

Title: Relaxing the Classroom Atmosphere

Project Member(s): Jamey Spratt

Describe the problem, issue, or area of interest and the context.

While I take pride in the fact that I challenge my students to think, it is not my intention to make them feel bad about their intellectual abilities. Unfortunately, I think the challenging nature of my classes was generating more anxiety than mathematical thought, and I felt like many students were completely misunderstanding my intentions.

Define your desired goals, or “outcomes.”

I wanted students to get a better idea of who I am; especially that I take an interest in seeing them achieve their goals successfully. I wanted to get to know my students a little better, and let them get to know me a little better, but I did NOT want to waste precious class time with chit-chat.

Describe your “indicators” of success.

I used a survey and tried to find some quantitative difference from beginning to end about students’ opinions of math, but I did not find any real significant differences there. The main thing I noticed was that students were being friendlier towards me and that my end-of-semester course evaluations were improving (the part about me, not the part about the courses). So, students weren’t really taking any more of an interest in math, but students were definitely more comfortable in my classes. This greatly reduced classroom tension and made my job LOTS more fun!

Describe your project. Students were required (as a tiny part of their grade) to make (and keep) two appointments with me during the semester. Our meetings lasted 15 minutes and were designed to force students to see me outside of class. I briefly explained to them that I was interested in letting them know that there is much more to me than math, and then I asked them to tell me a little about themselves. The first meeting was mostly information and get-to-know-you type stuff, while the second meeting was more about grades and what they thought was hard, what they liked, clearing up any confusion, etc.

Describe your results.

I did not find that more students were learning to “love” math. What I did find is that even though students were uncomfortable with mathematics, they at least weren’t uncomfortable with me. The comments on course evaluations in subsequent semesters have included comments like “he’s a nice guy” or “I really like Mr. Spratt”. In previous semesters, I would see more comments like “he doesn’t seem to care” or “Mr. Spratt is very rude”. I have had students tell me outside of class that they don’t want to do poorly in my class because they like me and want to please me, and I can’t imagine that ever happening before I made this attempt to connect with my students. Of course, I still have students from time to time who refuse to open up and seem determined to not like me or my class, but I have accepted that I can’t expect everybody to like me (as an instructor or in any other area of life). I have also accepted that if student is quiet and doesn’t “open up”, there is really no way of knowing what they are thinking or how they feel. All I can do is let them know I want to help them and let them decide whether or not to take advantage of that.

Describe your evaluation methods.

Initially, I was hoping that students would become more interested in math, but that generally did not happen. It is intriguing to see that students will associate me with mathematics (in a negative way) but it didn’t seem to work the other way around (i.e., they associate mathematics with me in a positive way). I think the fear and anxiety associated with mathematics is deeply-rooted in the psyche and not something that can be easily reversed, while their opinion of me is easily swayed since I’m completely new to them. I do think this was a worthwhile project, though it was extremely time consuming. An interesting note is that I have only done this once (required student meetings), but the results carried over into future semesters. In some cases, I had students who participated in the experiment sign up for other classes. They were more open in class, and this helped other students who didn’t know me open up. Also, my college is small and in a small-town environment, and student perceptions about instructors are passed by word-of-mouth across the student body fairly quickly. Many students have learned that my classes are challenging, but that I am willing to do whatever I can to help them succeed and have a good time in the process.