

# BUILDING A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: ADJUSTING THE CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION CLIMATE

## TENDING TALENT

**Jo Allen Bradham**  
Professor of English

Having been asked to share a technique I find effective in teaching, I confront the embarrassing moment of confessing in public what has to be an elucidation of the obvious, of what any teacher does: I work at discovering and cultivating talent.

The method pays off. Last summer in English 431, Shakespeare, a student, caught up in the excitement of her idea, asked if her paper might show that the Third Murderer in *Macbeth* is Lady Macbeth herself. Taking my cue from the fire in the student's eye, the zest in her voice, and my knowledge that she aspired to write mystery stories, I agreed. I put aside my own reservations about the topic and the best use of time and effort and told Deborah Ray-Ryscamp to proceed. Her paper grew beyond the course. It grew into English 400, Directed Study, into our making a trip to research libraries in the area, into Ms. Ray-Ryscamp's initiation into scholarly intricacies, and into a presentation at the English Hour. The flowering of her ideas did not stop here. This March Ms. Ray-Ryscamp presented her conclusions to a national audience of students and faculty at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research in Minneapolis.

Not every case has so spectacular an outcome, but in English 101, for example, as soon as I spot those who can profit from a more advanced course, I talk with them and tell them to plan with me in selecting topics for papers and ways of working that better suit their abilities than those that meet the needs of the class. By recognizing and reinforcing their talent, I can style an honors course for those who deserve one.

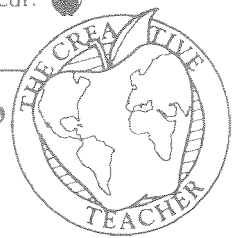
Tending talent has always worked for me. I interpret "talent" broadly so that I can cultivate as extensive a garden as possible, and I have seen a good harvest. 🍎

**Joan E. Dominick**  
Assistant Professor of  
Communication

Designing a positive learning environment includes not only working on content objectives but on the design and maintenance of the communication climate. A positive communication climate is important because there appears to be a correlation between the learner's communication satisfaction and perceived teaching and learning effectiveness. As faculty, we must set the communicational tone and then encourage learner participation throughout the course. However, establishing such a climate must be done at the onset of the course. How can faculty establish a supportive communication climate?

Introductions, ice-breaking exercises, and name tags help. Breaking the class into pairs and having them interview each other is an exercise that is a consistent success. This can be done using either a formal or an open-ended interviewing questionnaire. The questionnaire may be designed either to gather information about how much the students are familiar with the content area of the course or just for general demographic information. After allowing time for the dyadic interviews, students introduce their partners to the larger group. This gives each student a "colleague" in the class immediately. It also creates an open, approachable, and initially relaxed communication climate, promoting an atmosphere where class discussion can occur. 🍎

## IMPROVING STUDENTS' WRITING: WHOSE JOB?



**Gail Schiffer**  
Assistant Professor of Biology

Have you ever had trouble grading a student's written exam because the answer was so poorly worded that you could not tell how well the student understood the answer? Me, too. Poorly articulated writing is common in lower level classes, in part because students have not yet discovered the importance of taking time to think through their answers.

On the theory that student awareness of the problem is part of the solution, I have begun to take time out in class to prepare students for writing exams. They have a chance to answer sample questions ahead of time and to compare their results with appropriate answers. We discuss helpful hints, such as reading the test through quickly and then answering the "easy" ones first.

The exercise that has improved student writing the most, for me, is giving students samples of poor answers (drawn from student responses to tests in previous classes). I break the class into groups of three to five students and ask them to come up with better versions. We compare the results, giving students a chance to see that there are many ways to give the correct answer but that some are more acceptable than others. The act of correcting someone else's work alerts students to the problem and gives them practice in appropriate expression. (I have also used this exercise to point out common misconceptions and wrong answers by asking students to correct content as well as wording.)

This exercise does take time—often forty-five minutes to an hour, depending on number and length of the questions involved. But it saves hours of frustration! 🍎