

Dialogue Education in the University: Creating the Environment for Learning

by Jeanette Romkema and Dan Haase

NOTE: These tips were written with the undergraduate professor and students in face-to-face full-time learning environment in mind. However, they can be equally valuable in the post-graduate, virtual learning environment, distance learning, and part-time university program setting.

So much depends on the space (whether face-to-face or virtual) and how it enhances and/or limits learning and the learner. Taking time to consider the place and space is vital to designing an effective university course. Below are a few suggestions for creating the best environment for learning.

1. **Begin the course before the course begins.** Start the teaching and learning with a learning needs and resource assessment (LNRA). This fosters respect and safety and can offer a great deal of important information about the students coming to your course and what you might need to consider in designing a meaningful and relevant learning environment. Beginning a course before the course begins lends itself to an environment where students feel cared for and heard. (see the tip sheet *Dialogue Education in the University: Creating an LNRA*)
2. **Clearly articulate your expectations in the course syllabus.** The design bears the burden and the syllabus shows this design to the students before they start. The syllabus clarifies expectations, demonstrates the care that has gone into making the course meaningful and relevant, and names ways students will be involved in their learning journey. Offer students the syllabus prior to the first class meeting. (see the tip sheet *Dialogue Education in the University: Model DE in Your Syllabus*)
3. **Arrange the space to maximize learning.** Sometimes sitting in a circle will encourage deeper sharing and more courageous questions. Other times sitting in small groups is what you want to stimulate creative thinking and deep engagement. Most often, sitting in rows will discourage dialogue and encourage passivity – and so should be avoided. We always want to ask ourselves: *How should I set the room up to maximize learning?* In the virtual learning context, we need to ask ourselves: *How and when should I invite small group dialogue and investigation?*

NOTE: If you don't have assistants to help move the furniture around, just ask for some volunteers from the class to come early (to set up) or stay late (to return to how it was).

4. **Stand when presenting new content, sit when facilitating dialogue.** One should probably be sitting more than standing if this guideline is followed. Sit down with your students when possible and become a learner among learners. Although with large groups this may not be possible (as you need to be able to see everyone), the desired *shift in power* can still be

communicated by inviting learners to engage with the learning rather than only the professor, and encouraging dialogue with each other and themselves rather than only with you.

5. **Call students by name.** Learning your students' names even before the first class communicates that you see them as unique individuals. Many institutions provide class rosters with photos online that you can view before the class begins. Provide nametags for students so they too can respond to their peers by name, and feel more connected as a group.
6. **Invite and include all voices.** Students need to feel their experience and comments are important, and that you want to hear them. Open questions and meaningful learning tasks help raise all voices. Small group and pair work can also assist in maximizing engagement and learning. Students need to feel you are genuinely interested in what they think and their need to authentically engage with the new content. Sometimes this can best be done in an online discussion which can "level the playing field" for even the quietest students who may be hesitant about speaking up in a face-to-face setting.
7. **Consider the aesthetics of your room.** Too often university classrooms are sterile environments, void of natural or man-made beauty. Bringing in a rug, lamp, freshly cut flowers, or some plants can brighten a room and help learning.
8. **Find ways to include food.** Food and snacks bring students together and can foster community during break time or while you are teaching. For some students crunching and chewing actually helps them concentrate and learn more easily. If appropriate, invite students to rotate the task of bringing in snacks – many will rise to the challenge. In some cases, arranging a time to go out for a meal may be a helpful community-building event.
9. **Use the classroom to test, try, compare and analyze theory.** Since your time with students is limited, work to get students to study the necessary theory *outside of class*, so you can engage with the theory *during class*. This means we treat students as adults: we need to assume reading is actually completed before arriving in class. When professors read homework/readings to students during class (through a PowerPoint or handouts), we are encouraging passivity and discouraging ownership of one's own learning.
10. **Invite students to personalize their learning plan.** Assuming professors actually want to offer ways for students to demonstrate *real* learning, offering choices on exam style (oral or written) and type/topic of the final assignment (for example, a research project or scholarly paper) can provide more focused motivation for the students. Since students have unique interests and motivations, we should reflect these in our learning programs. Consider what cumulative innovation, essay, article, action plan or analysis best captures and demonstrates that the learners have learned by doing.



Jeanette Romkema has taught courses at [Dordt College](#), [Tyndale University College and Seminary](#), [Emmanuel College of Victoria University of The University of Toronto](#), and [Summer Peacebuilding Institute](#) of [Eastern Mennonite University](#), and will be teaching at [Wycliffe College](#) in 2015. She has also taught university professors how to strengthen their work with Dialogue Education in Africa, USA and Canada. Email her your questions or comments jeanette@globallearningpartners.com .

Dan Haase is Internship Coordinator & Instructor @ [Wheaton College](#) and works with his entire department to embrace Dialogue Education principles and practices in the university classroom. Email him your questions or comments daniel.haase@wheaton.edu .