A Senior’s Perspective: Ways to Create a Nurturing Classroom Environment

My name is Isabel Baba, and I am a Virginia Tech senior graduating in Spring 2021. As I look back on my past four years here, I can honestly say, the professors who have made the most impact on me were the ones who created a classroom environment that was supportive and made me feel as though I was at home.

I have been transformed by attending Virginia Tech. I am grateful for the wholesome and stimulating classroom experiences supported by caring professors and sympathetic peers. Professors who create nurturing environments plant the seeds for positive, open relationships built on mutual respect. These relationships are nourished
with effective communication. Here are some of the ways I believe professors can establish such an environment so future students may benefit from similar experiences.

**Make Your Students Feel Seen**

Students will speak in environments where they feel seen and heard, even when they may feel vulnerable. During COVID especially, it can be extremely hard for professors to create close, intimate bonds with students. In a smaller classroom setting, professors can take the first step by learning their students’ names. It is a simple act that can have a huge impact and shows the student they are important enough to remember. In a larger setting, have students turn in their assignment one at a time. This allows professors a chance to look their students in the eyes and ask their name – again, making them feel seen and heard. Consider these additional suggestions as well.

**Open-Door Policy**

During office hours, in addition to discussing academic issues, allow students to give constructive feedback on the classroom policies, academic structure, and overall culture of the class. Professors benefit from hearing different perspectives, and students become more confident in sharing their opinions.

**Weekly Check-Ins**

Both faculty and students may deal with circumstances or obstacles in their life that hinder their ability to work efficiently and effectively. Professors can
implement “weekly check-ins” to ask how students are doing and encourage them to ask for help if needed. Students work better in environments where they feel supported and cared about.

Create a Sense of Community

Students are more comfortable in classroom environments where they feel a sense of community has been created. Professors who make the class more personal can aid in this regard, which makes classroom engagement seamless. Here are some examples for creating community in the classroom.

Show and Tell

At the beginning of the class or semester, set time aside for students to share personal aspects that have meaning to them. In a virtual environment, students can introduce their pets, show a favorite part of their home (Zoom Friendly!) or a meaningful picture or object. For in-person classes, students can share stories about such things. This can be a great ice-breaker at the beginning of the semester or class, which allows students to open up and become more comfortable speaking in front of their peers.

Reward Systems

Create a rewards system that engages students and allows them to experience a different type of learning and have fun (which is especially important!). Examples include providing an immersive learning experience like a
field trip, or simply having class outside when weather permits. Weekly shout outs for students from their fellow peers have a powerful impact as well. Weekly shout outs are anonymous votes for a particular student who stood out during the week for their kind gestures, outstanding presentation, or other reasons for garnering recognition. These opportunities help create a sense of community as students show appreciation for each other and reinforce positive behaviors.

**Kindness and Gentleness**

Show compassion and give grace to all students. No one knows what someone else might be going through, at any given time. Being kind and gentle help create a nurturing environment for students, both inside and outside the classroom.

**Appreciate the Impact**

All the recommendations above are meant to make the classroom setting a nurturing, enriching, and almost healing environment for students and the professor as well. Students will thrive in environments where they feel valued for their ideas and contributions. The benefits of cultivating such an environment fostered by open communication are never-ending. Students grow exponentially in knowledge and confidence in a nurturing environment, and Professors benefit from the myriad of diverse perspectives shared in their classrooms. A supportive and convivial environment, where open and effective communication takes place, creates an engaging and inclusive atmosphere. For me, such an environment feels like home.
Author’s Blurb

Isabel Baba is a graduating senior who will be getting a dual degree in Entrepreneurship, Innovation, & Technology Management and Marketing with a concentration in Digital Marketing Strategy in May 2021. She has gotten ample experience within her four years at Virginia Tech, and she recognizes and embraces qualities that can foster a nurturing classroom environment. Such classroom experiences contribute to her fond memories of Virginia Tech, her home away from home.