



Centre of Expertise for Higher Education (University of Antwerp)

You probably have an idea of what a positive classroom climate might be: a good vibe, enjoyable collaboration, and some room for laughter. But it's more than that. In this Educational Tip, we will start by examining what constitutes a positive classroom climate. Then we will discuss how it can be achieved. Finally, we will address the specific situation of creating a positive 'virtual classroom' climate for online or distance learning. After all, it's also important – if not even more important – to offer a positive experience in online education.

What is a positive classroom climate?

The term 'classroom climate' refers to the way students feel in the classroom, and how they experience the atmosphere. It all comes down to the students' perceptions.

One key aspect of a positive classroom climate is the sense of a strong rapport and good interpersonal relations between the instructor and students, and among students themselves. In addition, there is also a more didactic component, where the positive atmosphere is created through a strong learning environment with sound teaching methods.

Research (Barr, 2016) has shown that the perception of the classroom climate influences students' motivation and degree of participation. In a positive classroom climate, students are more motivated and open to activation. This means that a positive climate has a positive impact on student learning.

How can you foster a positive classroom climate?

Before we go into specific methods, it's important to stress that working towards a positive classroom climate is something very personal. It involves more than just 'good teaching'. After all, in addition to the didactic component, there's also the social factor. That means it's up to you to decide how far you want to go with the social aspect. The

steps you take should fit in with your teaching style and personality.

On the one hand, then, we recommend 'good teaching' initiatives to everyone. Here you should consider including all *possible* measures. On the other hand, when it comes to social aspects (i.e. working on a good rapport and good interpersonal relationships), it's up to you to decide which measures you *want* to include. We will therefore discuss social and didactic measures separately.

Social measures

As an instructor, you have several opportunities to create good interpersonal relationships with your students, and among students. As mentioned earlier, we realise that it's not possible to include all the measures, as they should fit in with your teaching style and personality. Having said that, what are the possibilities you could consider?

- Getting to know your students

This is obviously easier in small groups than in large ones. We're not saying that you have to get to know every individual student. This is more about showing interest, which can be done in various ways:



Make room for informal interactions with students before or after class. You can also consider joining students at the coffee machine during breaks. Show interest in both their academic and personal lives. The input you get from this may also be useful in class.

Find out what your students think of assignments, tasks, activation efforts, videos you showed, etc.

Set an activating task that explores hobbies, holidays, favourite snacks and so on. This can be done to familiarise them with a new activation method, for instance (see also: [Tip No 67](#)). Killing two birds with one stone: you not only get to know the students, but you also give them the opportunity to practise activation in an accessible way.

Learn the names of (some of) your students. Don't underestimate the effect it can have when you call someone by name when you give them the floor.

Have your students fill in an introductory survey. This can be done digitally, e.g. via PollEverywhere (the University of Antwerp has a licence for teaching staff to use PollEverywhere, see also [here](#) and [here](#)). You could ask about students' interests, prior knowledge, preferences etc. in the context of your programme component.

- Activating your students to get to know one another

During the first session, organise an introductory game where small groups of students introduce themselves to one another by answering some standard questions. We realise that this may have a high 'youth camp' factor. Nevertheless, there are some compelling arguments in favour of doing this. If you want to activate students, it's important to break the ice as soon as possible, and this can be done perfectly via an introductory game. In addition, you can collect the information from this introductory game to get to know your students.

Regularly set activating assignments where small groups of students can brainstorm on the topic at hand.

- Allowing students to get to know you

The informal interactions mentioned earlier can serve this purpose perfectly.

In addition, you could take some time to introduce yourself during the first session. It's up to you to decide how much you're willing to share. Some instructors only

discuss their academic careers, others add some more personal input and talk about what excites them about this course, this field of study, and so on.

During your lessons, let students know how you feel about the topic at hand. Do you think it's straightforward, complicated, fun...?

Share personal stories that tie in with the topics covered. Not only do anecdotes help make your lectures more enjoyable, they also allow students to get to know you a little better.

Are you nervous standing in front of a large group? Do you make mistakes sometimes? Does it annoy you if your PowerPoint presentation doesn't load properly? Feel free to communicate about this on a meta level. It shows that you're only human, which helps improve the rapport with the group.

- Using humour

Never at anyone's expense, of course. But you could bring up funny anecdotes or use humorous cartoons or videos to illustrate or clarify the subject matter.

Didactic measures

A strong learning environment and good teaching can help create a positive atmosphere in the classroom. Below we will discuss several aspects that can contribute to a strong learning environment, and ultimately to a positive classroom climate as well.

- Encouraging activation (see [Tip No 67](#) and [Tip No 70](#))

By activating students, you can increase student involvement. When they feel that their input is valued, and an integral part of the lesson, this can contribute to a positive classroom climate. Do make sure that any measures to boost activation don't undermine this climate. Here are some aspects to take into consideration:

Praise students who are activated or who give an answer. It doesn't matter whether the answer is right or wrong. The important thing is to have students actively participate. It's all about rewarding desired behaviour (activation), a key principle in behavioural theory. Of course, it's also important that students know whether their answers are right or wrong. In order to maintain or create a positive classroom climate, it's important to deal



with mistakes in a constructive manner (more on this [here](#)).

In line with the above: make it clear that it's okay to make mistakes. You can communicate about this at the start of your programme component. After all, it's often useful to explain the 'rules of the game' of an activating learning environment right from the start (more on this [here](#)).

Create success stories by making sure students have positive experiences with activation. This can be done by always asking for an opinion during the first activation of a lesson, or by setting an assignment that everyone can participate in. In order to ensure an atmosphere with minimal reluctance to contribute, you can activate students in small groups first. Their (group) responses can then be discussed with the entire class. This will hopefully result in a positive attitude towards activation.

Always check whether the students are still following. Do they understand the activation assignment and the important takeaways? This shows you care about how your students are doing, which in turn is linked to the social aspects of a positive classroom climate.

An icebreaker (such as the previously mentioned introductory game) can also contribute to activation and to a positive classroom climate. The atmosphere is better when students have got to know each other a little, and they will be more likely to make an activation contribution.

As mentioned earlier, student involvement can be fostered by making student input an integral part of the class. This includes acknowledging students' questions and answering them as thoroughly as possible. You can even use one student's question to activate others: 'And what do you think the answer to the question is?'

- Making things clear

Ensure clarity in the learning environment when it comes to assignments and tasks (more on this [here](#)), thesis guidance (more on this [here](#)), rules, and dos and don'ts with regard to the classroom climate you want to achieve. During the first lesson, you can communicate about, or even openly discuss, activation (or expectations regarding activation): 'Don't be afraid to make mistakes', 'Respect your fellow students and their opinions', and so on.

- Giving students a certain degree of autonomy

Whenever possible, allow students to have a say in choices regarding the learning environment you want to create. The resulting ownership will ensure more involvement, responsibility and motivation. This, in turn, will have a positive influence on the classroom climate. Possibilities for participation:

Participation in the learning content: at the start of your class, you can check whether the students have any questions. You can then dedicate part of your lecture to these questions. This also includes freedom of choice regarding subjects for the Bachelor or Master dissertation. In addition, you could consider offering two possible subjects that you would like to teach, allowing the students to pick the subject they prefer.

Participation in the learning process: you could allow students to choose partners for a group assignment (more on this [here](#)), to set their own deadlines for an assignment (within certain limits), or to have a say in the criteria for a certain task. Using a joker system is another example of granting autonomy in the learning process: you could set four assignments throughout the year, for instance, and require that students complete any three of them. They each get a joker they can use to 'skip' one.

A positive classroom climate in online education

There's no way around it: online education involves several additional challenges. This means achieving a positive classroom climate will also be more challenging. Because of the specific nature of online education, you are less 'in touch' with your students, as there are fewer face-to-face sessions. That means you have fewer opportunities to pique students' interest in your course, while students also lack a sense of community. Consequently, it's all the more important to work on a positive 'virtual classroom' climate as well. Most of the possibilities mentioned earlier remain applicable, but the specific nature of online or distance learning requires an extra layer, or a slightly different approach:

- Getting to know each other is also important in online education. Here, too, you should take the time to introduce yourself. If this can be done face-to-face, for example in blended education, then great! But if that's not possible, be sure to



introduce yourself online. During 'synchronous' online teaching (with real-time communication between the instructor and the students, allowing immediate interaction), set aside a few minutes to introduce yourself. In addition, think about how you can introduce yourself in 'asynchronous' teaching situations, i.e. when you don't teach live, and students can view the recording of your lecture at a time of their choosing. You can start such recordings with a short presentation of yourself, or you can consider recording a separate short screencast or video in which you introduce yourself.

- Consider appearing on-screen in all your online lectures (regardless of whether they're synchronous or asynchronous). This makes things more personal. Alternate between showing the PowerPoint presentation and showing yourself. You can choose to appear at set times during your lecture: at the start when you welcome everyone, during the wrap-up of an assignment, when sharing an anecdote, etc.
- In line with the above: if the electronic learning environment permits it, you can try to have students who give an answer or ask a question appear on-screen. We understand that students aren't always keen on this. So it's always good to check whether your student group would be okay with this. You could also make a distinction between Bachelor and Master students. The latter are more likely to speak up and more accustomed to activation. Students will also feel more comfortable in smaller online groups. In order to nudge students gently in the direction of reacting on-screen, you could start with audio-only reactions at first.
- It's important to try to create a sense of community among students in online education. This can be done by setting regular activating assignments in the electronic learning environment you use, requiring students to work together

(UAntwerp staff members can use breakout groups in Blackboard Collaborate: more on this [here](#) and [here](#)). You could also consider setting assignments that students need to collaborate on outside of the (virtual) classroom via an online platform (UAntwerp staff members can use the collaborative spaces designed for students on Blackboard, which can be found in the left-hand menu of each course).

- Discuss the challenges that online teaching poses to you with the student group, and ask for their understanding.
- If some level of face-to-face contact is possible, it's certainly advisable to use this time to work towards a positive classroom climate. Think about how you can utilise face-to-face contact moments as efficiently as possible, making use of the possibilities outlined above.
- In addition to social measures, it's still useful to activate students during online lectures, thereby contributing to a positive classroom climate. There are several ways to achieve this. You can find more information about student activation below.



Want to know more?

A positive classroom climate

- Barr, J. J. (2016). *Developing a positive classroom climate. IDEA paper #61.* IDEA. https://www.ideaedu.org/idea_papers/developing-a-positive-classroom-climate/
- Redant, G. (2005). Doeltreffend klasbeheer: Effectief omgaan met de klasgroep. Leuven: Garant
- University Center for the Advancement of Teaching. The Ohio State University. *Shaping a positive learning environment.* <https://ucat.osu.edu/bookshelf/teaching-topics/shaping-a-positive-learning-environment/>

Online education

- Online activation:
 - [ECHO Tip No 95](#): How to make online lectures interactive (in Dutch)
 - [Pintra information](#) on online activation (accessible only to UAntwerp staff)
- [ECHO Tips on online and blended education](#) (in Dutch)
- Sources accessible only to UAntwerp staff:
 - [Teaching on campus & online](#): Pintra information with **inspiration, didactic & technical support and tips** to structure online education

Motivating students

- Svinicki, M. D. (2016). *Motivation. An updated analysis. IDEA paper #59.* IDEA. https://www.ideaedu.org/idea_papers/motivation-an-updated-analysis/
- Vansteenkiste, M., Sierens, E., Soenens, B., & Lens, W. (2007). *Willen, moeten en structuur in de klas: Over het stimuleren van een optimaal leerproces. Begeleid Zelfstandig Leren*, 16, 37-58.
- Vanhoof, J., Van de Broek, M., Penninckx, M., Doche, V., & Van Petegem, P. (2018), [Leerbereidheid van leerlingen aanwakkeren: 10 Praktijkprincipes die motiveren, inspireren én werken.](#) (Article on EDUBRON blog).

Activating students

- [ECHO Tips on activation](#)
- BV databank (in Dutch):
 - Steekkaart: [hoorcollege met activerende elementen](#)

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- Steekkaart: [Voting](#)
- Steekkaart: [Onderwijsleergesprek](#)
- Steekkaart: [Responsiecollege](#)
- Steekkaart: [Groepswerk](#)
- Steekkaart: [Jigsaw](#)
- Steekkaart: [casussen en de casusmethode](#)
- Steekkaart: [Zoemsessie](#)
- Deslauriers, L., Schelew, E., & Wieman, C. (2011). Improved learning in a large-enrollment physics class. *Science*, 332, 862-864. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1201783>
- Millis, B. J. (2014). *Active learning strategies in face-to-face courses*. IDEA paper #53. IDEA. https://www.ideaedu.org/idea_papers/active-learning-strategies-in-face-to-face-courses/
- [Good practices](#) (can only be consulted by UAntwerp staff members) (in Dutch)