

Overcoming the Classroom Environment

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The modern classroom is a recent development in the evolution of education and an obstacle for teachers: Evidence from cross-species, cross-cultural, and developmental domains demonstrates that the typical lecture hall is an inhospitable environment for learning.

As social psychologist Caroline Keating of Colgate University pointed out in her Teaching Institute Closing Plenary talk at the 27th APS Annual Convention, for most of our evolutionary history, humans learned by trial and error and by observing the ways of our kin and our tribe; we adapted to pay close attention to the social cues and nonverbal communication of those we know, respect, and love.

Keating presented these observations to emphasize how teachers' nonverbal cues affect students. She said that nonverbal cues make connections with students in ways that stimulate the learning motivations which come most naturally to us.

To foster more self-directed learning among students, teachers must find ways to stimulate their curiosity and sense of playfulness. Getting students physically engaged — with interactive exercises like role-play or the performance of synchronous actions — provokes questioning and triggers a sense of “we-ness” among diverse individuals.

Teachers also can develop positive rapport with students by paying attention to the balance of nonverbal cues for power and warmth they display in class, Keating said. The nonverbal stage is set by the way

teachers move about the classroom and the way they dress and speak, she said. Teachers can, for example, convey a sense of power by standing instead of sitting or by approaching students more closely. They can also speak and interact with them from different locations in the lecture hall. Dressing in bold colors conveys dominance. Physical gestures such as pointing and speaking in a deep voice connote authority, which in turn enhances memory for the spoken material.

Effective teachers not only project authority but also provide a sense of social connection and understanding to help students learn, Keating explained. Research shows that teachers do not smile and convey warmth to students nearly as much as they think they do, and that they underestimate the importance of displaying positive affect. A teacher's genuine smile and nonverbal signs of engagement (e.g., nodding, leaning in) can reinforce student efforts in the classroom and make it possible for pupils to take intellectual and social risks.

"Nothing is more powerful than the expression of power *and* warmth," Keating said, "and that is what makes a charismatic classroom."