

1

What Is a Learning Classroom?

How to Develop Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

—Albert Einstein

Jerry, an eager preservice teacher, was starting a class on behavior management before student teaching. In previous classes, he learned instructional theory and strategies. However, he continued to have nagging worries. Would his students listen to him? Would they behave? What if they didn't? Would he be able to relate to them? Would he have control and good classroom management? These fears preoccupied him. He didn't want anyone to know he felt this way.

Megan, Jerry's classmate, had similar concerns. She struggled with a perceived conflict between being nice and being tough. How would students enjoy her class if she must be firm to gain their respect? How would they like her if she had to consistently enforce school rules? She pretended to be confident.

When Megan and Jerry first walked into the class, they were surprised to find names on assigned seats. Class rules, which clearly stated expectations and criteria for failure, were projected on a screen. Dr. Roy Nickelson, the instructor, marched sternly into the class, stood at the

podium, and in a stern voice stated, "This class is *the* most important class for teachers. If you are going to make it in this class, you have to work hard and follow my instructions on how to manage and control a classroom. You need to be prepared and to keep my rules. If you don't, you can't be a good teacher."

Students sat there, eyes glued on the rigid figure. He continued, "Now you have an idea of what expectations are for this class. Take a notebook and write your thoughts on classroom management and being in this class." The students dutifully followed directions.

After about three minutes, Dr. Roy changed his tone and politely asked students to move their chairs into a circle. He moved the podium to a corner and pulled his chair into the circle. In a gentle tone of voice, he invited students to take a deep breath and reflect on what just happened. There was a noticeable sigh of relief. Students responded to his invitation to share their thoughts and feelings about what they just experienced.

One student said, "At first, I felt the class was structured and efficient." Like many preservice teachers, this young man had learned that getting a good grade meant doing what he was told and giving the teacher what he or she wanted. Another said, "I thought, 'This is scary! I already hate this class!'" This student responded negatively and would typically choose to withdraw before it was too late. Some students, who had Dr. Roy for other classes, said they were really confused and wondered what happened to the other Dr. Roy, because this was so out of character for him.

Dr. Roy carefully planned this brief demonstration to help his students experience how students feel when they walk into a controlled, sterile, uninviting, oppressive, strictly managed classroom environment. Although the dramatization was difficult for Dr. Roy, he knew it was an effective tool to help his students become aware of how important it is to develop a learning classroom.

After the brief shock demo, Dr. Roy encouraged students to reflect on their feelings in a relaxed environment. In the circle, they felt more comfortable to share their ideas in an atmosphere of respect and acceptance. In response to their comments, Dr. Roy modeled active listening by paraphrasing to clarify rather than evaluating or lecturing. He used open-ended questions to stimulate discussion as they created meaning through collaboration.

When Dr. Roy joined his students in a circle, he focused on building relationships within a safe learning community. Such an environment usually prevents inappropriate behavior and learning happens fluidly and powerfully.

Fortunately for Jerry and Megan, they were participating in a class where the instructor developed a learning community and encouraged the participants to voice their thoughts and concerns. In this environment, students felt safe to be honest about their insecurities. This instructor actually modeled the difference between developing and managing a classroom

in a way that was very different from the typical educational lecture classes where they were told how to teach content rather than shown how to engage learners. Dr. Roy emphasized, “You can manage a classroom with fear, but that discourages creative learning.” He did not discard the need for managing or organizing the classroom. Instead, he emphasized the importance of focusing on interactive learning within a well-ordered, developed classroom.

When teacher education students in Dr. Roy’s classroom management course were asked to think about how it would feel to develop a learning classroom rather than manage one, without exception, they were enthusiastic about developing one because it removed a substantial amount of the fear. One student said the change in terms changed his mental picture from “battening down the hatches” to “building something strong.” It clearly represented a change in mindset.

Preservice teachers are confused and somewhat intimidated by the prospect of managing a classroom. This perspective permeates required courses like classroom management or behavior management. Teachers need to be effective and efficient; however, the word *manage* conveys a need to overpower or control. This often exacerbates their fears.

As noted earlier, it’s not just the young teachers who struggle with this idea of managing a classroom. Seasoned teachers often believe they need to instill a certain fear in their students in order to keep them under control. This produces the illusion of a well-managed classroom. A well-managed classroom, though, is not necessarily one that promotes learning.

Even well-meaning teachers sometimes confuse managing and controlling the classroom with developing a learning classroom. Order in a classroom doesn’t mean quiet; it means focused engagement where students understand the goals and feel safe getting involved. *It means focusing on relationships, relevance, and rigor.*

Students tend to listen more with their hearts than with their heads.

THE THREE Rs REVISITED

To effectively teach and awaken the joy that Einstein described, we need to focus on what matters—*relationships, relevance, rigor*. These three words appear frequently in educational journals and are often used in discussions about improving our schools. However, they are usually ordered differently: *rigor, relevance, and relationships*. Our decision to present these in reverse order is intentional, based on the primary importance of forming relationships to facilitate learning and the need for seeing relevance before looking deeper for rigor. We encourage teachers, both beginning and experienced, to recognize the importance of these three Rs in

developing a learning community within the classroom. We can become so busy just keeping up with everyday demands and managing details that we get caught in a survival mentality rather than enjoying and stimulating learning for ourselves and our students. In this book, we discuss many facets of effective teaching and learning that challenge our readers to take a different perspective on what matters.

From our years of experience, we realized that students tend to listen more with their hearts than with their heads. This insight opened our minds to carefully examine the effect of relationships on learning. Thousands of struggling students who turned their lives around reported that a caring teacher who believed in them made it possible for them to be successful. Good students who regularly got good grades reported that connecting with a caring teacher enabled them to excel in developing their abilities. At every age level, trusting relationships between teachers and students prime the brain for learning, activate willingness to cooperate, and encourage excellence.

Teachers who connect with their students create a safe environment where students can question, explore, and discover. Willingness to take risks can be limited by a fear of failure. A safe environment governed by principles that encourage growth and respect allows students the freedom to learn from their mistakes.

But what happens when teachers are uncomfortable building relationships with students? Teachers need to connect with kindness while maintaining appropriate boundaries. To build meaningful relationships, teachers need to know who they are, know their students, be competent in their content area, and be proficient in their ability to engage students in learning.

Students, who sometimes appear to resist learning, confront teachers by asking "Why do we need to know this?" This is a legitimate question. Instead of thinking students are just trying to avoid work, teachers need to look at the relevance of what they are teaching and how they are presenting it. Digital access to unlimited knowledge redefines the role of educators. As facilitators, teachers help equip students with the cognitive tools to learn, create, and change, so they can apply what they are learning to their own lives. With information doubling at astounding rates, teachers make instruction relevant by developing a learning community where students use rigorous, systematic approaches to build on the basics and enhance their cognitive capabilities to make sense of their changing world.

Although the term *rigor* usually connotes harsh inflexibility, we are using it to mean thoroughness and precise accuracy that is only possible with standards of excellence. A well-developed learning community provides the structure, opportunities, and security that challenge students to achieve depth and breadth of learning through self-discipline and continuing independent research. Rigor includes good organization

and effective procedures that prevent many of the distracting behaviors interfering with learning.

As we worked with prospective and practicing teachers over the last three decades, we saw a need to emphasize the importance of developing a learning classroom based on relationships, relevance, and rigor, instead of stressing strategies for classroom and behavior management. Using a proactive approach, we involve teachers with the personal experience of a learning environment that is safe, stimulating, open, and challenging. Although education courses and seminars address innovative ways of teaching, most teachers teach the way they were taught without realizing the disconnect between what they claim to be their philosophy of education and their actual practice in the classroom. Our mindset, which is a composite of beliefs and values, filters and colors everything we do.

MINDSETS

Carol Dweck (2006) described two mindsets and their impact on learning. The “growth mindset” is grounded in a belief that growth is ongoing and that more effort will bring improved intelligence and performance. In contrast, a “fixed mindset” is grounded in a belief that “we are what we are,” and it isn’t likely to change. Those with a fixed mindset are apt to say things that define themselves unequivocally, like “I’m dumb” or “I’m not good at math,” and use that as a reason to avoid learning. They are not likely to put effort into changing their viewpoint since they see it as unchangeable. Those who think they are smart may think they will always get good grades based on their native intelligence and unrelated to their effort.

Classrooms with positive learning environments use strategies that promote a growth mindset. Students’ efforts are noticed and encouraged. Grades are not the focus as much as multiple indicators of ongoing learning. Mistakes are embraced as a step in the learning process. Misconceptions provide opportunities for dialogue and clarification. Questions from students give teachers feedback on their effectiveness in promoting growth.

Fixed mindsets occur across the learning spectrum from the very strong to the very weak students. With fixed mindsets, students are unwilling to take risks. They resist trying because they expect to fail no matter what they do. With growth mindsets, students are open to challenges and are willing to try new things because they are not afraid of making mistakes and focus on effort, expecting to improve if they work hard.

As with the students, schools that promote developing growth mindsets and sharing among professionals create classrooms that promote learning.

With students, the power to shape their perspective does rest with the teachers and their parents or other significant adults. By noticing the effort with statements like “wow, you really worked hard on that,” the students who are working on establishing their identities will begin to focus on the effort and a belief that they can change. When adults say things like “wow, you are really smart” or “you’re going to be the next LeBron James,” they are focusing on the outcomes and may stifle growth.

Mindsets become a focus for teachers, too. Teachers with a fixed mindset are less likely to engage with their peers in professional learning communities where they examine their teaching and assessment strategies. As with the students, schools that promote developing growth mindsets and sharing among professionals create classrooms that promote learning.

Developing a learning classroom means focusing on creating a growth mindset as well as keeping the brain in the game. Good teachers implement strategies that engage students’ brains while developing good relationships. That’s where focus on developing relationships, relevance, and rigor changes things. When students are afraid, they are not fully using the part of their brains that allows them to learn. Instead, they remain stuck in their *lizard brain*. In addition to avoiding the lizard brain, this also means making sure the students understand its significance.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SURVIVAL REFLEX TO TEACHING

The lizard brain is the most primitive part of the brain shared with other living creatures (including reptiles like lizards) and is focused on survival. Comprised primarily of the cerebellum and the brain stem, it keeps various bodily systems working. When we feel threatened, it becomes the primary focus for our autonomic system to work efficiently and activate our fight-or-flight response. Although this is critical for our survival, reacting can be problematic when we engage these defensive reflexes inappropriately in situations incorrectly perceived as threats due to our past experiences.

For example, Perry walks into his math class. He heads straight to the back of the classroom where the teacher is less likely to see him. He expects to be embarrassed in this class because he has often heard that he is a poor math student. Although his survival isn’t really threatened, his experience says that he is likely to be humiliated, which for Perry is a very real and meaningful threat. He hides as much as he can in the class.

In a similar way, the teacher spots Perry, sees what appears to be an angry young man, and decides he better get him under control. His perception of Perry is based on his experience with other students who looked and acted similarly. He engages his defenses in order to survive also and not be humiliated by a difficult student. He puts his sights on Perry and decides to gain control of him from the beginning. He's in "fight" mode. Very little teaching and learning can take place when both the teacher and the learner are engaged in survival thinking and not accessing their reflective brains to make meaning and solve problems. We need to feel safe in order to fully access these areas.

This reality is exacerbated in schools where the students' brains are still developing through adolescence. Positron-emission tomography (PET) scans reveal that adolescent brains are most active in the feeling area when confronted with a problem. In contrast, adult brains are most active in the frontal lobe where reasoning processes information.

Staying free of the lizard brain helps teachers focus on what is right for learning, not what they need to do to survive.

What does this mean for teachers? It means that teaching and learning happens best in a nonthreatening environment. It also indicates how difficult it may be to understand what might feel threatening to each student. How can teachers possibly know? This is a key element in building relationships and developing a classroom for learning. The point is not to know everything initially about every student, but to establish a safe environment, design a learning profile for each student, and be attentive to early signs of disengagement.

In this book, we address using the whole brain for effective teaching and learning. Staying free of the lizard brain helps teachers focus on what is right for learning, not what they need to do to survive.

One of the critical elements of creating a learning classroom is making the process of learning transparent. Teaching the students about learning will help make them good collaborators in their own learning. This begins when we focus on learning and invite the students to explore how they learn as they discover new knowledge. When we use this information to plan and deliver high quality lessons, we have a well-developed learning classroom.

CREATING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Relevance in the classroom begins by creating a classroom environment where learning is clearly the goal. When the classroom doesn't openly embrace and facilitate learning, students are left to wonder what is expected. Here are a couple examples.

Jennifer walked into her fourth-grade class with all the excitement and misgivings that students have when they begin a school year. As she stepped inside, she noticed the pleasant upbeat music that was playing. She looked around and noticed the posters on the wall, the area reserved for student work, and an area for pictures and information about students in this class titled "All About Me." The back corner of the room had some carpet, bookracks, and some beanbag chairs. Jennifer began to relax as she noticed how easy it was going to be to find things. Space-saver boxes were on each set of four desks containing pencils, pens, sticky notes, index cards, and highlighters. Mrs. Allen smiled, walked over, and introduced herself. Jennifer felt welcome. The atmosphere was calm and pleasant, making Jennifer feel safe and excited. Her anxieties diminished.

Next door, Rebecca walked into her classroom. Desks were arranged theater style. The walls were bare. The teacher sat behind a cluttered desk working on her computer without acknowledging Rebecca when she entered. Rebecca felt nervous and guarded, not knowing what to expect.

These two scenarios illustrate very different approaches to setting up a learning environment. One creates a clear vision of what will happen in the classroom, the other leads to uncertainty. For learning to happen, there needs to be a feeling of safety. Having a clear vision of what might be expected, where materials are located, and a clear feeling that the teacher feels good about teaching and is excited about the students in this class goes a long way toward allaying fears. Students who feel safe and welcome are much more likely to be open to learning and being engaged in the classroom.

Teachers who develop effective learning environments establish a *learning momentum* from the moment the students enter the class. The idea of establishing a learning momentum means that everything about the classroom clearly communicates a focus on learning.

What might threaten our students' success? Consider the questions that come to mind whenever we enter a new situation. What is expected here? What will I need? Will it be provided? Will I have a chance for success? How will I be treated? Am I going to be bored or excited when I come here? Does the teacher like me? Is the teacher fair? In addition to these issues, there are always those things that may happen outside of the classroom that threaten our students' safety. How will I be able to focus with these other things on my mind?

Teachers who focus on developing a classroom for learning take time before school starts to learn about students who will be in their class and reflect on how to build relationships and how to carefully plan instruction that is rigorous and relevant. The goal is also to encourage thinking and learning on an ongoing basis.

THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A LEARNING CLASSROOM

This is just the beginning of creating a classroom for learning. The process includes many aspects that go beyond what is typically considered when the focus is on managing a classroom. For instance, in addition to the elements just described, it also means paying attention to how teachers ask questions and how they respond to students. It means doing everything possible to engage students’ brains during instruction. It also means establishing procedures and responses to behavior that promote learning and avoid punishment or rigidity that stifles growth. Differentiation and assessment become critical aspects of establishing a learning classroom because they make success available to all students.

In a learning classroom, our role as a teacher changes from delivering information to facilitating learning. To do this, we have to be *professional learners* who are constantly researching and reflecting to improve our practice. It is much better to proactively plan for developing an environment for learning than it is to just manage with a focus on reactive responses to misbehavior. Keeping learning at the forefront is the crucial element that differentiates the two. Chart 1.1 illustrates some of the differences between developing a learning classroom and managing a classroom.

Chart 1.1 Developing a Learning Classroom vs. Managing a Classroom

<i>Developing a Learning Classroom</i>	<i>Managing a Classroom</i>
Proactive thinking with emphasis on learning	Reactive thinking with emphasis on control
Relaxed, open, self-controlled	Rigid, oppressive, controlled
Safe to take risks	Fearful of taking risks
All thinking valued	Correct answers valued
Student centered, every student included in discussion, each has a role, a voice	Teacher centered, lectures, individual students called on
Open-ended questions	Closed, one right answer question to cover content
Paraphrased responses to clarify for understanding	Evaluated responses for correctness
Creative novel presentations to engage mind and emotions for learning	Sterile, boring presentation of facts to be remembered
Creating meaning, discovery, cognitive engagement	Telling meaning, emphasis on covering content

REFLECTION

After reading this chapter, take a few minutes to reflect on the following:

- Reflect on a classroom in which you felt you learned the most. What do you notice about that classroom as you think about it? What are the characteristics of that teacher's approach that facilitated your learning?
- Now consider someone in your life, teacher or other person, from whom you learned some important lessons. What made that relationship one which nurtured learning?
- Think about your classroom or your prospective classroom. In what ways have you established an environment that is safe for learning? Which of your current practices may inhibit learning?
- Reflect on your classroom setting. What might a student notice when entering your classroom? How will this perception enhance safety and promote learning?
- Think about a classroom in which you felt a sense of comfort when you entered it. What about that classroom made you feel that way?

ACTION

- Take specific characteristics and practices that you noticed in the reflections and list them as the foundation for developing your classroom. Begin to examine ways in which you may incorporate these and journal your thoughts for future reference.
- Take a moment and notice those things that inhibit learning for you. List these to help you understand some practices to avoid or at least understand the impact they may have on learning.
- Draw a sketch (cartoon) of what a learning community classroom would look like. Share this with colleagues.
- Close the book and write a brief journal entry to document key points you take away from reading this chapter.
- Visit two classrooms and document three observations for each of the three *Rs*—relationships, relevance, and rigor.
- Write and date a short letter addressed to yourself: describe what you think a visitor would observe in your classroom in terms of relationships, relevance, and rigor. Seal it and file it in a place where you will open it six months from now.
- Identify colleagues whose classroom is well organized and stimulates student engagement. Visit it and notice what students' needs they took into account when organizing their classroom. Ask questions to discern how they made the decisions they made.

- In conversations with friends and colleagues, practice effective listening skills by slowing down, pausing before responding, and then paraphrasing their perspective before giving yours. Notice how it works.
- When responding to students, work on paraphrasing their answers both when working individually as well as whole class. Notice how this impacts participation and relationships with students.
- Identify some positive posters or signs to use in your classroom. Think also of signs that promote thinking such as “What do you see?”; “What do you notice?”; “What do you think?”; “What do you wonder?”; and so forth.