

CORE COMPETENCY 2: Creating Effective Learning Environments**Interpretation/Reflection**

In addition to the transfer of knowledge via discipline-related teaching strategies, the learning environment in which a student or group of students work also affects their personal and academic growth. When students come into the classroom, they bring with them misconceptions, a range of prior knowledge, and a plethora of life experiences, opinions, and attitudes that are unique to each individual! As a future educator, I believe it is my responsibility to create a learning environment in which these misconceptions are addressed, their prior knowledge is acknowledged and discussed, their life experiences are appreciated, and their opinions and attitudes are heard. Additionally, students have different learning styles and thrive in different environments; in other words, what “works” for one student may not work for another student. Therefore, in organizing and planning their courses and curricula, educators have a responsibility to consider various approaches to student learning and a range of discipline-related teaching strategies to fit all students.

These sentiments were echoed by Dr. Vincent Tinto, a presenter in one of the “Teaching Essentials for MSU STEM Faculty” workshops. As part of this workshop, he mentioned that educators are the key players in establishing the foundation upon which student success is built. According to Dr. Tinto, support, assessment and feedback, engagement, and clear expectations are all necessary components of an effective learning environment. Though I agree with Dr. Tinto, I believe these are not the only components of an effective learning environment. For instance, as a developing educator in my field, I am a proponent of using real-world case studies and examples with my students. Usually, I select an assortment of peer-reviewed journal articles and even more popular news articles to cultivate a collection of topical issues that cover big ideas in biology, ecology, and fisheries science. I like to discuss these materials in a classroom setting with undergraduate students, in particular, for a few different reasons: first, I believe these lessons help students learn how to sift through and use the primary literature; second, these lessons stimulate fruitful class discussions; and, third, I believe these lessons help students learn how to apply what they hear in class to real-world problems—is this not the point of education, anyway? Therefore, to me, an effective learning environment, with positive educator-student relationships, motivates students to think critically, ask questions, and apply their knowledge and experiences in new ways.

I believe that classroom diversity—racial, cultural, socioeconomic, political, etc.—only heightens the potential effectiveness of a learning environment. In my own life, as a graduate student, I have been privileged to be a part of many diverse classroom settings. In these settings, I found that I learned just as much from my classmates than I did from my instructor, especially in regard to bigger and broader life lessons. As a developing educator, I have taught at diverse collegiate institutions such as the University of Washington and Michigan State University. At these institutions, diversity in the classroom is celebrated (as it should be) as a necessary “ingredient” of a student’s

learning environment. Thus, I stress to my students the significance of respecting diversity and encourage them to engage in and learn from the diverse environments they experience in their lives. In the classroom, I have also found it to be important to present information through lessons and utilize case studies and examples that are relatable to all students. For example, in some of my courses at UW, I encountered students who had not had much experience using the English language and, thus, assignment instructions and assessment questions often came with confusion among these students. To avoid this confusion, I consciously paired these students with other students in groups with fluent English speakers to help them overcome the language barriers. By taking action like this, by making the class more inclusive, I believe that I can help maintain classroom diversity while also ensure that all students receive proper education and training.

In my opinion, effective learning environments are places where students find comfort and inclusiveness, and where educators work diligently to increase their own approachability and accessibility. In these environments, students will be more likely to ask questions and share their opinions. As a developing educator, like other educators I have observed in the “Teaching Essentials for MSU STEM Faculty” workshops, I try my best to bring optimism and passion for learning into the classroom; I believe a good attitude in the classroom can go a long way in increasing engagement among students. In my teaching experiences, I have been intentional about creating a safe and comfortable space for my students to express their ideas even if their ideas may be incorrect or unusual. By consistently encouraging and providing opportunities for all students to talk out loud and discuss their ideas in small groups or in front of the entire class, I believe I am increasing their confidence to express themselves and share their knowledge and wisdom with others.

Truthfully, creating an effective learning environment—establishing the culture—is probably the first thing educators should work on when it comes to their own courses and curricula, for the learning environment provides the foundation upon which discipline-related teaching strategies are successfully implemented and assessed. Without an effective learning environment, will students really learn? Maybe some will, but whether all of them will is debatable. In one of the workshops held as part of the Certification in College Teaching Institute, I was struck by a particular statement made by one of the institute leaders, which went something along the lines of, “Help your students if you want them to succeed.” This can mean a lot of different things, but to me, I felt that it meant that I, as a developing educator, should care about my students as the individuals they are and do what is in my power—which is a lot!—to support them. Thus, an effective learning environment, in summary, is one that is filled with passion for real world issues, problem solving, motivation, diversity, and comfort and support for all students.