

Question 4:
What can instructors do to establish a supportive learning environment for their students?

“There is no *one* way to create a supportive learning environment and no two teachers will likely create such an environment in exactly the same manner. I found that getting to the classroom before class started in order to greet students said a lot about how much I cared to be there and how ready I was to teach. I often sat with students who came early and talked to them about their backgrounds, majors, interests or just did some small talk about the weather or events on campus. I believe it is important to treat every student as if he or she is significant. I often think about how my daughters or a good friend would respond to what I am saying. That is how I consider my words and gauge how my students may react to them. When students miss class I email them and let them know that I missed them (or I might wait until they come back to class and mention that I missed them). This lets them know I care about them and notice their absence. It also helps create an open and supportive climate. It is critical to let students know that you care about them and that you want them to feel free to interact in the classroom—and they will interact more frequently if you make them feel that you care about they have to say. It is how you handle students who don’t like to interact or provide inaccurate information that will either promote or stifle the classroom environment. When I have problem students in class rather than call the student out during class, I speak to them privately either after class or in my office. I point out the issue and ask them to be cognizant of how their behaviors disrupt class, etc. Nine times out of ten that solves the problem and shows those students that I respect them but do not care for their misbehavior. I strongly encourage every teacher to read Parker J. Palmer’s book *The Courage to Teach* for extremely insightful views on teachers who ‘care deeply about their students and ...their subject’ but have lost heart in their craft.”

Bill Seiler, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
2015 Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellence Award

“First impressions matter, so on the first day I leave a big bowl of candy and a pile of syllabi (yes, I still print the syllabi for them) on my desk and welcome each student as they arrive. They visibly relax when they grab a chocolate kiss or starburst, smiling for perhaps the first time that day. We forget how stressful beginnings can be for our students! After going over the syllabus and requirements, patiently answering those anxious questions, I begin an ice breaker (the communication professor’s favorite). The type doesn’t matter, but having everyone sitting facing one another actively participating is crucial. One of my favorites that helped me immensely was asking each student to tell me what one thing I need to know about them to do a better job helping them to learn. The first time I asked this it was just a fluke, but the information was astounding.

I also still painstakingly learn their names and use their names every chance I get. With well over a hundred new faces each semester it takes time, but we know how important that recognition can be for the student’s success. It’s a small thing, but I know it matters

to them. Perhaps that's why a few weeks ago, a man stopped at a light yelled over to my car to say hello. He said he was a student fifteen years ago, he knew I wouldn't remember him, but he remembered me and the class he took."

Nancy Willets, Cape Cod Community College
2014 Michael and Suzanne Osborn Community College Outstanding Educator Award

"For over forty years I have worked with performers at every level of accomplishment and have been gratified by their responsiveness and eagerness to undertake heroic challenges. Increasingly I have come to believe that rich and genuine performance can't be taught.

Of course, you can teach those strategies and behaviors that encourage empowering performance, but students cannot evoke something that is not already inside them. So my job as a teacher became creating that safe place where they could risk showing us something buried deeply, profoundly within them. Naturally, the first glimpses were often tentative and sometimes misshapen. But it was a sure foundation on which to work.

And, best of all, it was a glimpse at how a serious student uniquely claims a text. Our failures teach us so much more than our successes. Make a place where students feel it safe to fail. Find the language that encourages risk, which sets a goal that stretches a reach, just beyond an easy grasp. And get out of the way. Watch the discovery—with awe."

Timothy Gura (Emeritus), Brooklyn College, CUNY
2008 Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellence Award

"As an instructor, I work to establish a supportive learning environment by learning about what interests my students and attending campus events like my university's College Night (competitive student musical theatre productions). I then tailor classroom discussions to students' interests. When your students see that you care about them as individuals and value what they do or what they enjoy, they often do their best to contribute positively to the supportive learning environment you are trying to establish.

One way you can learn more about your students' interests is to learn about the sports your student-athletes compete in. One semester, I followed collegiate bass fishing because I had two students who were on my university's nationally ranked bass fishing team. Although you are unlikely to find me casting a rod on the lake any time soon recreationally or professionally, I read articles detailing recent tournament results and learned about local area lakes so I could find ways to connect with these two students.

Another way you might be able to learn more about your students' interests is to assign an introductory speech of some kind where they highlight their literary or film interests. Another semester, I had several students taking a Hogwarts and Higher Education honors class. Even though I have not read any of the books or seen any of the movies, I

read the Harry Potter wiki and familiarized myself with Pottermore so that I understood discussions that revolved around their houses and favorite characters from the series.”

Tiffany R. Wang, University of Montevallo
2017 CSCA Outstanding New Teacher Award

“To me, supportive learning environments occur when students are comfortable in their classroom setting.

1. My first piece of advice is let your students get to know you. Get to class early and work the room. It doesn't matter what size your class is, you can walk around and talk to your students. Talk to them about anything, tease them, listen to what they have to say. Don't talk about class business, just talk. Let yourself have fun. Positive interaction with your students has nothing to do with the rigor of your class. They are not connected.
2. Make it known that you expect your students to respect each other's beliefs and opinions, that intolerance of any kind will not be tolerated.
3. Tell your students personal information about yourself. Let them know more about who you are, where are you from, what is your family like, what do you like to do, etc.
4. Let them know that your office is a comfortable and welcoming place, someplace they will feel safe to discuss class or life issues. Those personal things you have shared in class can be something for a shy student to mention when they come to your office. It gives them someplace to begin to talk to you. Also learn the resources on your campus for additional student help so you can quickly refer a student when you see that you are dealing with a problem that goes way beyond your ability as a teacher.
5. Let them know you care about them personally. They will soon see that you genuinely like not only the smart students, but students in your class that are struggling or just lazy. Students always love your attention.”

Bonnie Jefferson, Boston College
2006 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

“I believe it is important to establish a positive climate in the classroom—one where students feel comfortable and respected. First, I make an effort to learn the names of everyone in the class and I usually can do this by the end of the first class meeting. While this may not be possible for people who teach large lecture classes, simply learning something about the students in general is helpful in establishing a positive environment. Even showing an interest in how their sports teams are doing or how an event on campus went helps create a positive climate. Somehow showing you care goes a long way in establishing a supportive learning environment. Second, I spend a great deal of time initially as most of us do, going over the syllabus and explaining the goals and learning objectives of the course, what we will cover, what and when assignments will be due and other relevant materials pertinent to the course. I also

spend time letting them know I want to help them and am there to do so. Third, I am happy in the classroom and I think this helps make students feel comfortable as well. As soon as I enter a classroom, I have a smile on my face and start the class by asking them how they are. Needless to say, this has to be genuine and not contrived since students are able to pick up on insincerity very quickly. Fourth, I encourage students to participate by asking their opinions regarding something we are covering or asking them to put themselves in a situation to see how they would handle it. My goal is never to ask them anything that would embarrass them in any way (and I usually avoid calling on someone but rather wait for volunteers). Overall, these are just a few of the things that have helped me foster a supportive learning environment for my students.”

Sara Chudnovsky Weintraub, Regis College
2014 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

“One aspect that some students find surprising, early in my courses, in my insistence on all stake holders in the room knowing everyone’s first name. We work tirelessly during the first week on classes to learn names. Various ice breakers are used (cultural bingo, short opinion questions and statements--Which is better, dog or cat?,basic philosophical questions-If you had unlimited money, where would you travel?). Actually one mid-term question is to name each class member. Normally, there are numerous positive comments on my final evaluation concerning the fact that students at all levels (K-12, Community College, small liberal arts college and Division I research university) find this course to have a feeling of community and support due to the fact that they actually know the students in the course. Unfortunately, in my opinion, too many students attend classes and have no idea who is sitting next to them. Many students have commented that they actually made friends in the course. I believe that this feeling of support is vital for the students with high communication apprehension. Basic speech courses or any performance-based courses can be very intimidating for some students. I want all students to feel as comfortable as possible!!!!!!”

David A. Wendt, Iowa Wesleyan University
2000 Marcella A. Oberle Award for Outstanding Teaching in Grades K-12

“First and foremost, learn student names and something about them by the end of the third week. As noted above, be yourself. Be fair. Be honest. Let students know that they can respectfully disagree with you and their classmates. With students, set classroom rules for acceptable behavior. Admit when you are wrong. Encourage students to meet with you outside of class. Arrive early and stay after class whenever possible to show that you are available. Laugh . . . you can be silly and still be professional. Walk around the classroom. Listen to their concerns, about your class or learning in general. Adapt to different learning styles as best as you can.”

Betsy Wackernagel Bach, University of Montana
2017 Donald H. Ecroyd Award for Outstanding Teaching in Higher Education

“Over the past several years, our campus has focused on increasing the number of online course offerings. When transitioning to this new learning environment, it is important to identify and help students adapt to unique challenges presented in online learning. For example, when students don’t ‘see’ their instructors, we’re faced with the challenge of ‘out of sight, out of mind.’ Assignment deadlines are more likely to be forgotten, and students may experience a sense of disconnect with their instructors and their peers. However, there are simple strategies to create an immediate, supportive classroom at a distance. To ensure that students don’t forget assignment deadlines, consider using remind.com to send text message reminders within 24-hours of due dates. Messages for the entire semester can be scheduled and prepared ahead of time, so it’s not time consuming. Remind.com is also a useful tool to share motivational messages such as ‘Your classmates are eager to read your comments on their discussion board posts!’ and ‘It’s never too early to begin prepping for next week’s exam!’ Consider strategies to provide students with the opportunity to connect with you ‘live’ to ask questions as opposed to navigating the tedious back-and-forth of email messages for answers. Incorporate Zoom.us or other videoconferencing platforms to support students’ needs for ‘face-to-face’ time. While we may not ‘see’ our students in online classes, there are countless options for providing support.”

Candice Thomas-Maddox

2003 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

“One of the most helpful classroom conversations has involved – at the most basic level – explaining that my career goal is to facilitate their own betterment. This washes away any preconceived notion about my approachability or ego as a professor and allows me to work beyond their final course grade and to impact their own personal lives. First, I start each semester by making sure to note that I want each class to work for them, and then I highlight typical areas of concern that might arise throughout the semester. Then, when covering course content, topics emerge that might impact health or well-being and I acknowledge the significance of those disruptive experiences and discuss ways that we can make sure to collaboratively address those issues before they become insurmountable for the student. Next, when issues arise in class that might be relevant to student’s experiences (e.g., mental health, domestic violence) I make sure to offer myself as a partner to help point them in the right direction of professional help and resources *while also* providing them a list of electronic resources with resources and contact information that they can access anonymously. Finally, I have also had to learn the importance of not presenting a façade that faculty “have it all together”, but instead address classroom topics as they emerge; if I have personally struggled in the past with a class-relevant issue (e.g., disordered eating) I briefly acknowledge that reality in order to normalize experiences and also provide hope. All of this helps to humanize me as a professor, which can be a novel idea for some students, and it also increases my potential approachability (for some students) in ways that perhaps just a simple statement of support can’t necessarily accomplish.”

Jonathan M. Bowman

2014 Donald H. Ecroyd Award for Outstanding Teaching in Higher Education

2014 Western States Communication Association's Distinguished Teaching Award