

Creating Positive Classroom Cultures

Strategies for Setting up a Positive Culture with New Classes:

Before the Class Meets for the First Time:

- Find out about the class: speak to colleagues that may have taught them before (avoid taking on their biases).
- Check whether any students have Study Support Plans.
- Send a welcome email and invite students to respond outlining any learning preferences or concerns about the module.
- Set up a class forum on the VLE with carefully prepared prompts.
- Consider the physical space; how will this impact on group dynamics?
- Outline on the VLE any potentially controversial topics that will be covered and urge respectful curiosity and generous interpretations of others' views.

At the First Taught Class:

- Take time in the first session to co-create a Group Agreement/Class charter/ Ground Rules - ask students to agree a) what they will commit to; b) what they need from peers; c) what they need from the lecturer. Hold discussions to agree shared expectations.
- Explicitly discuss how you will deal with conflict or challenge in this learning community.
- Share your own teaching philosophy, values and expectations, and how they have shaped the module, content etc.
- Icebreakers – used with purpose! To understand learning needs/preferences, to build a sense of belonging.
- Review syllabus with open dialogue.
- Normalise struggle in learning, imperfection, growth.
- Explain how they can feedback to you on their experiences of the module.

Scenario-based Strategies for Addressing Challenging Classroom

The Silent Majority

A lecturer teaches a large, first-year psychology class. He notices that only a handful of students regularly participate in discussions, while the majority remain silent—even when prompted with questions or small group activities.

- Use anonymous polls or digital tools (e.g., Mentimeter, Padlet) to encourage participation.
- Incorporate think-pair-share activities to build confidence before speaking in front of the class.
- Create a culture where all contributions are valued and mistakes are part of learning.
- Check in with quieter students individually to understand any barriers to participation.
- Give opportunities to write individual reflections ahead of sharing in groups.
- Direct confident members of the class to support quieter members to speak in class.
- Ask the class to evaluate their own classroom participation.
- Explicitly state that speaking in class can feel intimidating and offer tips for improving classroom engagement.

The Unruly Classroom

In a second-year business module, the lecturer notices that a group of students frequently talk over lectures, use their phones during class, and make sarcastic comments when asked to participate. Attempts to redirect the behavior have been met with eye-rolling and further disruption. Other students appear uncomfortable or disengaged.

- Address disruptive behaviour calmly and consistently.
- Avoid using shaming or aggressive tactics that will create conflict in the group setting.
- Explicitly state what behaviour will be most beneficial for learning in your class.
- Re-establish classroom expectations and norms - return to the group agreement/class charter
- Speak privately with individuals involved to understand underlying issues.
- Seek support from academic leadership or student conduct offices if needed.

The Microaggression Moment

During a seminar, a student makes a comment that unintentionally reinforces a stereotype about a particular cultural group. The lecturer notices discomfort among some students but isn't sure how to respond in the moment.

- Address the comment calmly and clearly, naming the issue without shaming.
- Reinforce classroom norms around respect and inclusivity.
- Use the moment as a learning opportunity, if appropriate, to discuss impact vs. intent.
- Actively discuss microaggressions - give the class time to individually research microaggressions and how they can impact on others, then feedback as a large group.
- Follow up with affected students to offer support.

The Group Work Dilemma

A lecturer assigns a group project in a third-year course. After submission, one student privately complains that their groupmates didn't contribute equally and that they felt ignored during meetings.

- Set clear expectations and roles for group work from the start. You might require students to take and rotate specific roles e.g. secretary, chair. Ask the group to produce agendas and minutes of their meetings.
- Use peer evaluations to monitor contributions.
- Provide structured check-ins or progress reports.
- Offer mediation or alternative arrangements if conflicts arise.

Conflict Over Gender Identity

During a group discussion in a sociology seminar, a student shares their experience as a transgender person. Another student responds with a comment questioning the legitimacy of gender identity beyond the binary, citing personal or cultural beliefs. The conversation quickly becomes tense, with visible discomfort among other students and the trans student appearing upset.

- Intervene promptly to stop harmful or exclusionary comments.
- Affirm the identity and dignity of the affected student.
- Reiterate classroom norms for respectful dialogue. Return to the group agreement/ class charter.
- Facilitate a follow-up discussion.
- Provide follow-up resources to educate the class. In a particularly engaged class, you might co-create the resource together to share with the wider student/faculty body.

Student Complaints About Course Content

A professor includes a lecture on colonialism and its legacy in a global history course. After the session, several students email to say they found the content "politically biased" and "inappropriate," and request that the topic be removed or altered.

- Acknowledge the students' concerns respectfully.
- Explain the academic rationale for including the content.
- Invite open dialogue while upholding academic freedom and critical inquiry.
- Provide a reading that expressly outlines the above and ask students to read it.
- Consult institutional policies or colleagues if needed for support.

A Personal Disclosure

After a seminar, a student approaches you and quietly shares that they are going through a serious personal crisis involving a family illness and mental health struggles. They say they're finding it hard to keep up with coursework and are unsure whether to continue the module.

- Listen empathetically and thank the student for trusting you with this information and for sharing.
- Refer the student to appropriate support services (e.g., counseling, academic advice).
- Avoid becoming a counselor—maintain professional boundaries.
- Offer reasonable academic accommodations if appropriate and within policy.

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