

# INSTRUCTORS: Tips to Enhance Your Department's Teaching Climate and Culture



A University of Toronto research report on mentoring for teaching identified the role and impact of a 'teaching culture' in creating supportive spaces to talk about teaching (Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, 2016). As Weimer (2016) notes: "departmental climate is the confluence of many small actions, a few large ones, and, yes, a lot of inaction." Your daily work environment can be enhanced by "small actions" that together may have the larger impact of contributing to a positive climate in your department. Included here are taking steps to become an effective instructor. However, there are several other ways to play a role in improving your department's teaching climate and its overall support for teaching. When a handful of voices within your department engage in stimulating discussions and envision new ways through which teaching can be supported, departmental cultures can shift.

*The more discussions or increased number of "conversational partners" (Roxa & Martensson, 2009) in a department, the greater the likelihood that a culture will take hold and create the necessary climate for important teaching discussions to be had. (Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, 2016, p. 60)*

This tip sheet draws on many faculty experiences included in the CTSI report, along with seminal literature in the field to identify concrete ways to shift our teaching discussions from the personal to the public domain – in this case within departmental spaces and places. In these ways you can work collaboratively with colleagues to bolster our joint commitment to effective teaching and enhanced student learning across our institution.

## COMMUNICATE & CONNECT AROUND MENTORING FOR TEACHING

- Ask your Chair about formal and informal teaching mentors available in your department to ensure that your teaching-related questions are addressed and equally importantly, that these conversations continue on a regular basis.
- Consider sharing via the departmental communication avenues (e.g., listserv) upcoming teaching and learning centre workshops and invite colleagues to attend with you. If a colleague cannot attend offer to provide an update on what you learned. This action is a way to discourage the 'return' problem where faculty engage with colleagues at such events but return to their respective departments and rarely encounter such opportunities to share their gains.
- Advocate for encouraging teaching awards at the departmental level and broadening the recognition of what constitutes successful teaching (e.g., mentoring award, graduate supervision award, teaching with technology award) (Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, 2016; Weimer, 2016).
- Invite a colleague from a department that regularly engages in many activities included in this list to share the processes to enact and sustain a strong and supportive teaching environment within a department.

## DEMONSTRATE LEADERSHIP & MODEL EFFECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

- Open your classroom/lecture for observation or participation by a departmental colleague. This helps create small communities of faculty interested in observing and learning from others. Follow-up these formative in-class observation sessions with a post observation debrief meeting. Then reciprocate. CTSI and other teaching and learning centres can share sample peer observation/review of teaching guidelines for such formative activities.
- Convene a reading group and distribute a short article (peer-reviewed or otherwise) in advance (Weimer, 2016). Alternate roles based on interest levels and extend invitations both personally and through posting in a shared space (common area and/or departmental listserv). Remember that, even with small numbers, inroads can be made in shifting towards a supportive departmental climate.
- Faculty in our report described a pedagogical series that stemmed from a few colleagues seeking more information on the use of educational technology in their teaching. With two colleagues co-leading this monthly initiative, faculty could drop in for a lunch-hour brown-bag event that allowed ample time for Q&A and distributed the discussion across a number of participants. Specific speakers were invited for more 'expert' topics (e.g., use of social media in one's teaching).
- Offer to present on a teaching-related topic at a departmental faculty meeting. If this type of discussion is a new focus at these meetings ensure you narrow in on a specific topic for a ten-minute segment (e.g., a key take-away from a recent teaching-related workshop or conference you've attended). Other possible topics to concentrate on include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a specific instructional technique</li><li>• pedagogical article you've read on a hot-button issue (e.g., use of laptops in the classroom)</li><li>• share inquiry you have undertaken in your teaching, whether at a reflective level or at a more formalized level. Colleagues appreciate hearing evidence to support their own teaching. What works in your teaching may resonate with a colleague. Future collaboration in scholarship of teaching and learning may also emerge from such discussions.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• how to grade student participation or contributions</li><li>• using mid-course evaluations as part of an integrated culture of feedback</li><li>• ways to bolster student interactivity in face-to-face or online environments</li><li>• how to incorporate writing activities into one's lecture</li><li>• tips for classroom management in an age of e-communications</li><li>• share teaching innovations and successes of your colleagues to recognize and elevate the excellent contributions being made at your departmental level.</li></ul>
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\*Check out CTSI resources for additional ideas: <http://teaching.utoronto.ca/teaching-support/strategies/>

*Create departmental spaces (e.g., lounge area or a ‘teaching corner’, or a virtual space) to post special departmental or institutional teaching-related events. Such visibility also serves to bring teaching discussions into the mainstream, normalizing and making public these important conversations.*

## CREATE SPACE FOR MENTORING FOR TEACHING

- Be cognizant of the role that physical space plays in enhancing positive teaching climates (i.e., shared spaces, lounge area, a teaching corner). Intentionally invite faculty for a coffee break within the department to literally open the doors to a wide array of academic discussions, including teaching. Consider coffee/lunch opportunities with colleagues to address teaching moments, questions or suggestions on your teaching.
- Create spaces (physical or virtual) to post special departmental or institutional teaching-related events. Such visibility also serves to bring teaching discussions into the mainstream, normalizing and making public these important conversations. Included here may be upcoming pedagogical conferences, colleague’s publications, workshops, courses and institutes at campus teaching and learning centres, and listservs of interest (e.g., Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL) listserv, Online Learning Community of Practice (CoP)).

Choosing from this list of actions can help foster a positive teaching climate and culture in your department. These activities, coupled with an orientation that is open to support for teaching, can lead to shared and public discussions that spark creativity, innovation and excitement in one’s teaching. Over time, this intentional focus on teaching has a beneficial impact on the quality of learning in classrooms, as well as the quality of the teaching experience for faculty.

*“Ultimately, the overall climate in the department is most likely to determine the support for and value of teaching and teaching development.”*

*(Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, 2016, p. 25)*

## REFERENCES:

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Weimer, M. (June 1, 2016). Six Ways to Improve Your Department’s teaching Climate. *Faculty Focus*. Retrieved from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/six-ways-improve-departments-teaching-climate/>

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