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# Classroom Environment

## OBJECTIVES

- Create a plan to manage the classroom setting and facilitate student–faculty relationships given the physical environment, class size, and student diversity.
- Identify signs of incivility in the classroom.
- Explain faculty and student rights and responsibilities in the classroom.

This chapter describes all facets of the educational environment that facilitate learning. The educator has the responsibility to develop and implement a variety of teaching strategies and create a learning environment that is conducive to learning, is safe and non-judgmental, and affords students the opportunity to develop mentally as well as socially.

## THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Traditionally the classroom environment is regarded as the physical setting, combined with the psychological, social, and instructional experiences related to teacher–student characteristics and behaviors. The classroom environment plays as important a part in the teaching/learning experience as the content being learned. The environment consists of teachers, students, relationships, behaviors, abilities, competencies, and individuals. When any part of the environment is out of synch, there can be a big impact on learning outcomes. As a new instructor, it is advisable to be cognizant of all aspects of the environment to have positive academic outcomes.

Recent research has explored the psychosocial impact of student–teacher relationships and student–student relationships on educational outcomes. Educators have adjusted classroom environments and teaching modalities over time to accommodate what evidence has shown to be effective.

## THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Let us start with the physical environment, which can influence behavioral and academic outcomes. You may have little control over the physical location in which you teach, but there are still a few suggestions that will help you enhance students’ comfort and maximize learning. The classroom should be arranged so that every student has

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a clear view of and access to the teacher. The physical configuration of the furniture should match the type of interaction planned for the day. It sometimes may be necessary to arrange the classroom in a circle or semicircle. The lighting should be adequate and all students should be able to see what is being projected or written on the board. Always check your classroom before the students arrive to ensure that all equipment is functioning appropriately. It can be very disheartening if your audiovisual equipment fails just as you are about to begin teaching. The same can be said of online teaching. Make sure your technology is fully functioning before starting your chat sessions. Resources such as projector equipment, smartboards, desks and chairs, and computers must be fully functional. Educators are frequently engaged in using technology such as iPads, tablet PCs, and a variety of social media in the classroom to enhance teaching and encourage student learning.

**Class size** is usually determined by the scope of the curriculum. It is not unusual for faculty to be assigned upward of 50 students in a class; however, studies suggest that a class size of 30 or less is most conducive to learning. Smaller class sizes allow students to be less stressed, more cooperative, more attentive, and on task with assignments. Larger class sizes, by comparison, tend to have students who are more stressed, less cooperative, more distracted, more inattentive, and more anxious, and in some cases they have poorer educational outcomes. The larger the class, the more preparation you may have to do. If you are carrying out a very interactive class, you may find that the discussions and the desire of everyone to be heard may result in high levels of confusion that may even lead to disruption. Dividing the class into smaller groups and allowing one group to speak at a time may result in fewer interruptions.

**Class composition** may also significantly impact your class. It should not be surprising if in the traditional nursing classroom you come across more female than male students. The current male-to-female ratio in nursing is approximately 1:10. This should not make much difference in how and what you teach; however, the interactions may differ from those in non-nursing classrooms. You may also have a variety of learners in terms of age and learning speed. Older adults often take longer to digest what is being asked; therefore, special considerations need to be made for them. There will no doubt be a diverse group of students in the classroom. Diversity may be found in terms of age, sex, race, sexual orientation, ideas, learning styles, and intelligence. Although at first the level of diversity may be challenging, soon you will begin to see how interesting the dialogue will become.

## CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

To have an effective classroom, you must start out by managing it in the way you would like it to be for the entire semester. A classroom that is effectively run will afford students the social support they need and the mutual respect that all deserve. As a

teacher you need to set boundaries. This is not only a good habit, but also a part of growth and development. By setting limits and boundaries you help the students organize their lives in a meaningful way. They learn to plan their studies as well as meet deadlines, which as you know is a part of everyday life.

Start by having clear goals and expectations for the class. These can be written in the syllabus, verbally stated on the first day of class, or given in a **written contract**. Having a written contract between the teacher and the students is one way to hold everyone accountable to classroom expectations. The contract can outline the expectations for behaviors to be adhered to and the consequences of not adhering to those behaviors. Students must be consistently held accountable. Topics that can be included in a contract can be related to lateness, absenteeism, class participation, and grading. If students are not permitted to enter your class after a certain start time, then you must stick to that rule. If a grade is provided for class participation and a student does not participate, then she or he should not receive that grade point.

In the same manner in which you hold your students accountable, you should also hold yourself accountable. Make it a habit to be prompt, organized, engaging, and interesting to the students.

## DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Dealing with a diverse student population brings its own challenges. Following are some insights and suggestions on how teachers can address students of diverse ages, sexes, sexual orientations, races, and religions.

Approach the class with an open mind free of preconceived ideas and biases. Always anticipate issues surrounding sexuality, religion, and other values. One false assumption some teachers make is that all minority students of a certain race have a collective identity (Trustees of Indiana University, 2010). This could not be further from the truth. Therefore, do not ignore students' individuality by singling out one student to speak on behalf of a specific group or to receive any special attention or favors. Monitor students' commentaries to defuse any personal attacks. Finally, in making or giving assignments, be aware of people's values and beliefs in regard to cultural expectations and religious affiliations; for example, do not assign a male Muslim student to care for a Jewish woman in labor because this may be prohibited.

Whether in the classroom or online, remain aware of undertones during discussions. If you notice there is a tendency for some students to make personal attacks on another's race, religion, sexual orientation, or the like, you must interject immediately, pointing out that such behavior is unacceptable.

When forming groups, take advantage of the rich cultural diversity in the classroom by assigning students to groups of different ages, sexes, ethnicities, religions,

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cultures, and abilities. This will result in deeper discussions and understandings among students.

**Be fair** and unbiased in your management of the classroom. Students, especially those who are failing, often accuse the teacher of being unfair and in some cases biased against them. Having such feelings can negatively impact the way students learn.

Spending an appropriate amount of time at the beginning of the semester explaining and discussing the classroom expectations will significantly decrease the amount of time you will have to spend later in the semester dealing with issues related to classroom conduct. When all students know the rules, it is less likely the teacher will be seen as being unfair.

## **FACULTY–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS**

The basis of positive student–faculty relationships is open communication. Studies by Arielli and colleagues (2012) and Dapremont (2014) demonstrate the importance of open communication between faculty and students so that optimal learning can occur. The relationship that develops between students and faculty creates the psychological environment. Positive relationships between faculty and students result in increased class participation. Students view teachers as role models. Teachers who are seen as positive, caring, respectful, committed, and supportive in all aspects of the student’s learning tend to have students who are motivated and engaged. The students view the classroom as being socially supportive. For students to feel confident in their abilities and to be engaged in using all the resources and strategies presented by the teacher, there must be a feeling of mutual respect. The more time spent encouraging the student, the more likely the student will focus on completing assignments and participating in classwork.

Encourage meaningful dialogue with students so they feel their opinions matter; by doing so you will find that you spend less time responding to individual questions. Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007) report that students who receive frequent encouragement and emotional support from their teachers are more likely to focus on completing their tasks.

Finally, remember to keep a close watch on your nonverbal communication in the classroom. Nonverbal communication can be demonstrated by physical posture, clothing, eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice, and the distance held between students and teachers. Several of these ways of communicating can be threatening to students. For example, according to De Freitas Castro Carrari de Amorim and Da Silva (2014), if you are pacing at the front of the classroom with your “chin up and hands crossed behind your back, you are displaying superiority,” (p. 195) which could be intimidating to a group of new nursing students.

## Strategies for Facilitating Student Involvement in the Classroom

Students are expected to leave the classroom having gained knowledge, skills, and attitudes as they strive to meet educational outcomes. The level of student involvement and participation in the classroom is not a given; therefore, it is important for teacher and student to work together to create and nurture a positive relationship. Whether you are teaching in a lecture or discussion format, the goal should be to elicit student participation. You cannot expect to have all students participate at the same level in each session because interest often waxes and wanes. Nevertheless, there should be opportunities for all students to participate at some level.

As the teacher, your first goal is to create a *safe environment* where everyone feels safe to express their views. By doing so you will be able to assess the level of comprehension or misunderstanding that is taking place in your classroom. Suggested strategies are to assess the class environment, plan activities that will facilitate involvement, create an environment that will maximize student involvement, and perform ongoing evaluation of the level of student involvement.

As you **assess** students for their level of participation, you should bear in mind that not all students can be spontaneous in their reactions; some may need more time to reflect on questions before coming up with answers. Other students, in contrast, may be spontaneous and reactive. Therefore you should initially take some time to assess the makeup of the classroom environment and plan accordingly. You will no doubt have students who are verbal—some may even try to manipulate the classroom; you will also have quiet students who are uncomfortable speaking publicly, and in the extreme, some who may feel alienated or marginalized. Try to engage each student, giving all students the support and reassurance they need to express themselves. The use of technology in the classroom has been shown to facilitate student involvement in the learning process. Chapter 12 is dedicated to describing several technological strategies that can enhance student engagement.

**Plan** to present the content in a variety of formats throughout the semester. You may want to present mini-lectures during a discussion course or discussions during a lecture course. Short, one-paragraph written assignments during class that are then discussed at the end of the class can also help to break up the monotony and keep students engaged. Group assignments have controversial support but do encourage intergroup communication and collaboration. Students have become extremely technologically savvy and seem to thrive in a technology-friendly environment. Having students access the web during class to search for the most current information on the topic being presented can also bring about heightened levels of excitement and involvement.

**Practical strategies** include getting to know all students and addressing them by their names as often as possible. This will give the students a feeling of belonging and

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at the same time decrease their anxiety. They may also feel a desire to participate when they are being personally acknowledged. Have students introduce themselves to each other and encourage them to get to know each other outside of class. The more students are familiar with each other, the less intimidated they will feel about participating in the classroom.

Questions and answers form the basis for student engagement. The teacher's verbal and nonverbal approach to questions and answers will help determine students' level of anxiety. When you ask a question, make sure everyone feels like it is being asked of them and not to any particular person or persons in the room. Make eye contact with all students. Do not always choose the first person who raises a hand, especially if that person appears to want to manipulate the classroom. Give everyone a chance to think through the question and formulate an answer. Often a quiet student may be thinking about the answer and need more time to come up with it. Give students enough time to think through the question and encourage them to take a shot at it. Refrain from answering your own question too quickly before giving adequate time for a response. This may discourage students from formulating their own answers. It is important to articulate your question well, rephrasing if necessary, and to listen carefully to what the student has to say before responding. If necessary, repeat the question and the answer to the class, asking if everyone agrees or if someone else has something else to add to the response.

Strategies for classroom management include the following:

- Have students openly introduce themselves on the first day of class.
- Get to know all students and address them by name as soon as possible.
- Be aware of your verbal and nonverbal cues.
- Encourage all students to participate by calling on different students at different times.
- Allow adequate time for students to respond to your questions.
- Acknowledge everyone's opinion.

## **NURSING CODE OF ETHICS**

A very important text for all nurses to be familiar with is the *Guide to the Code of Ethics for Nurses*, edited by Marsha D. M. Fowler (2008) and published by the American Nurses Association. This text outlines nine codes for practicing nurses in all disciplines along with interpretative statements and applications. These codes emphasize the ethical practice of nurses, the nurse's commitment to protect the health and safety of the patient, the nurse's accountability to individual practice, the nurse's responsibility for maintaining competency and advancing the profession, and the nurse's responsibility to articulate values, maintain the integrity of the profession, and shape social policy. These codes are

intended for the practicing nurse; however, nursing students also need to be aware of these codes early in their career, and it is the responsibility of faculty to pass these on.

## MANAGING THE DISRUPTIVE/UNCIVIL STUDENT

Incivility in the classroom involves behavior that is unprofessional and often disruptive. Such behaviors compromise the learning environment as well as obstruct safe, quality client care. Disruptive behaviors may be encountered from student to student, student to faculty, faculty to student, or faculty to faculty. Most schools have policies and student codes of conduct that outline expectations for students in the classroom. The list of unacceptable behaviors includes, but is not limited to, physical threats, obscenities, verbal abuse of the teacher, outbursts or any other behavior that disrupts the teaching/learning environment, and stalking.

What causes a student to display uncivil, disruptive behavior in the classroom or clinical setting? Unruly behavior in the classroom or clinical setting can often be linked to deeper problems than meet the eye. Students often are tense due to heightened competition, personal stress factors, competing responsibilities, and difficulty with adjustment. They may lash out at each other as well as faculty. Some can be quite subtle with their hostility, whereas others cannot contain themselves. Occasionally you may come across students who consistently demonstrate disruptive behavior in the classroom and clinical sites.

Incivility in the classroom can take many forms (see **Box 5-1**), ranging from passive-aggressive behavior, inattentiveness, and talking among themselves to intimidating behavior. In the extreme you may encounter bullying, rudeness, disrespect, verbal outbursts, and threats or even physical attacks. Such behaviors are usually at odds with ethical practice and can place patients and colleagues at high risk for injury and

### Box 5-1 Signs of Incivility in the Classroom

- Inattentiveness
- Passive-aggressive behavior
- Talking among themselves
- Abusiveness
- Bullying
- Verbal outbursts
- Threats
- Disrespect
- Physical attacks

harm. Should you be faced with such a situation, it is imperative that you intervene immediately, remain calm so as not to cause the situation to escalate, remove the student from the environment if necessary, and refer the student to the correct campus support division. Depending on how serious the incident is, you may request a private meeting with the student after class. “An important step in de-escalating conflicts and curtailing incivilities is listening to students to understand their perceptions and feelings” (Altmiller, 2012, p. 1). This may improve the student–professor relationship by forming a foundation based on trust and interest in the student’s well-being.

When questioned, students often will address their academic performance as the root cause of their behavior rather than the underlying social issues. Students should be referred to the appropriate office for counseling and other resources such as anger management, student assistance, and psychological counseling. In most schools these services are available through the Office of Special Services (OSS). Students who consistently display disruptive behaviors should be reported to the school and be monitored for improvement in behavior once they have received the appropriate intervention. If the student was dismissed from the classroom, he or she must present a letter of clearance from the OSS before being allowed back into the classroom.

Often faculty consider incivility as solely a student behavior, but students often also describe incivility as coming from the teacher. Be aware that students can feel they have been treated uncivilly when a teacher is unprepared for class, is late, is disruptive, speaks in an aggressive tone, is unavailable after classes, does not appreciate students’ efforts, is unreasonable, is demeaning, or belittles students (Clark & Springer, 2010). Do not respond to emails or phone calls inappropriately, or demonstrate inappropriate body language while teaching.

You may not be able to identify which student will demonstrate a particular behavior (see **Table 5-1**), but be prepared to react in an appropriate way. Snyder (2010) suggests that all teachers keep safety in mind first and foremost. Respond by calmly asking the explosive student to calm down and remain seated. If the behavior persists, then security should be called in. In the case of a passive–aggressive or antisocial student, you should meet with the student privately and point out the behavior. Discuss the root cause and how you can best work with that student. Always refer to the school’s policy on disruptive behaviors.

**Faculty-to-faculty** incivility is not unheard of, and if this behavior is observed by students it can have a negative effect on the learning environment.

Additionally, students have reported faculty unfairness, rigidity, insistence on conformity, and overt discrimination as behaviors contributing to academic incivility. Consequences of this behavior include disrupted student–faculty relationships, problematic learning environments, and increased stress levels among students and faculty (Clark & Springer, 2010).



**TABLE 5-1** Characteristics of Disruptive Students

Characteristic	Behaviors
Explosive	Bullying, volatile, threatening
Antisocial	Cheats, steals, forges, exploits others
Passive–aggressive	Chronically late, sleeps in class, procrastinates
Narcissistic	Arrogant, self-centered, entitled, devalues others
Paranoid	Suspicious and blames others for failures
Litigious	Threatens lawsuits and responds to every slight
Compulsive	Preoccupied with orderliness and perfection, intolerant, critical and controlling

Data from Bart, M. (2009). Managing disruptive students in the college classroom. *Faculty Focus*. Retrieved from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/managing-disruptive-students-in-the-college-classroom/>; Snyder, B. (2010). Coping with seven disruptive personality types in the classroom. *Magna Publications White Paper*. Retrieved from [http://www.northwestms.edu/library/Library/Web/magna\\_wp7.pdf](http://www.northwestms.edu/library/Library/Web/magna_wp7.pdf)

## STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The rights and responsibilities of students and teachers are usually outlined in the student/faculty handbook of the school where you intend to teach. The handbook may be found as a hard copy or via a link on the school's webpage. It is imperative that you review these rights and responsibilities prior to beginning your appointment and then whenever a question arises. In general, students have the right to a fair and unbiased education.

## ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

There are many definitions of academic integrity. In general, academic integrity reflects the values and principles upon which academia is built. It refers to honesty in developing and presenting one's scholarship. Faculty and students alike are expected to present original work or at least to give credit to work that was done by others. One much-discussed breach of academic integrity is plagiarism, which is submitting someone else's work as yours without giving proper credit. With the advancement of technology, creative strategies for plagiarism have expanded into all areas of academe. Why is such an upsurge occurring? Often students are peer-pressured, social-pressured, or self-pressured into cheating. Nursing students have reported a main reason for cheating as being the high-stakes testing that will influence their success or failure and, in most cases, their ability to remain in the nursing program.

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Faculty have a right to be preemptive to minimize plagiarism; this includes stating clear policies in the syllabus regarding the consequences of such an act. Such policies also are usually clearly stated in the student/faculty handbook. Plagiarism is not always done intentionally; therefore, it is the faculty's responsibility to explain to students what is considered plagiarism and how to avoid it. The teacher has the responsibility to enforce the rules of academic integrity. Most schools have a policy governing academic integrity. Failing to follow the rules is dealt with in several different ways, ranging from remediation to expulsion from the school.

McCabe and Pavela (2012), researchers on academic integrity, outline the following 10 steps for minimizing breaches in academic integrity:

- Schools should affirm the importance of academic integrity as one of the core values of academia.
- Foster the love of learning in students by making the work challenging, relevant, useful, and fair.
- Treat students respectfully as valued individuals.
- Promote a classroom environment of trust, free of arbitrary rules.
- Hold students accountable for academic integrity. Create fair competitions where integrity is respected and dishonesty or the perception thereof is punished.
- Clarify expectations for students ahead of time and provide guidance in helping students meet their goals.
- Develop and use fair and relevant forms of assessment that promote learning opportunities for students.
- Reduce opportunities to engage in academic dishonesty by removing ambiguous policies, unrealistic standards for collaboration, inadequate classroom management, or poor examination security.
- Challenge academic dishonesty when it occurs by enforcing the stated school policy as a guide.
- Support campus-wide efforts at decreasing academic integrity and standards by identifying students who commit an infraction across campus, especially repeat offenders.

## LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The concept of learning communities in colleges has become increasingly popular over the past few years. In a broad sense, learning communities on campus involve a group of students who share similar interests, such as nursing; have common values; live and learn together; and attend a cohort of classes taught by teachers with whom they have close interactions. Whether or not there is such an arrangement on your campus, you may want to consider developing a quasi-learning community for your classes.

Students can be divided into groups based on their interests and learning styles. Clinical faculty can be invited to share in the teaching of these grouped classes. Students' clinical groups will remain constant throughout the semester, with the clinical instructor helping students to meet their individual goals and program outcome. Senior students can be invited to share their experiences as nursing students and give practical advice on how to succeed.

This arrangement gives the students the opportunity to work closely with those who have similar interests as they develop the skills and confidence necessary for future success. Students not only will feel a sense of belonging with their peers and faculty, but also will become more comfortable in seeking advice on their academic achievement and become more comfortable in the school's culture. The overall goal, therefore, would be to have the student succeed socially and academically.

## **ASSISTING THE ACADEMICALLY CHALLENGED STUDENT**

Working with the academically challenged student in the traditional classroom often poses a huge concern for the teacher. Students who are struggling often expect the teacher to spend extra time addressing their needs. In some cases this may not be possible; however, it is the responsibility of the teacher to provide resources that will enhance a student's learning. Depending on the needs of the student, you may refer her or him to several university resources such as a learning center, a writing center, tutoring, or test-taking practice. If the student is struggling with mastering the content, you may want to set aside special office hours time to go over strategies on how to study effectively.

At some point teachers can become frustrated when they believe they are not meeting all of a student's needs. You may also feel conflicted that you have not done enough to assist students in passing exams. It is advisable to discuss these feelings with senior faculty who may have had the same experiences in the past and who may be helpful in providing hints on how to deal with such issues.

## **CASE STUDY**

You are the new pediatric faculty for the Department of Nursing at a local university. You receive your course roster and notice there are 55 students assigned to your section of the course. Your room assignment is S138, the 150-seat amphitheater in the south wing of the building.

1. Create a seating plan to facilitate learning among the students and promote student-teacher relationships.

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2. You notice a group of four students sitting in the back of the amphitheater talking and using their cell phones. How would you handle this situation?
3. You are proctoring an exam and notice a student glancing at the answers on another student's test. How would you handle this situation?

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