CHAPTER THREE

CREATING A WELCOMING
CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

> ...[T]he emotional climate of the classroom is directly
> related to the attainment of academic excellence,
> however defined. Students' feelings about what they
> experience in class — whether inclusion or exclusion,
> mastery or inadequacy, support or hostility — cannot be
> divorced from what and how well they learn.
> — Wilkinson and Ansell 1992, 4

Creating the Environment

Ask any student or professor what the most important factors are for student success in college and you'll likely hear: student preparedness, student ability and motivation, attendance, and teacher effectiveness. I have put this question to both my students and my colleagues, and these responses have been the most frequent answers I've encountered. I was surprised, therefore, to discover in the college student retention literature that one of the most important factors in whether students persist to earn a degree is whether or not they experience a sense of *belonging* at their institutions.

By now the evidence is irrefutable that student success has an affective dimension — that is, it is tied to how students *feel* in class and at the institution. Retention studies conducted over the last two decades in higher education suggest that one of the most crucial factors in helping students complete their studies is creating an atmosphere of *community* (see Bank, Biddle, and Slavings 1990; Frost 1999; Padilla 1999). Do students feel they belong at a particular institution? Do students have friends at the institution? The bottom line for retention seems to have more to do with stu-

dents' friendships than with their studies. So how can we as faculty promote that sense of belonging in our classes? In this chapter we'll look at strategies you can use to connect with your students and promote student-student interaction.

As I pointed out in Chapter 2, retention rates for many groups of minority college students — particularly for Hispanic Americans — lag far behind those of more traditional (i.e., white) students. Those of us who teach at colleges and universities — particularly commuter institutions — and who are committed to increasing those retention rates recognize that if student friendships are to occur at all, they'll probably occur within the classroom. This makes classroom atmosphere and dynamics critical variables for retention. The challenge to us as faculty goes beyond learning to teach effectively, and beyond using multifaceted approaches and strategies. Equally important — in terms of fostering student persistence — is to create an inclusive atmosphere where students from diverse backgrounds feel safe within the classroom environment. Students need to believe that their voices will be heard and valued by their teachers and their peers. Within such a climate, the chances that students will form friendships go up markedly.

If we want to motivate students to learn our course content and persist to earn a degree, we need to pay attention to more than how we can best present course material. We also need to manage the class dynamics in such a way as to foster bonding among students. Effective teachers create an atmosphere of trust and warmth between themselves and their students — and they cultivate that same atmosphere among the students themselves.

The "Chilly Classroom Climate"

The "chilly classroom climate" research of the last two decades documents differential treatment of students in classes ranging from grade school through graduate school. This information has been extensively discussed in feminist journals, at women's conferences, and in multicultural journals and conferences. Yet the research has not become a part of general educational discourse.

Observations

Hall and Sandler (1982) wrote the first comprehensive report on differential treatment of men and women in the college classroom. The term "chilly climate" was coined to describe the classroom atmosphere for many women in colleges and universities. Hall and Sandler found in their

research myriad gender inequities, some of them small and, at first glance, trivial, and some that were quite profound. Even the small inequities, when taken together, created an environment for women that was inhospitable at the least and hostile at the worst.

The term *micro-inequities* was coined by Rowe (1977) to describe the many small and subtle ways people are treated differently in the classroom because of their gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or age. While most of the related research has been conducted on differential treatment of women, these other groups of students have been considered "outsider" groups in academia as well.

Grade-school-classroom studies, many of them using videotapes of teacher behavior, have clearly demonstrated that teachers generally pay more attention to boys than girls, in numerous ways. Teachers ask boys harder questions, allow them more time to answer questions, ask more probing follow-up questions, and give boys more praise and criticism than they give girls (Sadker and Sadker 1994). In addition, other research shows that grade school teachers tend to give boys specific instructions on how to complete a project or task. In contrast, teachers more often show girls how to do a project or even do it for them (Sandler and Hoffman 1992).

Hall and Sandler's (1982) review of research for all educational levels shows six major ways in which teachers communicate sex-role expectations to students:

- Teachers call on male students more often than on female students.
- Teachers coach males to work for a fuller answer more often than they coach females to do so.
- Teachers wait longer for males to answer questions than they wait for females before going on to another student.
- Teachers are more likely to ask female students questions that require factual answers.
- Teachers respond more extensively to male students' comments than to female students' comments.
- Teachers communicate sex-role stereotypes by their use of sexist language.

Myra and David Sadker, university professors who have studied teacher-student interactions in grade school classrooms, have shown (1994) that many teachers are not conscious of their contributions toward gender inequities in the classroom. Teachers who believed they were being "fair" were often shocked to see themselves on videotape behaving in dif-

ferential ways that were completely hidden to them. This finding has led us to understand that what happens in the classroom may be overt and obvious, or it may be much more subtle and elusive. The challenges we face in our classes may, therefore, involve some soul-searching and consciousness-raising.

According to a study done by the American Association of University Women (cited in Sadker and Sadker 1994), one result of differential treatment of grade school girls is that, during high school, girls' self-esteem levels tend to drop relative to those of boys. Further, the same study showed that girls have lower career aspirations than boys even when their potential and their successes are comparable.

While some studies report gender differences in self-esteem (e.g., Kelly and Jordon 1990, Widaman et al. 1992), other studies do not find overall gender differences in self-esteem (e.g., Côté 1996, Cate and Sugawara 1986). One consistent finding, reported by Matlin (2000), is that both adolescent boys and girls who score high in "masculinity" have higher self-esteem. In particular, those adolescents who score high on the "instrumentality" dimension of masculinity — that is, the ones who believe they can accomplish goals — have higher self-esteem (Cate and Sugawara 1986, Rose and Montemayor 1994, Stein et al. 1992, Worell 1989). The burning question then becomes, To what extent do our schools foster or discourage instrumentality in females and in other "outsider" groups of students?

Sandler and Hoffman (1992) suggest that the types of grade-school-classroom practices described above, combined with sexism in society at large, contribute to a classroom atmosphere in which women's contributions and women's words seem less valuable to us. In a classic study done by Goldberg (1968), female college students gave higher grades to essays they thought were written by males. Identical essays allegedly written by women were judged as inferior. This study, along with so many others, shows us that women incorporate the same societal messages of female inferiority as do men. Study after study, in all fields and disciplines, documents similar findings. Although a meta-analysis of the research, done by Janet Swim and her colleagues (1989), did not support overall prejudice against women and their work, newer studies of the 1990s (e.g., Haslett et al. 1992, Eagly et al. 1992, Eagly and Mladinic 1994, Fiske 1993) show that bias against women is alive and well under certain conditions. Bias has been documented when a woman's competence is being judged in a traditionally masculine area, or when a woman is acting in a stereotypically masculine way. Bias has also been found where there is little information available about the qualifications of the woman being judged, and when males are doing the evaluating.

Studies have shown that, in North American culture, gender may be the most salient characteristic we notice when we first encounter someone (Bem 1993, Unger 1988). It seems to be even more salient than race, ethnicity, or age. We all develop gender *schemas* very early in life. We categorize people as males or females, and then gender schemas shape our perceptions, thoughts, expectations, and behaviors of ourselves and others. This happens both consciously and unconsciously, and it occurs in all aspects of our lives.

The classroom is no exception. Faculty and students come to the college classroom with a host of gender-related expectations. Most faculty members would probably like to believe that they don't hold stereotypes, expectations, prejudices, or biases of any type. However, none of us can escape the socialization process that has shaped our understandings of our social worlds. At this point, there is extensive empirical and anecdotal evidence that many faculty members, both men and women, treat women and men differently in the classroom. These behaviors may be overt — as, for example, by the use of language, statements, or questions that are in some way gender biased — or they may be more subtle, such as nonverbal cues, gestures, and eye contact. In either case, the behaviors may be conscious or completely outside the instructor's awareness.

The Sadkers' (1994) research documented a lack of awareness on the part of faculty in their patterns of behavior in the classroom. An experimental group of twenty-three instructors who had participated in a gender awareness workshop, along with a control group of twenty-three instructors who had not participated, viewed a videotape on classroom behavior. The first time the experimental subjects viewed the videotape, they believed the instructor was treating all of the students similarly. In their second viewing, however — which followed the gender awareness workshop — the subjects realized that the instructor in the videotape had asked three times as many questions of the male students and given four times as much praise to male students in comparison to female students. Additionally, when the experimental subjects were compared to the control subjects who had not attended the gender awareness workshop, there were significant differences in the classroom behaviors among members of the two groups. Instructors who had participated in the gender awareness workshop conducted classes that were more interactive; male and female students participated equally and there was more student participation in general. Moreover, these instructors gave more precise feedback on students' comments and questions and demonstrated less gender bias in their teaching in comparison to the control group instructors (Sadker and Sadker 1990).

C.G. Krupnick (1985) conducted a study at Wheaton College in Massachusetts two years after the formerly all-women institution admitted men

for the first time. The study showed that, although only 10 percent of the students in class were men, the male students did 25 percent of the speaking in class. This pattern occurred even though the classes were predominantly female and the majority of faculty members were also female. Analysis of videotapes of classroom sessions at this same institution further showed that men put their hands up to answer questions faster than women did, and that women were more likely to expand the previous speaker's ideas rather than challenge them (Fiske 1990). I discovered a similar pattern of male domination of the discussion in my "Psychology of Women" course, which also had a majority of women (see McGlynn 2000/September 8 and McGlynn 2000/September 22).

In 1996, Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall summarized the research from the 1980s and 1990s in a book called *The Chilly Classroom Climate: A Guide to Improve the Education of Women*. While the Hall and Sandler work published in 1982 focused specifically on the teacher behaviors that contribute to a chilly climate, this more recent work goes beyond teacher behavior and examines how the classroom atmosphere is impacted by classroom structure, power dynamics, teaching styles, the curriculum, and the relationships among students.

Implications

In *The Chilly Classroom Climate*, the authors make several assumptions that seem relevant for our understanding of classroom atmosphere. The authors presume that learning is facilitated when students are active contributors and teachers are responsive to them. Students may be active learners in a number of ways. They may participate by practicing active listening skills, taking notes, working in pairs or larger groups, or asking questions and making comments.

Sandler et al. (1996) further believe that teacher-student interactions affect not only the level of student participation, but also students' learning, self-esteem, satisfaction, and even their motivation to succeed and their career choices. In their research, the authors cite evidence that both male and female faculty members treat students differently based on gender, and that they often do so completely unknowingly. The authors suggest that the subtle ways faculty treat women differently also affect other groups — for example, students of color; students who speak with a foreign or regional accent; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students; older students; students with disabilities; and "working-class" students. These are the groups we referred to above as "outsider" groups. These other factors in addition to gender — factors such as race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, level of ability, and social class — are also critical vari-

ables affecting teacher-student interactions, which, in turn, affect students' classroom experiences.

Sandler et al. (1996) believe that, while all students would benefit from the recommendations for good teaching that follow from their research, good teaching alone cannot eliminate the effects of bias. This is where faculty awareness becomes important. The authors caution readers that their research necessarily involves generalizations about people — and generalizations are always subject to exceptions. Not all women or all men, all Hispanics or all Asians, etc., behave in such and such a way. The generalizations simply tell us that certain groups of people are more likely to behave in a particular way. The generalizations help us understand how gender, race/ethnicity, age, etc., tend to affect teacher-student interactions and what follows from the atmosphere created in the classroom.

A number of studies that followed the 1982 report on the "chilly classroom climate" were conducted throughout the United States. Some climate studies found very little difference in faculty behavior toward men and women and little difference in level or quality of participation among their male and female students. Heller, Puff, and Mills (1985) suggested that the "chilly climate" might be more manifest in certain institutions than in others, or in certain programs within institutions.

Other research (e.g., Constantinople et al. 1988, Cornelius et al. 1990) found that additional factors — such as class size, discipline, and time of semester — were actually more influential on student participation than was the gender of instructor or student. These studies concluded that teacher behavior does not greatly influence student participation, and therefore targeting faculty behavior for change was inappropriate. Crawford and MacLeod (1990) found that, regardless of the size of the institution, class size was the factor most important to student participation. In fact, the researchers said, class size seemed to influence students' perceptions as to whether a course encouraged participation, and whether students as individuals could participate and were free to assert their ideas.

Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall's (1996) summary and analysis of all the previous research makes several points to address the issues raised above. First, the researchers who found differences in student participation based on gender, but who did not believe those differences were related to faculty members' differential treatment of men and women, may be right. Sandler et al. agree that students may actually *bring* differences *to* the classroom. Obviously, female students have lived a life of experience that has already shaped their way of being in the world and in the classroom. Sandler et al. further agree that what perpetuates gender differences in classroom participation may not be overt discrimination of any kind on the part of the in-

structor. Rather, it may be the instructor's lack of attention and awareness to gender that exacerbates women's negative classroom experience, where it exists. We as faculty, then, may need to take a much more proactive stance to remedy the host of factors that might contribute to lower classroom participation by women. In other words, even in cases in which we are not the cause of women's inhibitions in the classroom, we need to be part of the solution.

Alternatives

The Chilly Classroom Climate offers many recommendations to assist us as we attempt to increase student involvement in our classes. The Sandler et al. suggestions will help us develop a variety of teaching strategies to reach a diverse student population. The recommendations I'll be offering from the Sandler et al. research, from other sources, and from my own community college students are not about accommodating women and other "outsider" groups. The strategies presented throughout this book are about enhancing the learning environment for women, for students of color, for older students ... for *all* students. Crawford and MacLeod (1990) conclude that lower participation among female students, and among other students who are reticent to speak in class, is best managed by teachers who are aware of the research and who have developed a variety of teaching methodologies to create a "student-friendly" classroom.

Do some of our students, for whatever reason(s), feel excluded in our classes? The modified focus groups I conducted for several years (beginning in the late 1980s) with Mercer County Community College students, and the more recent Spring 1996 and Fall 2000 surveys I conducted concerning classroom atmosphere, generated the same kinds of comments and recommendations as has the more formal research.

Faculty-student interaction seems to play a big role in students' comfort levels in class. Many educators believe that student success is more likely if students feel safe in class. Is the classroom atmosphere conducive to students feeling they're respected, supported, and encouraged to learn by their instructors? Do they have a sense of belonging to a community? Do they feel that their instructors and their institution care about them and their futures?

The ideal classroom atmosphere is one in which students feel connected to you the instructor as well as to their classmates. There are many ways you can connect with students personally. There are also activities you can use to promote student-student connections. The general classroom atmosphere is dependent upon the quality of these relationships. And remember, the atmosphere of your class is set in place the very first day the

course begins. If you can make connections with your students, and your students can bond with their classmates, early on in the semester, you will have established a "successful beginning." This start will allow rapport and trust to grow stronger and stronger, making your classroom a more effective learning environment.

What Students Want
from Us as Faculty

Certainly students' relationships with us as faculty play an important role in their sense of belonging. Perlman and McCann (1998) published the results of a study in which they asked seven hundred undergraduates to write complaints about teaching behaviors they had observed in all the courses they'd taken. Among the top ten complaints of teacher behaviors were: "being unhelpful and unapproachable" and "intellectual arrogance — talking down to or showing a lack of respect for students."

What interests me most about the Perlman and McCann results are the parallels I found in research I conducted during the Fall 2000 semester with the majority of my 220 students in "Introduction to Psychology." Although I posed two very different questions in comparison to those Perlman and McCann used, students still identified similar factors as important to them. In my research, I asked two open-ended questions:

- In all of the college and high school courses you have taken, are there teaching methods, strategies, or techniques that are particularly helpful to the way(s) you learn?
- Are there teacher behaviors — in other words, are there things that teachers say or do — that motivate you to learn and to do well?

In my research, students not only wrote their responses privately on index cards, but I also had them work in focus groups of four students per group. Within the groups, students were asked to share their responses and to reach consensus on the five most important factors they had identified. I then reconvened the focus groups into the larger class and asked each group's recorder/reporter to state their top five factors. This large-group sharing allowed for some clarification and for a rich discussion.

If we really listen to our students, the retention literature that focuses on the importance of bonding and classroom atmosphere makes perfect sense. Although they may use different language, students overwhelmingly report that classroom atmosphere is a critical variable in what motivates them to come to class and do well. In response to my second research question regarding motivational qualities of instructors, students said over and

over again how important it is to them to have an instructor who is approachable and who speaks to them at a level they understand. (Note the similarity with the Perlman and McCann results, despite the different angle their research took!)

In follow-up discussion with students, when I asked for specifics on what it means to be "approachable," students said things like the following:

- It's important to me that the instructor knows my name and a little bit about who I am.
- I want to feel as if the instructor cares whether I come to class, and that he or she is invested in me learning the material and doing well.
- I want the instructor to be "human." (Note: When I asked for further elaboration, students said they want their instructors to be personal — to not always be in the "teacher" role. They want us to share a little of who we are outside the teacher role.)
- I want the instructor to use humor in class.
- I want to feel as if the instructor respects me as a person, and respects my opinions.
- I want my instructor to show enthusiasm about the discipline and about teaching.

This last statement about teacher enthusiasm was the most frequently expressed comment of all. Given this fact, colleges and universities may need to rethink professional development and renewal opportunities for faculty members, particularly for those of us who have been teaching for decades. Clearly our students are telling us how to create a safe environment and giving us tips on how to build rapport with them.

How to Build Rapport
and Connect with Your Students

Now that you've learned about the importance of a welcoming classroom atmosphere in enhancing your students' participation in class, and ultimately the quality of their learning experience, you're ready to begin the hands-on practical strategies that will help you create such an atmosphere. Building rapport and connecting with your students — from Day 1 — is the first step. Here are some tips to help you do just that:

#1: *When you walk into class the first day, and every day, greet he class as a whole or greet students individually*. This can be as simple as smiling and saying, "Hi!" Students are reinforced when you greet them as if you're

pleased to see them. It's a simple task, yet it goes very far in establishing warmth in the classroom.

#2: *In your first class, tell the students what you prefer to be called.* Then ask each of them what they prefer to be called. Students are often non-committal, and sometimes it takes gentle prodding to find out if they have a nickname or another name their friends call them. Once you find out each student's preference, write it down in your roll book so you remember it. If you need to make marks in your book to help you pronounce each student's name, do so. Ask students to correct you if you mispronounce their names.

Although you may be burdened by large classes, find ways to learn students' names early in the semester. Mostly, this simply takes motivation on your part. You'll likely be more motivated when you realize the difference it may make in terms of student participation and learning. In most of the research on retention and classroom climate, and from students' own reports, when you as an instructor know your students' names, the students will feel more comfortable with and positive about your class.

Wolcowitz (1984) offers some tips that will help you learn your students' names. He suggests using index cards featuring students' names and other information you can use to call roll in lieu of a class list. That way, you can easily match students' names and faces. In my "Introduction to Psychology" large-lecture class of 220 students, I ask students to bring in a recent photo. I tape the students' photos to their index cards and write down some information about each student to help me associate his/her name with his/her face. I use the cards like flash cards to help my memory. In particular, I look at the cards before I meet the students in twenty-person seminar classes so that I'll be able to remember their names.

#3: *In general, it works best to call all students by either their first or last names.* If given the choice, most students will elect to be called by their first name, which creates an atmosphere that is less formal and more friendly. However, if you and the students are more comfortable with last names, you can call the men "Mr." and the women "Ms." (unless they request to be addressed differently).

#4: *Take roll in every class session.* Boll and Parkman (1988) discuss the importance of roll taking as a way to encourage class attendance, show we value our students' presence in class, and foster student participation in class. These educators argue that students like to hear their names spoken. Calling roll helps you remember your students' names and lets the students learn each other's names as well.

Boll and Parkman suggest that you ask questions during the roll-taking process. They tell their own students, for instance, that when roll is called, they're to answer the roll by responding to a general question, posed at the beginning of the class. Early in the semester, the questions are safe and easy for everyone to answer. Examples:

- What's your program of study or major?
- Where were you born?
- What's your favorite food?

As the semester progresses, the questions ask for more self-disclosure. Examples:

- What's your favorite TV program?
- If you had to give a book as a gift, what book would you choose?
- If you could ask anyone three questions and receive an honest answer, who would you approach and what would you ask?

After the semester is in full swing, the questions can relate to course content:

- If you could gain one punctuation skill, what would it be? (a lead-in to a review of punctuation)
- What chemical reaction that occurs in your daily life do you most value? (a lead-in to a chemistry lecture)

Boll and Parkman say that after just a few classes, students begin to anticipate the questions and many students have suggestions for additional questions. Boll and Parkman note that an excellent source for questions is Gregory Stock's (1987) *The Book of Questions*.

#5: *Use your students' names in class in ways that will boost their self-*esteem. For example, you might quote a comment a student made earlier in the class if it's appropriate to a point you're now making. (Be sure, however, to use minority and female students' comments as frequently as you do white male students' comments, since doing the latter is one of the clearest inadvertent differential treatment practices found in the "chilly classroom climate" research.) Where appropriate, praise individuals for their questions, comments, answers to questions in class, test grades, papers they've written, and work they've submitted. At the end of a good class discussion, or when an entire class does well on a test or project, praise the class as a whole. If a particular student does poorly on a test, paper, or project, speak to him/her privately and ask if he/she knows what went wrong and how he/she might do better in the future. You can offer some guidance for improvement in a nonjudgmental way.

#6: *Since the frequency of faculty-student contact inside and outside of class seems to promote student motivation, perseverance, and success, talk to students before and after class.* At the very beginning of the semester, give students your office location, office hours, phone extension (with voice mail instructions), and e-mail address. Invite students to your office by telling them it's OK to drop by, by establishing conference appointments with them, and by asking them to pick up their work at your office.

#7: *In surveys of student satisfaction with the college experience, students ranked interaction with professors as a very high priority (Astin 1993).* Garko et al. (1994) explored students' views about their relationships with their professors. When students were asked to describe in their own words their view of the ideal student-teacher relationship, they said they wanted to connect with their professors.

In study after study, students report that they appreciate having instructors who are approachable. "Approachable," to students, means respecting students as persons and as learners. The Garko et al. study (1994) found that students wanted equality, mutuality, and respect in their relationships with their professors.

Students value teachers who seem to care about them as people, and who show an interest in their learning. Students say they want their instructors to talk to them in language, and at a level, that is understandable to them. They say it helps them feel relaxed in class when their instructors step out of "role" and share personal experiences with them. Of course, pedagogically, this works best when you can use your personal experiences to demonstrate the course content.

In short, students feel that the classroom atmosphere is more relaxed when there's less formality, and when you as the instructor seem like a real person to them. Your students want to feel connected to you — and they want you to care about them.

#8: *Use humor, where appropriate, to create a more informal atmosphere.* Berk (1996) found that undergraduate and graduate students rated the use of humor as very effective to extremely effective in reducing their anxiety, increasing their ability to learn, and improving their chances of performing their best on problems and exams.

Berk studied several uses of humor, including:

- humorous material on the course syllabus,
- spontaneous humor in class,
- humorous questions and examples, and
- humorous material on exams.

Sometimes you can find jokes in your discipline to make students more comfortable in class. For example, when I present the material on Pavlov and the classical conditioning of his dogs, I put up a cartoon in large lecture that shows Pavlov sitting in his laboratory with his dogs. The sign on his door says, "Please don't ring the bell!" I'm not suggesting that you need to become a stand-up comic. However, using appropriate, spontaneous humor in your classroom can go a long way toward improving your rapport with students.

Civikly-Powell (1999) reviewed the body of research on the uses of humor in the classroom over the last few decades. She found fairly consistent conclusions. She says there's a strong positive correlation among teacher uses of humor in the classroom, student evaluations of teaching, and student reports of learning. Certainly in my own focus groups with students over the years, students have reported that they appreciate a teacher's sense of humor as a way of making the teaching/learning environment more comfortable. Civikly-Powell says that, although there is no direct causal connection between humor and learning, humor seems to arouse students' attention and interest. And there is compelling research showing that increased interest among students is a motivating factor that improves the likelihood the students will learn and retain information more readily.

Civikly-Powell also notes that teachers report using stories and anecdotes, exaggerations, jokes about themselves, and visuals that are funny. Most teachers say they use humor to help students feel more comfortable in the classroom, to relieve tension, to grab the students' attention and interest, and to have fun.

It's important to use some caution, however, when it comes to humor. In her observations of other teachers' classes, Civikly-Powell found that sometimes what a teacher found funny, the students did not. She thinks the disparity often can be accounted for by the difference in the level of sophistication between teacher and students, and by the generation gap. So it's important to know your audience.

Be aware too, Civikly-Powell stresses, that students are in a more precarious position in the classroom than you are as the teacher. To establish and maintain an atmosphere in which students feel safe, you need to be very cautious about using teasing, for example, even when the teasing is positive. Civikly-Powell also reports that students appear to be uncomfortable with teacher sarcasm, unless you the teacher make yourself the target of the sarcasm. Even then, however, students seem to tolerate only small doses of sarcasm.

Promoting Student-Student Interaction

As I've noted throughout this book so far, the first day of class is an important one that sets the tone for the semester — for better or worse. So in addition to working to build a solid connection between yourself and your students, it's important to do something that gets your students connected with each other as well.

Students need to begin interacting with each other from the first class session if your goal is to establish a warm classroom atmosphere. As faculty, many of us need to let go of our need to make that first class full to brimming with our introductions to the content and mechanics of the course. The research is quite clear that student perseverance and success are more dependent on the relationships they establish in class than on what we have to tell them about the course.

In Chapter 2, I described a variety of "icebreaker" activities you can use during the first session of a new class. Whatever activities you choose to do, the important ingredient is to help each student meet at least a few other students in the class in a non-threatening way. If you can do an exercise that deals with your course material, so much the better.

Early in the semester, devise a way to let students exchange phone numbers and/or e-mail addresses so that they can help each other if they're ever absent from class. If you're teaching at a commuter institution, you might encourage students to look for other students from the same geographical area, zip code, or phone exchange. Whatever your type of institution, you might ask students to pair up with someone who is in the same major or who shares similar career aspirations. You can mention your expectations that students be responsible for obtaining missed work or handouts. You can then add that some form of a "buddy system" has worked out well at colleges and universities throughout the nation.

Seating arrangements are also important for creating an atmosphere that is conducive to students' active participation in class. Where appropriate and possible, put students in circles. Face-to-face seating seems to generate more student interaction than having students sit in rows facing the backs of each other's heads. (Incidentally, social psychology research has shown that morale is highest in any group in which participants are engaged in discussion.) A variation of the full circle is to ask students on each side of the room to shift their desks so that they're facing the center of the room and each other. This setup allows you to walk from the front of the classroom occasionally so that you can make the back of the room the focus of attention. You might occasionally engage the students who sit in the back and who ordinarily wouldn't participate by standing closer to them.

When blackboard work, overhead transparencies, or class size make a circular seating arrangement unfeasible, try to get students to sit close to each other. For example, you can ask students not to sit in the last row in the back of the room, or in the side rows.

If you notice that the class has arranged itself in a way that is gender or race segregated, try a random-type rearrangement without calling attention to the fact that the original arrangement was segregated. Social psychology research suggests that proximity and contact among diverse people of equal status promotes harmonious relationships and breaks down prejudices (Sherif et al. 1961). (In fact, in Chapter 4 I'll discuss the research showing that the *cooperative*, rather than the *competitive*, classroom improves the learning environment.)

Encourage students to form study pairs or study groups. Suggest ways the students can get organized and approach their study sessions. Offer to meet with them occasionally if they'd like to. A way to use "study-buddy" groups in class — indeed, an approach that facilitates bonding and enhances the quality of class discussions — is to ask students to move into four-person groups as soon as they come to class. Create some ongoing assignment for them to be working on that they can discuss together for a few minutes before you start the session. For example, you can ask students to read an assignment at home; select and write about portions they found intriguing, difficult, confusing, powerful, or whatever you choose; and discuss their writings together within their study groups.

When I tried this technique, I found that when I reconvened the large group and started the class, the students' willingness to participate was much higher than usual and the discussion much richer. In a "Psychology of Relationships" course that I taught several years ago, I started every class this way. Students brought an energy to the discussions that enlivened our whole semester together. (Incidentally, I once overheard an intriguing conversation taking place within one of the study groups prior to the start of the large-group discussion: A student was reprimanding another student for not having read the assignment. Students seem to take their commitment to their groups very seriously.)

Participation, Motivation, and Perseverance

Now that we've explored the importance of creating a welcoming, inclusive, and safe classroom atmosphere — and some ways you can do so — it's time to discuss the issues of student participation, motivation, and perseverance, and what we as teachers can do to promote student success from the very first day of class. For that, we turn to Chapter 4.