

Managing the Classroom Climate

When people feel emotionally threatened, they become resistant and their ego defense mechanisms kick in. This can happen in a heated intellectual discussion, if one person feels outmatched, embarrassed, or unable to defend himself. When a student becomes upset, for whatever reason, s/he is likely to lash out at others, so, it's important to pay attention to students' emotional temperatures as they engage in a controversial discussion.

When a person's emotional temperature spikes, nothing rational is happening, and the person is responding to what's happening based on pure emotion. Reasoning with them will not help at this point. A person with a high emotional temperature can disrupt an entire classroom and derail your lesson plan for the day.

If this happens in your classroom, you need to lower the temperature back to temperate ranges for the activity to proceed.

In individual encounters, the way to lower a person's emotional temperature is to respond directly to the emotion that the person is expressing, as in, "You seem upset." Unfortunately, this is difficult to manage in a group classroom setting, so it is much better practice to continually monitor the discussion and to step in to modulate the proceedings at the first sign of rising temperatures. This is part of the structured instructional "scaffolding" and support that some students require until they are better able to manage their own emotions amid a challenging discussion. If a student becomes overly "hot" during a discussion, despite your best efforts, then private journaling is an effective means to allow him or her to exit the discussion gracefully in order to process the emotions and blow off steam. In fact, the private journaling option may be something to keep available to all students as a sort of "safety valve" if they find particular discussions upsetting or difficult. Speaking in public is more challenging for some students than others, and having some measure of control over the situation will lower emotional temperatures.

You are responsible for maintaining the classroom climate. Allowing things to escalate to an overheated level undermines learning in your classroom. For more information, refer to Thomas Gordon's Teacher Effectiveness Training.

THOUGHTS ON NOT TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY

It is one thing for students to avoid launching personal attacks during a debate, but it can still be hard not to take some things personally. Even adults struggle with certain topics or opinions. Sometimes, you think the class is conducting a civil discourse, and not launching inappropriate personal attacks, but a student in the class might still react as though they had. This is why it's important to continually monitor the classroom climate for signs that things are becoming heated.



