

Creating an Open, Energized, and Collaborative Classroom Environment

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Have you ever wondered why some of your class sections are livelier and more engaged than others?

Your 10am class is energized, asking meaningful questions, pushing each other, and generally performing at a high level. But in the very next period they're almost zombie like, semi-responsive, and many students are barely holding on.

It's the same lesson plan. Same you. Same day. Yet, totally different results. Why?

Here's another interesting phenomenon. Have you ever asked a class if there are any questions right before handing out a test or evaluation, and no hands went up? Yet, when grading the test, you observe that a significant portion of the class underperforms or worse yet, fails. Clearly, students had questions. Why didn't any hands go up?

Although these phenomena may seem different, recent research demonstrates that they share the same underlying cause: fear. Specifically, it is the fear of being judged or punished.

When a student raises their hand in front of the class and effectively says "Hey Teach, I don't get it," they risk everyone in the room judging them and thinking "Wow, you are stupid."

Stop and really think about that.

In that moment, those students would rather underperform on that evaluation than risk being publicly perceived of as ignorant.

This type of fear is called psychological safety. Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmonson provides the most accepted definition, "A sense of confidence the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up." We all want that lively class environment where students feel confident to authentically engage each other and the course content, so how do we create psychological safety?

First, intentionally build relationships to create trust. You already do this by using On Course's learner centered activities, which inherently create trust through their interactive nature. Understanding psychological safety and how fear holds students back gives you the ability to unleash even higher levels of student engagement.

For example, I've redesigned the first day of class, making psychological safety the primary goal. As a new instructor, I spent a significant chunk of day one going over official documents: course guide, syllabus, grading policies, etc. etc. Looking back, it felt like sitting down with a lawyer. Is it any wonder that some students never came back for day two?

Now day one is all about relationship building. I begin with activities where students to talk with one another, first in pairs and then in groups. I intentionally avoid academic and other high fear topics associated with school.

Instead, I start with questions about their favorite restaurant in town, what superpower they'd like to have, etc. Once the ice is broken with these low fear topics, it's so much easier to transition to high fear topics such as publicly expressing ignorance/confusion, giving authentic feedback to one another, and taking academic risks.

Outside of academia, Google now trains their managers to use similar techniques. According to reporting by Pulitzer Prize winner Charles Duhigg, many Googlers now start meetings with relationship building before launching into the agenda.

Google's embrace of psychological safety came about from a five year and \$20 million research project to answer a simple question. Why, despite having the best minds on the planet, do some Google employee teams vastly outperform others? In the end, according to Duhigg, Google's exhaustive research concluded that individual personality traits of team members matter far less than how the team works together.

Put another way, the number one factor determining a group's success are its norms.

With the right norms, B and C grade individuals can work together and achieve A grade results. Skeptical? Just look at sports. Time and time again we see "Cinderella stories" where under- resourced teams with farm league talent not only play on the big stage, they win.

Let's return to those students who would rather underperform on that evaluation than risk being perceived of as ignorant. What norms drive this behavior? The classic and often duplicated Asch Conformity Experiment reveals just how powerfully fear of judgment influences our actions.

Why are participants so willing to conform and state something that's blatantly untrue? Asch's follow up questioning reveals that participants didn't want to be publicly ridiculed or perceived as "peculiar" (McLeod). They felt psychologically unsafe, just like countless students holding back their questions.

Even more importantly, the Asch experiment variations prove that small shifts in group dynamics matter. If just one actor tells the truth, test subject conformity drops precipitously. This proves what we intuitively know: few folks are willing to be the first to say something risky. But once someone else does, other people are much more willing to follow their lead.

So, why is that 10am class so lively and the 11:30 not? Odds are, in that 10am section there are one or more naturally confident students who, right from the start, felt comfortable asking questions and speaking their truth. In doing so they established the norm and unconsciously gave permission for others to do the same.

Going forward, you do not have to rely on drawing a lucky roster. By intentionally cultivating psychologically safe norms, you can dramatically lower the level of courage required for students to verbalize their thinking and questions.

Works Cited

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