

## ESTABLISHING POSITIVE CULTURE AND CLIMATE IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM: PATHWAYS FOR INSTRUCTORS

By

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### ABSTRACT

*This article will discuss the importance of conscientious and purposeful establishment of positive culture and climate within online courses, particularly those offered within higher education and graduate programs. School culture and climate have been linked to student and faculty performance, satisfaction, efficacy, and overall learning and teaching experiences (Cicco, 2015; Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015). The online course instructor plays a key role in laying a strong foundation for the formation of positive relationships, effective instructional strategies, fair assessment practices, and consistent communication patterns within the virtual classroom, ultimately impacting the development of both culture and climate. Students' feelings of safety and trust in their ability to seek and receive help in difficult situations have also been tied to culture and climate (Cicco, 2015; Negis-Isik and Gursel, 2013). While organizational culture and climate are valuable indicators of academic success, these constructs are also evident and measurable within an individual classroom, whether offered in face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online format. This article will discuss culture and climate within the context of the online classroom. Pathways for creating optimal faculty-student relationships, healthy, and consistent student engagement and interaction, and developing best practices for online courses will be addressed with the aim of assisting instructors in the effort to establish positive culture and climate.*

*Keywords: Climate, Culture, Online Classroom, Online Courses, Online Instruction, Virtual Classroom.*

### INTRODUCTION

The concepts of organizational culture and climate are widely discussed in graduate education programs. Clear contrasts can be made between a toxic school culture and a positive one. In terms of climate, a related but distinct feature within educational organizations, it may be even easier to identify negative and positive based on stakeholders' feelings and perceptions (Deal and Peterson, 2009; Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015). In online courses, just as in face-to-face and hybrid courses, there are major opportunities for stakeholders, particularly instructors, to impact the development and evolution of culture and climate. A key contributor to culture and climate is the instructional style of the course manager or instructor, who in many ways serves as a leader. The pedagogical techniques and strategies selected to deliver online learning modules will also foster or impede student

engagement and interaction. Leadership style, communication, and collaborative interaction inevitably influence faculty-student rapport, which may elicit results evidenced by academic performance, retention, and satisfaction levels (Grady, 2013; LaBarbera, 2013). Therefore, it is in the best interests of online course instructors who are concerned with student retention and success to be cognizant of their potential to create positive culture and climate in the virtual classroom and to explore the many tools available to them that may be beneficial towards the goal of enhancing the online learning experience. Additionally, recognizing the instructor's own potential to make such a meaningful and positive impact within this context may encourage more in-depth reflection on teaching techniques, greater self-awareness as instructors, and improved efforts at building effective online relationships.

## 1. Culture and Climate

Deliberately laying the groundwork for positive culture and climate first requires understanding of these concepts, where they exist within one's school or classroom, and then how to create pathways to achieve them (Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015). Culture may not be as clear of a construct as it seems to be. It involves the norms, behaviors, routines, beliefs, assumptions, and values of those within the given organization, and for the purposes of this article, within the online classroom. Culture conveys unwritten goals and rules, where power and authority are found, purpose, and the mechanisms for internal functioning (Deal and Peterson, 2009; Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015). In simple terms, culture is about what the school or classroom is really about, how things get done, and the ways in which daily issues are handled. There are established methods for identifying and assessing culture and various researchers have categorized culture into specific typologies. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) summarized school culture into six groups, including toxic, fragmented, balkanized, contriving collegial, comfortable collaborative, and collaborative, with a true collaborative culture being the most favorable. They also based these categories on elements, such as decision-making, trust, leadership, communication, and student achievement, among several others (Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015). True collaborative cultures allow stakeholders to share ideas without the need to make everyone feel comfortable or accepted. Instead a stakeholder in a collaborative culture will be confident in being able discuss diverse areas of need and even those topics that can be challenging at times, honestly and without fear of repercussion or retaliation (Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015; Kampwirth and Powers, 2016).

Climate in a school or for the purposes of this article, in a classroom, is a major component of culture. In describing climate, in contrast to culture, it is helpful to consider it a more fluid and changeable element. Climate is more about how stakeholders feel or perceive their environment at a given time, which may vary frequently, but may have a profound impact on performance, communication, motivation, and attitude (Deal and Peterson, 2009; Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015). Stakeholders may easily

assess the climate at any given time by gaging how they feel within the classroom or school, and whether or not they have developed a sense of trust in others and in the academic and structural mechanisms. Climate impacts morale, or the ability to experience happiness within the environment, and one's perception of overall fairness. A positive climate will contribute to creating a positive culture and will facilitate improved rapport and the development of true collaboration (Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015). Negis-Isik and Gursel (2013) viewed academically successful schools within major components, including the ability for educators to have effective discourse even when they disagree, sharing a positive attitude when addressing problems, and providing effective leadership, each of which is entirely relevant in the discussion of the virtual classroom's culture and climate.

## 2. Faculty-Student Rapport, Communication, and Interaction

An online instructor has many pathways for creating positive culture and climate in the virtual classroom. This will inevitably begin with course design and structure that optimally will present an impression of professionalism, clarity, and a safe environment for respectful exchange of information and reflection. The instructor's selection of language, delivery of content, assignments, feedback, and communication patterns are likely to produce an impression for students of the instructor's preparedness, expertise, and accessibility (Cicco, 2016; Haberstroh, 2010). To create a climate of trust and fairness, a solid faculty-student rapport must be built through consistent and effective exchanges. An early exchange of information is the course syllabus, whereby the sketch of the course and student and faculty expectations are presented. The clarity and ease of readability of this document will provide an early message of the potential for the overall course experience. Using appropriate language, responding to students' learning styles through varied instructional techniques within learning modules, and providing a clear structure for student-faculty engagement within the course will help the instructor to build positive relationships with students. Ideally, the instructor should aim to convey approachability,

accessibility, and expertness on course subject matter and logistics (Cicco, 2014; Haberstroh, 2010; Zacharis, 2011).

The instructor should interact regularly with students for the duration of the course through discussion boards, emails, live media when possible, supervision of debates and small-group exercises, comments on each submitted assignment, in-depth feedback through rubrics and commentary on capstone activities, and telephone or in-person advisement sessions when necessary. It is also imperative that the instructor decide on a disclosed protocol for responding to discussions and emails and for scoring of assignments as well as any recommended or permissible assignment variations. If the instructor agrees to respond to inquiries within 48 hours, then he/she must abide by this promise. In turn, students should also be held to the same level of responsiveness to instructor inquiries. Students should be expected to respond within a time frame that is agreed upon and realistic. In this way, all course members are held accountable for their own presence and responsibility for the course learning experience. Solid communication patterns will often support and improve faculty-student relationships and students' relationships with their peers, which results in community building within the virtual classroom (Cicco, 2014; Cicco, 2016; Lindgren and McDaniel, 2012).

There are numerous methods for maintaining student engagement in online courses. Perhaps the simplest of these methods is to build in assignments requiring students to interact with their peers and instructor throughout the course. An instructor's weekly email reminders, announcement posts on the course webpage, and involvement in each discussion board demonstrate involvement and investment in student success as does intervening when students do not meet standards by providing constructive feedback. Creating pathways for students to communicate and engage with each other increases the possibilities for student interaction with their course colleagues and with course materials and encourages participants to develop a more cohesive unit that truly works and learns together while overcoming challenges to master objectives. For example, an assignment that requires students to interview one another

will at minimum allow them to have a basic conversation on the given course topic. Self-and peer-evaluation assignments may also expand interaction by requiring more intensive critical thinking, conscientious reflection, and honest exchanges of diverse points of view. Such varied forms of communication and interaction with other individuals also responds to diverse learning-style preferences and creates a sense of trust and confidence in one's ability to navigate through the course experience (Cicco, 2016; Zacharis, 2011).

### **3. The Weekly Roadmap**

An effective tool that online instructors may use in delivering structure, organization, and ongoing communication is the weekly roadmap. Each week the instructor lays out a roadmap to highlight reading and research assignments, videos, podcasts, and other media, and assignments or reflections with corresponding due dates. This tool breaks down information from the course syllabus for each week or unit of the course calendar, making it easier for students to interpret and digest. The roadmap becomes a weekly routine, which creates a reliable and steady communication method for students and faculty, and provides a reader-friendly support mechanism with learning resources and opportunities to interact with faculty and peers. Students who have received the weekly roadmap tool throughout an entire semester describe it very favorably as a helpful organizer with clear directions to guide weekly task mastery (Cicco, 2015). When an instructor emphasizes the available resources for achieving performance goals week by week, the students gain trust in ongoing support that and this eventually strengthens rapport while building a positive culture and climate in the virtual classroom. The weekly roadmaps for each unit of instruction may be posted at the beginning of the semester or in increments to mark milestones within a learning module. This tool may require a great deal of advanced planning, but it is a worthwhile investment in establishing a comprehensive framework for student success and satisfaction (Cicco, 2015; Grady, 2013; LaBarbera, 2013).

### **4. The "PICCA" Model**

The most effective tools for instructors to establish and strengthen virtual classroom culture while enhancing

climate can be summarized by the "PICCA" Model. "PICCA" represents five critical guidelines for faculty and student success in online courses, and each of these will contribute to positive culture and climate. Presence (P) pertains to being a visible and active participant throughout the discussions and activities of the online course. Interaction (I) reminds participants to engage with each other in meaningful ways to discuss, analyze, and synthesize curricular objectives. Clarity (C) requires clear and detailed communication of expectations, roles, and responsibilities of course participants. Consistency (C) of each of the above concepts is a necessity for the "PICCA" Model to succeed. Any positive pattern of behavior must be modeled and adhered to consistently during the course, to minimize confusion, demonstrate reliability, and professionalism, and to maintain a sense of safety, fairness, and trust. Availability (A) to respond to requests for information, help, and feedback similarly conveys commitment to standards and success, dedication to meeting course goals, and a personal investment in the overall course experience. Each layer of the "PICCA" Model will assist course participants in solidifying each of the above recommendations as viable pathways for maximizing positive culture and climate in online courses (Cicco, 2016).

### Conclusion

The importance of establishing a positive culture and climate within the virtual classroom is clear when educators consider course outcomes in terms of student and faculty performance, success, and satisfaction. Culture and climate have demonstrated influences on individual and collective efficacy, morale, and motivation of educational stakeholders (Grady, 2013; Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015; Negis-Isik and Gursel, 2013). This article aimed to help online course instructors to recognize and develop pathways for promoting positive culture and climate by utilizing tools, such as effective relationship, engagement, communication, and organizational practices, thereby reducing the potential for negative and toxic patterns. Examples of healthy leadership practices for online instructors include consideration and responsiveness to participants' learning styles, ongoing rapport-building, the

weekly roadmap tool, and adherence to the guidelines summarized in the "PICCA" Model (Cicco, 2016).

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