

# GATO Session A: Creating a Positive Classroom Environment Resource Guide

## **Introduction**

*This session was designed to help GTA's gain an appreciation and initial tips for creating a positive classroom environment. This resource guide includes Instructional Objectives, Session Topics, Suggested Activities that you may choose to utilize in your session, and a list of References that provided source material. Throughout this document, information for you is italicized, while information geared towards TA's is not. The information in the Session Topics section includes the kind of material you may wish to discuss. We feel it is more important, however, to meet the instructional objectives drawing upon your teaching expertise rather than cover a list of material. Key points and suggested activities are embedded in the PowerPoint slides which you will receive and can modify to suit your particular session.*

## **Instructional Objectives**

- *Be able to identify at least four important aspects of creating a positive classroom environment*
- *Be able to articulate at least two appropriate teaching strategies/actions to encourage academic integrity, positive behavior, and motivation*
- *Be able to ask basic questions and receive guidance and resources regarding interaction with students*

## **Session Topics**

**Your authentic enthusiasm for teaching and your genuine caring about students are significant factors in your success!**

Creating a positive classroom environment involves routine tasks related to such things as instructional objectives, planning, instruction, and reflection which begins before the first day of class. Whether you are the instructor of record, a discussion or lab section leader, or a grader and leader of office hours, your responsibility cannot be over-stated for creating an environment where students can learn, actively participate, and thrive. Fundamentally, students want clarity about your expectations. A lack of clarity invites problems. Students want fairness. They want rational explanations. Being EXPLICIT with students when providing rationales for asking them to do something prevents resistance. Be consistent. If you have little teaching experience, this will require more thought, energy, and attention than if you were more experienced. Get student buy-in. Involve students in discussions about the kind of climate they thrive in.

## **Three Key Ideas**

### 1. Daily Routines

Establishing daily routines early in the semester is essential to creating a positive classroom environment (e.g. daily announcements, collecting papers, distributing papers, referencing their syllabus, turning off cell phones, iPods before class begins).

### 2. Student Rapport

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Establishing rapport with students starting with the first day of the semester is essential. Learn their names and how to say them properly. Arrive in class at least 5 minutes early prepared and ready to begin. End class on time.

### 3. Classroom activities

Engaging the students throughout the class session is essential to a positive classroom environment. Whether students work individually or in groups, they should be held accountable for active participation. Barkley, Cross, and Major's book *Collaborative Learning Techniques* is an excellent resource for activities. Moving around in the classroom, actually timing activities to keep the class moving, an awareness of their attention span for lecture (average adult attention span is 10 minutes), providing adequate "wait" time (at least 10 seconds is needed) after asking a question or asking for questions, etc. will help sustain student interest. (*Adult attention span and wait time will be discussed further in Session B.*)

## Preparation

### The classroom before classes begin

- ✓ How large must you write on the white board/chalk board to be able to "see" from the very last row? Is your handwriting legible?
- ✓ If you take a friend along you can practice how loudly you must speak to be heard in the last row. Remember with a room full of people your volume must increase. What are you going to do to increase clarity of your spoken words if, for example, you have an accent that might be difficult to understand?
- ✓ Walk around the room. Are there places that it is difficult to see the board or the screen? Get comfortable moving in your classroom space.
- ✓ What AV equipment do you have already in the room? Do you know how to work it? You can call the University Teaching Center Equipment Services for a free "tutorial" of all the equipment. Many rooms are locked when classes are not in session. They have the key and will be happy to meet you. To make an appointment call 621-3852 or visit the website at [www.uaav.arizona.edu](http://www.uaav.arizona.edu) What AV equipment will you need that is NOT in the classroom? Again the UTC Equipment Services department has equipment they will deliver to your classroom. Request forms are on their website.

### Departmental concerns such as what class you are assigned to are best addressed through the department that has hired you.

- ✓ Each department has an Administrative Assistant and/or a Graduate Advisor, if you are unclear about any aspect of your assignment, check with them to see who has been assigned as your supervisor.
- ✓ Some departments have classes and/or regularly scheduled meetings for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA).
- ✓ In departments that use GTAs regularly, there will be experienced GTAs available.
- ✓ If you are teaching a class, there are usually syllabi from previous classes available to you. Additionally, often the syllabus for a class has already been constructed and the textbooks ordered.

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- ✓ For teaching assistance, the University Teaching Center is available to assist you. You can call the main number 621-7788 or visit our website at [www.utc.arizona.edu](http://www.utc.arizona.edu). If you would like to further develop your teaching expertise, please follow the link to the Certificate in College Teaching.

### **The First Day of Class**

#### Welcome, Introductions, Setting the Class Tone

- ✓ Welcome students as they enter the room. Sometimes just making small talk before class begins helps to relieve your anxiety and theirs.
- ✓ Write your name on the board and introduce yourself.
- ✓ Write the name and section of the class on the board. In the first day of class confusion someone might have arrived in the wrong room!
- ✓ Express your interest in working with them throughout the semester.
- ✓ Tell them that class will begin and end on time. In a 10 year study by Robert Boice, it was clearly shown that 70% of classroom incivilities were perpetrated by the professor not the students! Starting class late and allowing it to run late were huge infractions that communicated disrespect to the students.
- ✓ Have a “get to know you” kind of introduction activity. I strongly encourage the use of a timer and taking notes about the students as they share – it’s a great way to begin learning names and taking attendance and you’ll hear what they “want” to learn from the class.

For example: You post on the board or power point slide

“Working in pairs you will each have 1 minute to introduce yourself what one concept would you like to learn from this class this semester. You will each take turns introducing each other to the class.”

- ✓ The next order of business is the syllabus. DO NOT hand out the syllabus and dismiss class expecting them to read and understand it. Also by dismissing class early on the first day, you are communicating that class time is NOT important!

#### The Syllabus

- ✓ I often use the metaphor of a “journey” to explain the trip we’ll take over the course of the semester. As I hand out the syllabus, I tell them it is the guide for our trip. It will tell them exactly what they can expect as we travel together.
- ✓ Review the syllabus with them. If they are new students to higher education, they may have never used a syllabus before. This is another great place to put in an interactive activity. You could divide the syllabus into sections and assign small groups (4-6 students) to review that portion together and report out to the class. When the review is complete, I ask basic questions such as:
  - What is the name of your textbook?
  - When is your first assignment due?
  - Where do you go to pick up the class packet of notes?
  - What is plagiarism?
  - What is the penalty for plagiarism?

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When are my office hours?

- Encourage them to reread the syllabus and come to the next class with questions, etc.
- ✓ I tell them there could be a quiz on the syllabus during the next class.
- ✓ The second day of class I actually give a “quiz” over the syllabus! It doesn’t have points connected to it; I don’t tell them that. This allows me to review the important points of the syllabus and clearly show them it is the guide we will follow.

### Start Teaching! Establishing Interest and Relevance

- ✓ Prepare a power point presentation overview of the interesting and relevant information students will gain from taking the class. Just as you want to go to see a movie that created interest in the topic for you, the content you are teaching has interesting and relevant information for your students. This is not to say there may not be boring or rote types of learning that must be mastered because every discipline has foundational information that one must master to be able to move on. However, here is where you can shine and show them why you found your discipline exciting and worthy of study. Research shows us without question that it is the passion and enthusiasm of the teacher that motivates students to learn. When you are excited and interested in the subject matter they see that and they respond. Ask yourself, how will their lives be improved by learning this material? How will they be better able to deal in their world by learning this subject? How can you show them that if they are patient and truly apply themselves to the task of learning this subject their lives will be enriched?
- ✓ This time also allows them to ask you questions.

An activity that is cited in Mary Ellen Weimer’s *Learner-centered Teaching* is put large newsprint pages around the room and ask students to contribute to the sentence stems that are written on the newsprint—such as

- “In the best class I ever had, students....”
- “In the best class I ever had, the teacher...”
- “I learn best when.....”
- “I feel most confident as a learner when...”
- “Classmates compromise my attempts when...”

The student responses provide fertile ground for discussing expectations and behavioral principles. These insights can be developed into “Ground Rules” for the class.

A word about “norms.” Behavioral norms are set very quickly in classrooms. One way to test this is to observe whether students sit in the same location in class every day. Another is to observe who sits next to whom. Since effective student engagement is desirable, a critical behavioral to “norm” the first day is that students participate! They talk with you, with their classmates, they respond to questions, and they DO things in class besides passively take notes. If you desire these behaviors, you MUST engage the students in them the first day. If not, they will have concluded that you talk and act; they sit passively.

### **For the Rest of the Semester**

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- ✓ Arrive in class ahead of time, prepared and eager to begin.
- ✓ End class on time even a minute or two overtime may make them late for their next class
- ✓ Greet students as they enter the class. Engage in informal conversations and invite them to office hours
- ✓ Begin class with an item of interest (current event, news story, popular movie etc) that relates to that class session topic. (You could also encourage them to bring in relevant items they find of interest related to the topic)
- ✓ Create a daily agenda and follow it. Nothing is more frustrating than being lost and unable to figure out where a topic is headed.
- ✓ Laughter relaxes us; metaphors intrigue us.
- ✓ Construct activities in each class that engages student-to-student as well as student-to-teacher
- ✓ Learn about students' interests and life/work experiences related to the topic
- ✓ Enrich the course content by drawing on the fullness of human experience. Encourage students to provide topic related examples and references from their cultural/ethnic/socio-political backgrounds.
- ✓ If you perceive a student has a problem (angry, aggressive, dominate, silent, totally withdrawn, etc) take a moment to think about what part your behavior may be playing in the situation. A teaching/learning relationship involves at least two people rarely are problems completely one-sided. Invite the student to office hours. LISTEN carefully and respectfully. Maintaining the structure and "rules" as set forth in the syllabus for all students explore possibilities for options that would be open to all students. If this doesn't work, if the behavior is interfering with learning in the classroom you have resources available to you.

### First Aid Kit

#### Dean of Students office:

Disruptive and Threatening Behavior Policies and Procedures and Academic Integrity Guidelines and Procedures are available online at: <http://dos.web.arizona.edu>

#### Departmental Support:

Include Department policies, Graduate Faculty Advisor, Your supervising Faculty member, An experienced TA

- Do not hesitate to dial 911 in an emergency situation
- Campus Health 621-6490 and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) 621-3334 can be a valuable resource for you and your students.

### Keeping the Fires Burning

*(As the session draws to a close, we would like to leave GTA's with final tips and sources of inspiration. A few quotations are listed below and in the PowerPoint slides for this session. Feel free to use these or share your favorite quotations.)*

"The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." - William Arthur Ward

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“Good teachers never teach anything. What they do is create the conditions under which learning takes place.” - S.I. Hayakawa

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

### Three Tips To Keep The Fires Burning:

1) *Remember: Enthusiasm, Organization, and Caring*

These three characteristics are among those most highly correlated with teaching effectiveness.

2) *First impressions matter. What you do the first day of class sets the precedent for the rest of the semester.*

Studies of student evaluations have revealed that ratings of teaching effectiveness collected at the beginning of a course are generally the same as those collected at the end of a course.

3) *“Education is not filling a pail but the lighting of a fire.” (William Butler Yeats)*

This idea is at the heart of learner-centered teaching.

### Suggested Activities

#### Activity 1: First Day in the Classroom Student Introductions

For TA's: (On the board or PowerPoint slide)

“Working in pairs you will each have 1 minute to introduce yourself what one concept would you like to learn from this class this semester. You will each take turns introducing each other to the class.”

*(This could be the basis for a discussion on first day norms.)*

#### Activity 2: Creating a Positive Classroom Environment Brainstorm and Discussion

For TA's: (On the board or PowerPoint slide)

“Working in pairs or small groups, brainstorm answers to the following questions and list them on your T-chart:

1. In your experience, what class characteristics promote learning (+)?
2. In your experience, what class characteristics do not promote learning (-)?”

*(This could be the basis for a discussion about creating a positive learning environment.)*

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## **References**

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