

Positive classroom

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Introduction

A positive classroom brings up images of warm, creative, and engaging physical places. And while stimulating learning spaces undeniably boost academic progress, creating an environment that nurtures an authentic learning culture is more complex. Here, the role of the teacher is key. Effective instructional management enables teachers to build meaningful connections with their students. Similarly, employing good classroom management provides pupils with the physical and emotional safety to thrive. Research indicates a strong link between classroom climate and students' academic achievement. Instructor satisfaction and academic success can flourish with the introduction of the three aspects of a positive classroom: learning environment, instructional management, and classroom management. Through these elements, students can build positive behaviours and relationships, as well as achieve academic success.

Learning Environments

Not only does the classroom provide context to people's interactions, its relevance as an active agent in the learning process is widely acknowledged. Malaguzzi, the founder of the well-known Reggio Emilia approach to learning in preschool and primary education, referred to the physical environment as the "Third Teacher". There is an increasing understanding of the impact of online spaces on the student experience too. So how can teachers identify, understand, and harness the power of spaces meaningfully?

Physical Spaces

Findings from the University of Salford's Clever Classrooms Report (2015) found clear evidence of the effect physical characteristics of classrooms have on their users. Factors found to be particularly influential include: naturalness (specifically light, temperature and air quality), individualisation (ownership and flexibility), and stimulation. While some elements fall undoubtedly under the whole-school remit, teachers can readily action the aesthetics, function, and flexibility of their rooms.

Aesthetics

The debate regarding the implications of visual stimuli on learners is a divisive topic in educational circles. Yet well-organised and interesting classrooms can make for effective learning environments. Maintaining a good standard of display, beyond the merely decorative, can convey community values, promote pupil interest, and encourage a sense of belonging. Even employing colour carefully has been proven to influence attentiveness. Avoid cluttered and confusing boards by adopting a less-is-more strategy which reduces distractions and teacher workload. Above all, regularly utilising displays to generate dialogue and celebrate achievement ensures their continued relevance.

Function and Flexibility

Purposeful furniture configurations increase physical comfort, access, and inclusion. For example, students should be able to view demonstrations easily and adopt healthy postures when seated. Similarly, teachers must be able to observe and regularly circulate among pupils. In this way, dialogic classroom practices and positive relationships can be fostered. Modularity further aids collaborative and practical learning - essential for student connectedness - while organised resource storage minimises disruption and supports independence. Perhaps most importantly, teachers should ensure people who use these spaces have control over their environment too. This could include student input on displays and age-appropriate choices over classroom set up. Finally, making good use of outdoor spaces benefits students' cognitive engagement, social development, and psychological well-being.

Virtual Spaces

The 2020 Covid pandemic has pushed a lot of learning online. Many authors, such as Adrian Underhill (Underhill 2020) have drawn attention to this change in ESL/EFL. According to Underhill, this unique situation has relocated learning spaces to students' and teacher's homes, or, as he puts it, their "kitchen tables". However, learning online implied also an emergence of a new learning space that is virtual.

The perception that online learning spaces need little forethought is rapidly becoming outdated. Arguably, digital technologies demand a deeper analysis of learning processes because of their heavy reliance on individuals' interactions with each other and the tools at their disposal. By placing close attention to design choices, online teachers can encourage greater participation by using formal and informal spaces, more scope for reflection by allowing students to learn at their own pace, and increased inclusivity through multi-modal approaches. A thoughtful combination of learners, online spaces, and digital tools can increase engagement and ultimately learning outcomes.

Instructional Management

University of Melbourne Professor Kenn Fisher notes: "Good teaching understands how learners learn" (2016, 8). Successful teachers follow effective patterns of practice to achieve this. These include careful planning and thoughtful delivery. Above all, getting to know one's students, both as learners and people, is key to delivering exactly what they need.

Lesson Planning

Effective lesson preparation should anticipate learners' needs and required resources. Learning objectives must be clear and shared with pupils. Framing them as 'I can' statements provides clarity and self-affirmation for confidence-building, especially in younger pupils. To ensure groups of learners are supported, stretched, and challenged suitably, ensure robust differentiation through innovative teaching methods and the skilful deployment of adults or peers. Finally, incorporating a plenary (review) session supplies educators with valuable opportunities to assess progress, consolidate learning, and involve students in self-evaluation and reflection. Teachers must be prepared to adapt or even abandon their lesson plans and seek other strategies if the lesson just isn't working.

Lesson Delivery

The best planned lessons are worthless if engaging delivery is not evident. Teacher enthusiasm for a subject is hugely motivational as is content relevant to students' contexts. Clear modelling of expectations and activities is important, and teacher talking time must be kept to a minimum in a genuinely learner-focused environment. To ensure productive learner involvement, use targeted questioning that consciously allows for reasonable response times. Then, use follow-up questions to deepen understanding. Build in active, collaborative tasks to promote student cohesiveness and satisfaction. Encouragement is also a powerful way to improve attitudes to learning, but praise must be sincere. Bear in mind not everyone responds well to public recognition, so respecting pupil preference is vital. Lastly, kind, prompt, and specific feedback is paramount to students' progression and can be enhanced through peer and self-assessment too. These approaches can help to establish a positive, enjoyable learning experience.

Classroom Management

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory of human motivation. In 1943, Maslow asserted personal potential (or self-actualisation) cannot be fulfilled without meeting basic physiological needs. While teachers cannot be responsible for providing nourishment or sleep, they can establish a climate of safety, social belonging, and respect. In this way, self-esteem, the next stage of the pyramid, can be realised. So how do teachers create a nurturing learning environment?

Consistency

Most learners need structure and routine. Predictability can provide security and save time, reducing off-task behaviour and stimulating emotional self-regulation. This can be achieved by:

- Displaying the timetable for the day
- Clear rules that govern conduct, introduced and used positively and, where possible, co-created with students.
- Setting boundaries in advance so learners can understand consequences.
- Teachers embodying and modelling agreed values
- Using non-verbal cues that impact students' perceptions of their instructors and peers.

Keep hard and fast rules to a minimum, exercise emotional control however challenging, and pay first attention to good conduct.

Connection

Building rapport in the classroom enhances students' interpersonal relationships with their instructors and each other. It also facilitates motivation, enjoyment, and receptivity. When teachers follow a personalised approach, learners feel valued. Simply providing opportunities for student-to-teacher interaction is a good place to start. Teachers who actively listen, respect, and express interest in their pupils model the warmth and empathy essential to a strong learning culture. A sense of humour too can unify communities and reduce tensions. Likewise, offering additional help outside taught sessions can instil confidence and reduce anxiety. In such a climate, learners can embrace the healthy risk-taking habits of question asking, thought-sharing, and spirited discussion.

Conclusion

Negative and mismanaged learning environments are challenging, combative, and chaotic. The consequences too often lead to poor mental health, academic failure, and staff burnout. While there is no silver bullet that can produce the perfect, positive classroom, pondering how learners view the spaces in which they learn, the lessons they share, and the teachers they encounter can only be beneficial. Teachers are the decisive element in the classroom. Positive classroom practices, lead to better academic outcomes for students and improved job satisfaction for teachers.

References and Further Reading

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