems anyway. I have received assistance in more open communication through the kind of training experiences referred to in Gazda (1973), Aspy and Roebuck (1977), and Kagan (1977). There are also a number of other types of programs designed specifically for in-service training experiences.

I would like to see more of us teachers paying more attention to the environment we create for ourselves in the classroom. I try to arrange my life so that I feel as good as possible, as often as possible, and as nurtured as possible, as often as possible, everywhere—including the classroom. I think that my students benefit a great deal from my good care of myself. Recently I have read some research that supports this belief in Aspy

and Roebuck's book entitled, *Kids Don't Learn from Teachers They Don't Like*.

Anyway, with this attitude of mine, when I go into a class feeling tired and funky, within ten to 20 minutes my energy comes up. I start to feel attentive and involved in what's happening at the moment, and good and happy to be there. If this fails to happen, I know that there is something seriously amiss, either with my life



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outside the classroom, or with me and my students inside the classroom. I try first to see if I can detect the "culprit" in me and my doings. If the trouble is with me: (1) I am doing too many things and feeling stressed and preoccupied, or (2) I am doing too many things that I don't like doing, and feeling heavy and resentful. If I don't find the trouble with me, then I raise the issue of my feelings with the class to see if they are having the same feelings and find out if they can be of any assistance to us/me to remedy the situation.

I remember one instance when I did this, and one of my students (a college sophomore) said to me, "Well, Ann, I think you're trying too hard to be fair in grading all of our papers and having us all feel good all the time about the feedback you give us—you know, there is fair, and then there is nit-picky, and I think you're being nit-picky!" With her clarity and bravery to pave the way, the others joined in, and together we made some new commitments about our shared responsibilities and my responsibilities for their learning.

You may not be so lucky, but

my general experience is that talking about these issues changes the energy level. Your style is yours, and mine is mine, and you will find your own way to attend to these issues if they seem important to you. My own belief is that not much is happening in a classroom where either my energy and involvement, or the students' energy and involvement is consistently low.

Only when I create an environment for learning in my classroom based on the issues that I have been discussing, do differences in learning styles and strategies begin to become apparent. Only then do students feel free to share their learning difficulties, strengths, and weaknesses. The issue then becomes, what do I do as a teacher when I begin to attend to the differences as they emerge? I believe that one of the ways we teachers fail to recognize these differences is because of our own anxiety and helplessness about what to do with the differences once we recognize them.

I have shared some of my thinking and experiences in creating a classroom environment that is intellectually exciting, responsive to individual differences, and nurturing and enjoyable for both teacher and students. My way is to get a little information about what others have discovered and thought, and then use my own style and common sense about how these ideas can be useful to me in helping me to accomplish my objectives as a teacher. I hope you will try it, too.  $\square$

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