



## **Effective Instructional Practice:**

### **Facilitating a Connected Classroom Climate**

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A connected classroom climate reflects “student-to-student perceptions of a supportive and cooperative communication environment in the classroom” (Dwyer et al., 2004, p. 267). Most instructors and students desire a supportive and cooperative classroom climate. Although much of instructional communication research has focused on the influence instructors exert on students, in any given classroom, students and the instructor affect one another, for better or worse. The classroom can be viewed as a community setting. Teaching and learning not only occurs between the instructor and students, but also among students (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002).

Student-to-student connectedness represents the relational interactions that take place among students in the classroom. Students express themselves freely and openly in nonjudgmental ways that allow strong bonds to develop in the connected classroom. These friendly, socially connected interactions include students praising one another, sharing personal stories or experiences, and engaging in general small talk (Dwyer et al, 2004). Not only do instructors enjoy a connected classroom climate, but also they report liking their students more in connected classrooms (Sidelinger, Bolen, Frisby, & McMullen, 2012). The concept of the connected classroom climate implies the intent to establish and maintain a positive context that facilitates classroom learning and positive communication.

Facilitating a connected classroom climate is important for three reasons. First, a connected classroom climate enhances student learning outcomes. A connected

classroom climate is associated positively with student affective learning (Johnson, 2009), cognitive learning (Prisbell, Dwyer, Carlson, Bingham, & Cruz, 2009), and self-regulated learning (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Students who connect with each other also are more comfortable asking questions in class (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010) and getting extra help from their instructor and classmates outside of class (Sidelinger, Bolen, McMullen, & Nyeste, 2015). Second, a connected classroom climate positively affects communication. In connected classes, students participate more (Frisby & Martin, 2010), text less (Ifert-Johnson, 2013), and engage in civil behaviors (Myers et al., 2016). It also provides students enrolled in public speaking courses with a comfortable climate to present speeches. Sidelinger, Myers, and McMullen (2011) reported that students' perceptions of connectedness in public speaking classes is related to decreases in public speaking anxiety and public speaking apprehension, as well as to increases in perceptions of communication competence.

Third, a connected classroom climate is associated with effective instructional behaviors. Instructor confirmation behaviors (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010), rapport (Frisby & Martin, 2010), nonverbal immediacy (Ifert-Johnson, 2009), and humor (Sidelinger, Frisby, McMullen, & Heisler, 2012) enhance students' perceptions of a connected classroom climate. Instructors also are perceived as more flexible in the classroom. A connected classroom climate is linked positively to instructors' willingness to comply with student requests (Sidelinger, Bolen et al., 2012).

### **Five Tips on Facilitating a Connected Classroom Climate**

1. Provide students with opportunities to connect with one another early in the semester. Use interactive and experiential learning--group discussions, problem solving

assignments, and role-playing activities--to engage students in learning and help them to connect with one another during the first few weeks of a semester. In-class activities and small group discussions may facilitate familiarity among students. Students who are uncomfortable participating in class may be inclined to speak in a small group. Sollitto, Johnson, and Myers (2013) stated that “engaging in group work could serve the function of helping students interact more by helping the students associate with one another and work toward common goals together” (p. 327). Student rapport (Frisby & Martin 2010) and appropriate, relevant self-disclosures with one another (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015) positively affect students’ perceptions of a connected classroom climate.

2. Once students become familiar with one another, encourage class participation. Not only will students connect with one another in small groups, but also with the larger class. Unfortunately, instructors are more likely to ask questions and encourage participation early in the semester; as the semester progresses, they spend less effort attempting to stimulate student involvement if earlier attempts fail (Howard & Henney, 1998). However, students are more likely to respond to instructor questions in class once student-to-student connectedness is established (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Be mindful that students may not be ready to participate at the start of a semester.

3. Be available to meet students outside of class and suggest students do the same with one another. A connected classroom climate strengthens student involvement and communication outside of the classroom. Students are more likely to seek instructors (e.g., during office hours) and classmates (e.g., to form study groups) outside of class (Sidelinger et al., 2015), and engage in extracurricular activities such as alternative,

service-related spring breaks (Johnson & Martin, 2013) when connections are established in the classroom.

4. Rely on a range of prosocial instructional communication behaviors to strengthen perceptions of a connected classroom climate. Confirming behaviors such as demonstrating interest, dynamic teaching style, and responding to student questions and comments serve to create a connected classroom climate (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Likewise, when instructors engage in appropriate and relevant humor (e.g., jokes related to the course material, role playing/activities) and are nonverbally immediate (Sidelinger, Frisby et al., 2012), perceptions of student-to-student connectedness is enhanced. Ifert-Johnson (2009) and Johnson and LaBelle (2015) suggested students might not only mirror instructor behaviors in the classroom with instructors, but also with each other.

5. The Connected Classroom Climate Inventory may serve as a useful assessment tool for instructors. As a semester progresses, this measure can gauge student-to-student connectedness to determine whether it changes over time. Student assessments may be important and relevant in light of course objectives and goals.

### **Assessing the Connected Classroom Climate**

To assess the connected classroom climate, do so by using the 18-item Connected Classroom Climate Inventory (Dwyer et al., 2004) or Ifert-Johnson's (2009) 13-item abbreviated version.

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