



POSITIVE CLIMATE FOR LEARNING.

By: Benjamin Pisani

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The night before my first day as a teacher in a classroom I remember thinking about the kind of teacher I wanted to be. I have realised over time that all teachers have this thought, and the answer is always a version of the same thing - we want to create a positive climate for learning. Teachers want to create places where students can feel free to express themselves, can push the boundaries of their knowledge, take risks in their learning, feel safe in taking challenges, and become the best they can be. It may sound like a cliché, but I believe it to be true: most teachers join this noble profession out of a desire to have a positive influence on young people’s lives.

A positive climate for learning

A positive climate for learning is not only an individual teacher’s responsibility. It is also a commitment by the school system in which we work. The Department of Education and Training’s (DET) Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) identifies Positive Climate for Learning as one of four key areas that impact student achievement, engagement and wellbeing. The four sub-categories identified in the figure below identify key aspects of the educational experience that work to make the climate positive for student learning.

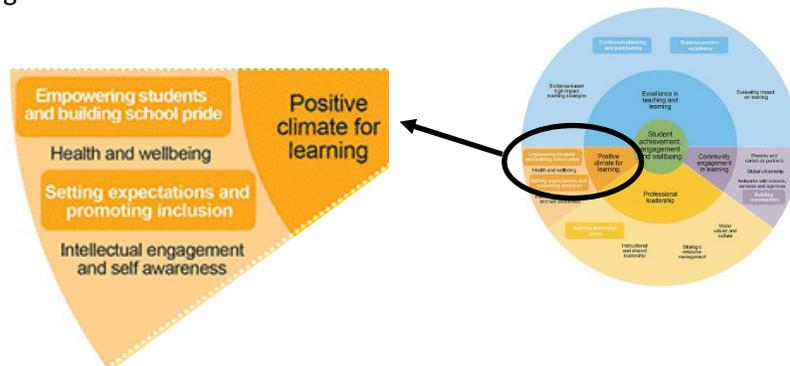


Fig 1: Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (DET)

The complexities of creating a positive climate

In this article I will address the strategies I have used to create a positive climate. However, I want to begin by raising some of the complexities that have changed the climate for learning during my career in teaching. In the year I started teaching (30 January 2004 was the date!), research was completed that demonstrated that; "the fastest-growing mental health problem in the world, and particularly the developed world, is among adolescents" (World Health Organisation, 2003).

Since the publication of that report we have had the introduction of instant messaging, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other social media tools. The research is now suggesting that social media is impacting the mental health of young people. Beyond Blue have reported that one in 35 young Australians between the ages of four and seventeen have experienced a depression disorder, one in 14 have experienced an anxiety disorder, and one in seven have experienced a mental health condition (Beyond Blue, 2015). A positive climate for learning is a concept that is always evolving. Because of the changing climate for students it is not a fixed thing we learn how to do as teachers and that remains unchanged. As teachers we must be alert to the challenges facing students in a rapidly changing world.

I have arranged this article around broad themes centred on creating a positive climate for learning: The DET FISO model and Amplify explore 'empowering students and building school pride'. In my practice this has meant creating an environment where students want to be and can learn effectively. The FISO model, along with the Practice Principles for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, explore 'setting expectations and promoting inclusion'. One small component of this is to recognise that as a teacher your own actions and attitudes can have a powerful positive influence on your students.

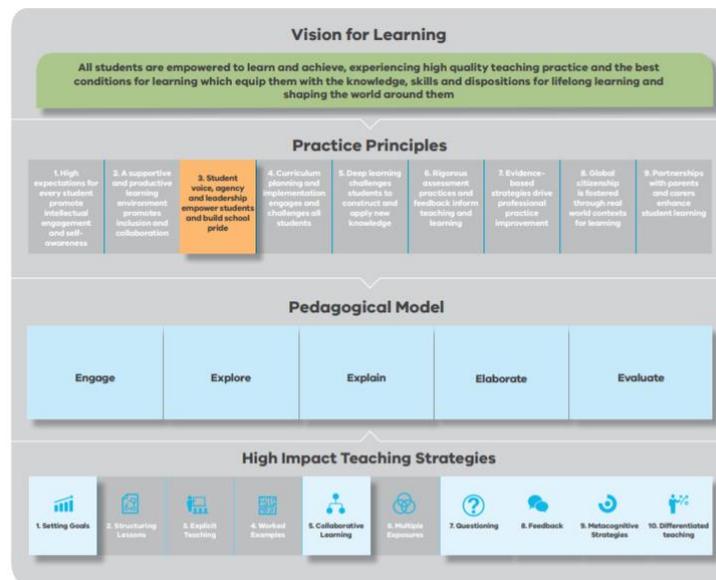


Fig 2: The Victorian Teaching & Learning Model, pg. 12 Amplify (DET)

Create an environment students want to be in

Trust is a key factor in creating a positive climate for learning. Students need to trust their teachers if they are going to take risks in their learning and push themselves out of their comfort zone. When students are trusted and respected by their teachers, they connect to the teacher, collaborate with each other, and are more willing to be vulnerable and open to learning.

When teachers work to develop a learning environment based on trust, respect, honesty and transparency, students will want to be there. I have learnt to work to build a learning environment where students want to belong, a class that students want to attend and a student-teacher relationship they want to maintain. This kind of environment is one participants value greatly. Another dimension of this is working hard together to keep negativity out of our learning environment

Build trust by being fully human

I have heard some teachers say you should not share any personal information with students. There are times those same teachers complain about feeling disconnected from their students or say their students are not trying. I find it helpful in building trust to share something about myself – though it is important to make good judgements about what to share with students. This can include important people in your life, movies you like, music you listen to, books you have read, sporting teams you follow. While some of this information may seem trivial, it can be a great way for students and teachers to make a connection and start to build a strong and positive relationship.

Build respect by listening to students

Listening to your students and acting on their feedback builds a positive relationship. If you commit to an action and don't follow through this can break down the trust and respect you have worked to build, and can degrade the learning climate. A strategy I have developed to strengthen respect is to write student questions or requests in my diary and aim to respond before the next class (using our LMS). This activated the student voice in my classroom, ensuring the students felt that their voices were being heard, and demonstrating that I was actioning their feedback and incorporating this into my future teaching plans and the direction of learning in the classroom (Practice Principle 3, Action 3.2). I also developed a protocol to ensure I address the response in more depth in the next class so students can see I have acted quickly on the feedback. Part of this includes giving an answer and published justification for the decision.

No negatives

I have one firm rule everyone knows and I reiterate regularly; at no stage must anyone receive negative criticism about a comment or question. If anyone belittles someone else about a comment or question, my rule is to exit them from the class. This works to encourage the quiet students to voice their ideas, to share their opinions and provide their answers. I saw this process was effective when students were sharing their answers and were not hindered by the fact it might be wrong. I also began talking to

students about how we gave good feedback to each other which assisted in more positive discussions in the room.

Positive reinforcement is in the professional practice toolbox of all teachers. I have found the learning climate is improved substantially by regular acknowledgement, both private and public, of the students' work and achievement, regardless of their academic performance. I have explored different ways of utilizing positive reinforcement in my practice. One element I love about teaching is the capacity we have to say to a student, 'I just wanted to let you know that I am exceptionally proud of you. I have noticed a huge improvement in your focus in your learning and that I am seeing improvement in your knowledge and skills. Keep up the good work'. Acknowledgement from a teacher they respect can be a strong motivation for many students. It will also be significant in determining how well the student will receive specific feedback on their learning.

Mistakes as learning opportunities

A teacher I greatly respect shared a story from her practice with me. She was working in a grade three classroom with a student who was struggling with a numeracy problem. Her request to the student to erase their working out so they could work through the problem together was met by one of the most powerful statements she had heard from a student, 'we're not allowed erasers in here, mistakes are things we learn from, not things we need to forget'. This is a powerful concept for students and one I committed to in my classroom. When a student is feeling self-conscious about their knowledge or skill, they are going to hesitate to share answers in the class because of the fear of feeling shame for getting it wrong. For students to be open to the idea of sharing their ideas or skills they need to feel safe in the learning environment. This safety from criticism or ridicule will encourage them to take academic risks both in their interactions in the classroom and in their own personal learning. To achieve this I have a practice of articulating to the students my assessment of the learning landscape. Like many music classrooms around the state, or the world, my classrooms always have a huge breadth of levels of skill and understanding. This barrier can prevent many students from participating or engaging in the learning that happens in the classroom. You may think this only refers to the lower skilled students as they don't want to come across to their peers as being "dumb", however the same issue occurs for high achievers as they don't want to come across to their peers as "know it all". To address this, I aim to articulate my assessment of learning as a journey, dismissing the idea of "she's better than me" and reworking the language to the analogy of a road. The image is that we are all on a road taking us on our educational journey and each person's level of understanding or skill is determined by how long or fast someone has been 'walking'. As some have been walking longer than others (started earlier in their lives), or some people are been walking faster than others (more practice or dedication to their learning) it makes sense that they are 'further down the road'. This justification seems to really help students place themselves along the continuum of learning, and their acceptance of my philosophy coupled with the positive, respectful and safe learning environment we establish encourages students to take risks in their learning across all skill and knowledge levels. The effect on the learning is that students not only support and encourage all attempts at learning in the classroom, but also shed their fear of mistakes and embrace the learning opportunities that come from "incorrect answers. I have found this experience changes the learning landscape, energizing students and amplifying the discussion in the classroom.

You can only control your own actions and attitudes

The most important thing for a teacher to consider (and this has not changed since my first day as a teacher) is the way you present yourself to your students. It may be that you are the one positive adult role model in a student's life; building trust with that student will not only assist their learning but will also help with their personal growth. Engaging students in respectful and honest interactions teaches them proactive and productive ways to communicate with others. Modelling this in my interactions with each student both inside and out of the classroom creates an expectation of how students should interact with their peers and their teachers. This in turn impacts on the ways students behave. It teaches them the skills of language choice, body language and emotional control when dealing with others in various situations - skills which assist them in their overall development as people. An example of this was my introduction of a "swear jar" into the Music Department of one Senior Campus. Being a space that students frequented regularly during their day (classes, recess/lunch time, after school and study periods) the swear jar was a marker that encouraged students to reflect on the language they chose to use during their time in the department. Anytime a student swore, or made an inappropriate comment, they would put a coin in the swear jar. This was a fee that contributed to the music departments ongoing sponsorship of a child through World Vision. This action taught students and staff alike that there were consequences for making poor language choices while in a professional environment, and started to get them thinking about the control that they had over their actions and attitudes. Such actions bolstered the positive learning environment I had worked to build, in addition to teaching students accountability for their actions and attitudes - skills that would assist them in their future professional pathways.

Fairness

I have found that if you apply a consistent approach to feedback, consistently celebrate achievements and apply the same consequences to inappropriate behaviour, students will develop respect for you that will strengthen the learning experience. Having said this, I do need to articulate the difference between equity and equality in my classroom. Differentiation has always been a key factor in my teaching. A common trait to most music classes is that there are always a wide variety of experience and skill levels among students. Differentiating the learning and the assessment, as outlined in the High Impact Teaching Strategy document (HITS 10, pg 28 DET) gives each student the opportunity, skill and knowledge to be successful in their own right (equity), however the ways I have chosen to celebrate student achievement, regardless of their academic or skill level, has been the same (equality). I find this moves student focus from the comparison of grades or numbers to their own personal growth and development as learners. This fairness in my approach to celebrating successes has meant students focus their development inwards and spend their time focusing on mapping their growth against their goals, as opposed to mapping their knowledge against that of their peers. I find this approach fosters a positive learning climate that allows students to work towards student centered, personalized goals and celebrate their own successes.

Integrity

I am committed to the adage 'practice what you preach'. Whenever I was in a school with an expectation that students be in their seats when the class bell went, then that applied to me too (in

addition to my legal obligation to be there). If the students were not allowed to use or answer their phone in class, then that applied to me. While these sound like common sense practices that teachers do naturally, it is important to verbalise these practices and make this process transparent. By having a discussion with my students and demonstrating that the expectations apply to everyone in the room, I find that a sense of team within the classroom can be established which fosters a positive climate.

Transparency

I have developed a commitment to providing justifications and reasoning behind the decisions and directions I make in the learning program. While the level of justification and reasoning would differ depending on the year level that I am teaching, I find that by providing a voice to the planning and process of their learning, students became more engaged.

Saying something as simple as ‘today we are going to miss out on our regular practical class and have a written theory class instead because I wanted to revise some of the major themes and concepts that will prepare you for the assessment next week’ gives students an explanation why I had decided to change the direction of a class. Following up with ‘does anyone have any concerns or issues that they would like to voice to the class?’, gives students the opportunity to share their concerns in the public forum and reinforces the trust and respect established in the classroom. Opportunities for student feedback are a vital ingredient to strengthening the positive learning climate in the classroom by giving students the power to influence change in their learning (Amplify, pg 22 DET) and has always been a powerful factor to increase student engagement in my classroom. Not only does engagement increase but the students feel a shared ownership over the responsibility of their learning, realizing that they had the responsibility of providing feedback and sharing ideas which would work to improve their learning experience.

Takeaway message for graduate teachers

The key takeaway message for creating a positive climate in your classroom is to create a learning environment where students want to be. To do this effectively you need to be honest and genuine. Be someone that allows connections to be made between yourself and your students. Someone who acknowledges mistakes and accepts them. Someone who is honest and respectful towards everyone you come into contact with. Someone who is transparent about consistent expectations and instructions. Someone who is open to the concept of feedback, both giving and receiving.

In short, don’t be afraid to be yourself, open, respectful and trusting. When you act this way the learning environment becomes not only positive but engaging and exciting for students and teacher alike.

Discussion with your mentor

I met my mentor, and started building the relationship, at a staff day the day before my first day of teaching. I am proud to say I still have that relationship 16 years later. Your mentor can be an important influence on your whole teaching career. Here are some questions you can discuss with your mentor about the climate in your learning environment.

1. What is going well with the climate in my classroom?
2. What can be improved to make the climate more positive?
3. What is one strategy from the ideas in this article that would be helpful to focus on for the next month?

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