

A PERSONAL VIEW

Ten maxims for creating a safe learning environment

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Prashanti E, Ramnarayan K. Ten maxims for creating a safe learning environment. *Adv Physiol Educ* 44: 550–553, 2020; doi:10.1152/advan.00085.2020.—To foster a milieu in which student learning can be optimum, teachers need to be aware of the attributes of a safe learning environment. This is the space created in the students' minds to seamlessly promote learning. The 10 maxims, presented in this paper, are the cornerstones, nay, the capstones, for making this happen.

maxims; medical education; safe learning environment; student-teacher relationship

Get the learning environment right, and the learning will look after itself.

Alan Clarke (13)

INTRODUCTION

Students' learning ability is deeply influenced by the safety and comfort of the learning environment, notwithstanding the technology, teachers, and the text. Irrespective of the generation to which the student belongs, the learning environment is pivotal for the overall development of the student. The best pedagogical tools and technologies cannot supplant the conducive learning environment the teacher can create symbiotically with the students.

A safe learning environment is the unseen face (and phase) of learning approached more from a psychological perspective (1, 5). This article expounds the idea of a safe learning environment and propounds ways to establish this through 10 maxims. The teacher plays a crucial role in creating this environment by paying heed to these enduring principles enunciated in this article.

Maxim 1: Don't Undervalue Relationship with Students

Educational processes depend on good relationships. We learn best from people we care about and from people who, we believe, care about us.... We must listen to our students. We must remove our white coats, walk the halls at coffee and lunch breaks. We must get to know our students.

R.G. Tiberius and J. Sinai (36)

Very often teachers underestimate the role of relationship with students. We must remember that the most important aspect in a safe and positive learning environment is the student-teacher rapport. Establishing a meaningful Relationship with the students, being Approachable to them, showing

Patience and giving them Positive reinforcement, having an Open communication, giving Respect to their views and thoughts, and finally creating mutual Trust is what we mean by student-teacher RAPPORT.

Students who have a purposeful relationship with their teachers will be willing to disclose their lack of understanding rather than hide it. Students are more attentive, ask more questions, and are more actively engaged in such an environment (33). Importantly, it has also been shown that a student in such a relationship can go on to develop a sense that their teacher is credible and, therefore, an invaluable asset to their learning (13, 35). Relationships are verily the most vital of determinants in creating an educational climate conducive to learning. The teacher needs to act as an emulative model for learning and celebrating achievements.

Maxim 2: Don't Use Fear, Threat, or Sarcasm to Establish Control

Pain from words has left its scar, on mind and heart that's tender. Cuts and bruises now have healed; it's words that I remember.

Barrie Wade (37)

There are sporadic reports of belittlement of medical students that can vitiate the safe learning environment (30). Seabrook reported on the "intimidating, bullying and demeaning behaviour of teachers in medical schools" (31). There is some proof that clinical teaching is disorganized, unplanned, erratically supervised, and inappropriately assessed. Ingrained into this unpredictable scenario are the elements of sarcasm and ridicule (23, 32). Such practices, even though not widespread, need to be scrupulously avoided, given the evidence that they affect the environment for learning and students' mental health. When students feel abashed, disconcerted, or threatened by the domineering attitudes of teachers, they tend to conceal rather than reveal their ignorance and become timorous in seeking clarifications (31).

Teachers take refuge in the specious argument that intimidating students will help them grow as professionals. In reality, the alleged lack of interest and superficial approach to learning are often manifestations of students under academic pressure and threat (11). Passi et al. (25) reported that students feel embarrassed and wished to never have a class with teachers who used sarcasm.

Some teachers think it is humorous to use sarcasm in the classroom. However, in a study done by Liu et al. (20), humor related to sarcasm and mockery was considered inappropriate and disrupted the decorum of the classroom. The caring teacher

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will always ensure that he/she laughs with the students and does not laugh at them!

Maxim 3: Don't Show Off Knowledge: Show Them Concern

Students do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.

John C. Maxwell (24)

Most often, teachers believe that students respect them for being knowledgeable and intelligent. In their attempt to show what they know, teachers tend to show off knowledge, make it content-intense, complicate rather than simplify concepts, and ask questions that students invariably fail to answer. This is a potential threat to the supportive environment for learning.

A teacher becomes an "expert authority" when he is knowledgeable, well prepared, and confident. This is necessary but not sufficient for the overall effectiveness of student learning. A teacher becomes an "attractive authority" when he is personable, affable, and amiable. Blending the intellectual dimension (expert authority) with the interpersonal dimension (attractive authority) impacts student behavior positively and purposefully (12). Students tend to work harder for teachers they like and perceive as caring (22).

A genuinely concerned teacher is more likely to instill confidence and responsiveness in students, which eventually form the bedrock of trust, providing the platform for seeking help and getting feedback. Especially for medical students in their first year of study, often away from home and overwhelmed by the expectations, a caring teacher is comforting and helps make the transition easier.

Once we become a teacher, we care, not just about education, but about our students' education.

V. Penales et al. (34)

Maxim 4: Don't Reduce Students Understanding to Marks and Grades

When we consider the practically universal use in all educational institutions of a system of marks ... we can but be astonished at the blind faith that has been felt in the reliability of the marking systems.

I. E. Finkelstein (29)

Teachers are unwittingly guilty of rating student understanding based on the marks or grades in an examination. A test score is not an accurate representation of what a student has actually learned. Instead, it is worth providing a menu of activities from which the students are allowed to choose any or many to demonstrate their learning (29).

The unfortunate focus on grading blights the value of the learning process and overturns the learning priorities to have a deleterious impact on metacognitive skills and critical thinking (18). For such underperformers, failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that eventually thwarts their motivation for excel (9).

Teachers must understand that assessment is beyond grades, marks, and recognitions. Assessments must be used "as a yardstick to probe what the students have learned and to provoke their thinking on what they have learned" (27). Formative assessments work best for this purpose and happen best in an environment free of judgments and grades. "Interesting interactions rather than interrogation should be the cornerstone

in a safe learning environment, wherein the student realizes that learning is paramount rather than a grade or a mark" (27).

Maxim 5: Don't Forget Students' Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

Albert Einstein wrote, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid" (28).

Diversity, plurality, and flexibility enhance learning by creating a more comfortable classroom environment. Yet many teachers fail to factor this in when creating their learning environment. Recognizing this and consciously incorporating a range of learning opportunities will propel students to learn better (3). However, an unsafe learning environment will sabotage the gamut of educational strategies.

A teacher can nonchalantly and peremptorily dismiss efforts to get more acquainted with students, but understanding their learning styles enables the teacher to appreciate students' perspectives and viewpoints.

Unwillingness to understand the complex interplay of factors that govern student learning in today's digital era will become an obstacle to a healthy learning scenario. These factors are too sacrosanct to be left to chance or else there is a real risk of not reaching out to the students at all.

Maxim 6: Don't Make Classrooms Suffocating: Allow Ventilation of Ideas

If you do not express your own original ideas ... you will have betrayed yourself.

Rollo May (21)

It is of utmost importance for teachers to realize the importance of creating a classroom environment that allows free expression. Ventilated classrooms are not only important in the physical sense but also in the sense of freedom given to students to ventilate thoughts and ideas without the fear of humiliation. Free expression of thoughts is a casualty when the milieu reeks of daunting peer pressure. Can medical schools endeavor to provide platforms for debate, discussion, dissent, and disagreement without residual rancor?

Students feel unsafe in a classroom that is intellectually and emotionally suffocating and worry about being embarrassed or laughed at in their quest for learning. Teachers must welcome originality in students and must be open enough to accept differences of opinion. Teachers need to emphasize the importance of expression, open-mindedness, a willingness to consider other views, and a readiness to learn from other perspectives. Striving to make the learning environment more ventilated entails providing opportunities for students to challenge and change their own thinking.

Maxim 7: Don't Give a Feedback That Evaluates and Expresses Secondary Feelings

We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their actions.

Stephen R Covey (7)

Giving a meaningful feedback is a crucial aspect of establishing an environment contributive to learning. As teachers, we are unaware that, most often, we give an evaluative feedback to students that "judges student actions" instead of a

descriptive feedback that “provides factual information about the students’ action exactly as we see it” (2).

Evaluating or judging students involves mixing our previous experiences, fears, and preconceived ideas with the actual behavior of the student. This leads to students negating the feedback given as they do not see it the way the teacher perceives. Students who receive descriptive feedback, on the other hand, accept the feedback with more willingness. Studies have shown that descriptive feedback is much more contributory to student learning (19).

Another important aspect of giving a meaningful feedback is about the emotions we express. Primary feelings are one’s primal responses to external events. Feeling sad that a student has not performed well is a primary feeling, but castigating a student for that is expression of a secondary feeling, which is an offshoot of the primary feeling. The faux pas teachers make is to express secondary feelings more often than primary feelings. Such feelings turn emotions into complex reactions, increase the intensity of our reactions, and hide the true intentions of a concerned teacher (4).

A safe learning environment, in the true sense, can be created only when a descriptive feedback is given by expressing the teacher’s primary feelings so that students understand the care and concern that resonate in the teacher’s words.

Maxim 8: Don’t Forget to Set High Expectations

High achievement always takes place in the framework of high expectations.

Charles Kettering (16)

Setting high expectations boosts student performance and morale. Goading students to accomplish more by the teachers’ unconditional faith and support galvanizes them to perform better and live up to those ideals (3). This can also be explained by the Pygmalion effect, which is grounded in theory that, when people believe something will happen, they subconsciously alter their actions and make it come true. We can use this in our classroom by raising the expectations for the performance of students, which may actually show an improvement in student performance (15).

Students tend to concentrate best in an environment that is somewhat more demanding and challenging. Combining the motivating approaches with the feeling of security in learning is a balancing act that the teacher has to perform adroitly (6). Constantly highlighting to the students what they are capable of and what more they can achieve and encouraging them to challenge themselves and achieve more are the true attributes of a safe learning environment.

Maxim 9: Don’t Underrate the Value of Student Cohesiveness

Coming together is a beginning; staying together is progress; working together is success.

Henry Ford (8)

Another necessary aspect when fostering a safe learning environment is creating classroom communities. Nurturing commonalities among students will allow celebration of not only their similarities, but their differences as well. The communion arising from this togetherness is a powerful glue to foster collaborative learning.

More enduring than the individual efforts to learn are the team efforts to achieve together and succeed in synergy (3). Teachers need to make students a part of a collaborative learning effort in the classroom, sharing their strengths and encouraging each other. The teacher should assign responsibilities to students so that they work together, interact effectively, and learn positive interdependence and interpersonal skills. Tasks assigned to make students depend on one another will not merely bridge, but bond, the relationship that will encourage group learning. With the cooperation and collaboration of students, a learning environment will flourish the way it should.

Maxim 10: Don’t Miss Teaching Students the Way They Learn Best

If students do not learn the way we teach, teach them the way they learn.

Ignacio Estrada (10)

Today’s teachers must be aware of the learning needs and styles of the present generation of students who are technophiles. They are so accustomed to technology outside the classroom that its absence inside the classroom deprives them of that connectedness (14). A vibrant talk-text-technology link is vital in engaging students and creating an environment that is enjoyable to them. Koehler and Mishra suggest that the teachers who teach the present generation should abide by the TPACK framework, where technological knowledge (TK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), and content knowledge (CK) have equal weightage (17). Active engagement with the learning material through technology allows students to prepare themselves better for their life ahead.

A combination of a creative teacher and innovative classroom technology usage can result in an environment that will ensure optimum learning for millennials and centennials (26).

Conclusion

Creating a safe learning environment requires a continual reflection by a sagacious teacher on the factors that promote or demote the ideal environment in which students will love to learn. The maxims presented in this article are well known to every teacher but are often the most neglected in actual educational practice. They serve as a sounding board in this digital era to experiment with technology-enabled learning. They are not intended to prescribe or proscribe but are meant to resurrect awareness and interest in the established adages.

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E.P. and K.R. conceived and designed research; E.P. and K.R. drafted manuscript; E.P. and K.R. edited and revised manuscript; E.P. and K.R. approved final version of manuscript.

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