Teachers’ Leadership Role in Providing Positive Classroom Environment in Theological Institutions

Dr. Ruth M. Oyeniyi
Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary
Ogbomoso, Nigeria

ABSTRACT
Classroom is a world of its own where students and teachers meet. The activities which take place within the room has affected many theological seminary students either positively or negatively. When students vow never to have anything to do with a particular teacher or school, the underlying factor could be that of poor relationship between teachers and students in the classroom. Teachers dictate the tone of their class as well as build warm classroom environment for their students. Irrespective of the levels of students, the classroom still stands out as the meeting point between teachers and their students. In theological institutions, teachers are seen as God’s representatives who equip students for ministry. Students expect every class session as an opportunity to have an encounter with God. However, findings reveal that such experience is rare leading to disillusionment among prospective gospel ministers. This study researched into the leadership role of teachers in creating positive learning atmosphere for theological students in order to make them feel welcomed in the classroom at every learning opportunity. It is observed that no tangible learning can take place in a hostile learning environment, and that is why teachers in theological institutions should adopt positive leadership styles as they lead their students in the classroom. This paper discusses the interplay between learning in conducive environment and leadership of teachers in the classroom. It also reveals the “host” metaphor of teachers receiving students as guests in the classroom.

Keywords: Teacher, Positive, Classroom, Environment, Leadership, Theological Institutions.

INTRODUCTION
Classrooms play important roles in the teaching-learning process of every educational institution. It is a meeting point where interactions between the teacher and learners take place. This is why it is the core of most activities in any school. “The way a classroom functions determines how the members feel about participating in the group.”1 The classroom serves as a social environment for students and teachers and can contribute either positively or negatively to learning in a setting, irrespective of the nature of the school be it theological institutions or secular, whether residential, part-time (sandwich) or online. Students need the input of their teachers as they receive instructions in the disciplines of their choice. The meeting point between teachers and learners is the classroom whether large or small, well-equipped or ill-equipped. What transpires in the room determines whether learning will take place or not. A warm and conducive classroom environment plays a significant role in the teaching-learning process in the school. The climate of the classroom determines whether any learning will take place or not. Conducive classroom learning environment entails physical arrangement of the class which deals with space and sitting arrangement of students, availability of comfortable furniture for both learners and teachers. However, emotional and psychological environment created by the teacher in the classroom through the leadership provided by teachers in the classroom are the focus of this paper. High expectation is placed on teachers in the classroom setting, for, apart from distance learning which involves the use of technology for online learning, learners and teachers meet on a weekly basis in the classroom for
interaction. Michael Lawson gives reasons why teachers have great roles to play in the classroom by stating that:

Classrooms by their very nature create a unique atmosphere for education, in fact, many students share some common classroom experiences. These dynamics shape students’ thinking, actions, and expectations of Christian education. Students may even carry behaviour patterns from previous classroom experiences into Christian education. Some of these experiences mould students in ways counterproductive to Christian education. A teacher who manages his classroom well must first account for previous counterproductive experiences.²

It is a fact that teachers’ attitudes contribute to a certain extent to how students learn in class. Their leadership styles have a lot to do with students’ response to learning, and it is uncommon to hear students making comments either directly or proverbially about their teachers. In secular schools, students tag their teachers with names that correspond to their subjects or behaviour in class; unfortunately, this is not different in theological institutions in spite of the level of students’ maturity.

**Classroom as a Concept**

Students spend the greater percent of their time in the classroom weekly since that is where they receive instructions from their teachers. Classrooms are designated rooms in a school system where teaching-learning takes place. The classroom “contains person and psychological environment as it exists to him.”³

The learner, the teacher, as well as the interactive process between them constitute the psychological environment which has bearings on the teaching-learning activities that take place. Where the learner is motivated to learn or threatened to learn determines the outcome of such learning. It is the responsibility of teachers to create warm learning environment by collaborating with students to achieve the desired goals. According to Edwards and Allen, classroom process includes teacher planning which focuses on “what the teacher does both in the classroom and in organizing and managing the course” this encompasses classroom atmosphere, teacher and student behaviours, face-to-face interactions, learning activities and evaluation procedures⁴

According to Vernon “the classroom is a kaleidoscope of ever changing patterns of student behaviour… The fascination derived… comes from a generalized tone of well-being, order, warmth, affection, and learning.”⁵ Morgan citing Rogers alludes the following to teachers in creating warmth and conducive learning environment:

i. Allowing students’ emphatic understanding
ii. Allowing students some (although not completely) freedom to learning by choosing which tasks they do and or how they will do the task
iii. Involving students in collaborative work and discussion
iv. Facilitating experiential learning discovery and problem-solving, requiring students to hypothesise, ask questions and discuss the lives of inquiry
v. Providing students with resources that give them the opportunity to learn experientially.⁶

Conducive classroom environment is a catalyst to learning which will take place where every necessary thing is put in place. Coleman opines that “interaction with the environment is necessary to life itself.”⁷ Whenever learning takes place, there will be a change of attitude, direction, and priority. Describing the type of classroom environment that allows freedom of expression, Lynn Holley and Sue Steiner citing Boostrom describe it as a safe place. The metaphor of the classroom as a “safe space” has emerged as a description of a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. Safety in this sense does not refer to physical safety. Instead, classroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm. It is “concerned with the injuries that individuals suffer at the hands of society”, or when referring to a classroom, at the hands of instructors and other students. A safe classroom space is one in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differs dramatically from the norms set by the
instructor, the profession, or other students. Safe space does not necessarily refer to an environment without discomfort, struggle, or pain. Being safe is not the same as being comfortable.\textsuperscript{8} Students in most cases for fear of embarrassment, ridicule or fear of receiving lower course grades may refuse to speak out or air their opinion to correct the misdemeanour of their teachers in an unsafe environment. A safe environment will reduce the fear of reprisal from teachers by students. Lynn Holley and Sue Steiner describe how to create a safe environment such as welcoming discussion from students, approachability of the teacher, as well as his or her supportiveness in the classroom. The teacher is also expected to maintain a demeanour of non-judgmental acceptance of students as individuals even when their comments are “reprehensible.”\textsuperscript{9} Students should not be punished for unpopular views, and discussion rules or guidelines should be set by designing norms for class discussions.

**The Teacher in the Classroom**

The teacher is the key player in creating a conducive learning environment in the school and in the words of Grace Olajide, the teacher can influence the child through investigation, better learning environment, reinforcement, counselling, and re-education, involvement of the home, class solidarity, cognitive advancement, modelling, specific skill training, need satisfaction, punishment and teacher's style.\textsuperscript{10} Although learners have contributions to make towards the success of the teaching-learning process and other activities in the classroom, greater responsibilities are on teachers. The classroom poses a challenge as well as satisfaction to the teacher. The classroom provides an opportunity for the teacher to interact with individual students in a “mutually beneficial way”\textsuperscript{11} though it can also be a place of crises for the two parties if not carefully handled. The instructional task seems to be uppermost in many teachers’ mind from which many derive satisfaction. To Andrew, “people exist and evolve in relation to interaction with their environments,”\textsuperscript{12} as a result through interaction with students in the teaching-learning process, many teachers hope to become better as they improve on their teaching skills. However, from the perspectives of most teachers, students occupy the “centre of challenge, and that relationship which exists between the student and the teacher is crucial to the accomplishment of educational objectives.”\textsuperscript{13}

James Jones relates teacher’s philosophy to the way he or she will handle the classroom which will influence the type of environment he or she creates in the classroom. He claims that:

> If the teacher feels that subject matter is valuable for its own sake, that knowledge for the sake of knowledge is sufficient reason for his teaching, then his classroom environment will reflect this way of thinking. If the teacher feels that knowledge is taught to prepare the pupil for some problems he will face in the future, his classroom environment will reflect this way of thinking. If he is trying to carry out a philosophy that says learning situations must contribute to the child's felt needs in the culture in which he is now living, the felt needs will reflect in the way in which he organises classroom.\textsuperscript{14}

**Teachers' Role in the Classroom**

Every employee is expected to perform specific functions and irrespective of the personality of such individual, he or she eyes that roles and performs them to the satisfaction of the employer. Citing Clark, Vernon and Blackington affirm that:

> A role is a social position that has certain patterns of behaviour associated with it. Roles are mandates on behaviour; regardless of personality, individuals who occupy a role are likely to behave in roughly similar ways because of what one expects from them. The teacher must meet classes, keep order, teach, grade papers, not because of any inclination of personality, that may not be there, especially for grading papers, but because such actions are part of what a person has to do as a teacher.\textsuperscript{15}

Teachers play many roles which according to Moore “interlock and overlap.”\textsuperscript{16} The author categorised the roles into the following:

*Instructional Expert:* this is one of the core roles that many believe is performed by the teacher because he or she “plans, guides and evaluates learning.”\textsuperscript{17} Students, of course, will expect adequate preparation and skill from teachers and be able to proffer the answer to all questions.
Manager: He or she is the manager of the classroom environment. He does this by maintaining law and order in the classroom, serving as “environmental engineers who organize the classroom space to fit their goals and to maximize learning,” motivating learners to study and reinforcing positive behaviours, and performing clerical duties of marking students’ test and examination scripts, grading and recording students’ performances, taking attendance records and keeping other necessary records.

Counsellor: not all teachers are trained counsellors and psychologists, but they perform counselling role to their students, parents, and colleagues. Teachers’ interactions with students, parents, and colleagues, pleasant and unpleasant behaviours afford them the opportunity of understanding different behaviours and be able to counsel them appropriately.

Host: Relating teachers’ role to that of host in their classrooms, Soh encourages teachers in theological institutions to be “hosts to their guests, that is, their students.” Citing Shaw, Soh reports that “creating a hospitable teaching-learning space is essentially a pedagogical act, even a theological act. The hospitable act of welcoming students as guests in the classroom is a nonverbal visual portrayal of divine reconciling work, God welcoming and reconciling sinners to himself.” According to Shaw, a hospitable teaching-learning encounter is pertinent in the spiritual formation of our students.

A hospitable environment serves as the ideal context to teach for reconciliation, an environment characterized by trust, not fear of reciprocity. Practicing hospitality and serving as hosts to students implies practical practices such as arriving in class before the arrival of students, "beginning and ending class on time, knowing students' names, communicating with students between classes, letting students know ahead the course expectations, giving prompt and timely feedback to students, and sharing food together as a class. Hospitality does not have to do with a series of activities or pedagogical strategies or contextual mechanics; rather hospitality has to do with relationships.

The Emotional Aspects of Teacher-Student Relationships

Emotions and cognitions are connected and Schutz et.al are of the view that “schooling is an emotionally laden process for students, teachers and parents.” In view of this Hargreaves developed the following five emotional geographies which can determine emotional closeness or distance between students, teachers and parents:

1. Socio-cultural geographies which mark the difference in both culture and class determine how close the teacher/students/parents will relate.
2. Moral geographies which reveal teachers’ purposes may be at odds with those of students they serve. Students may misunderstand or misrepresent their teachers’ ideas or have different opinions from that of their teachers.
3. Professional geographies this is “where teacher professionalism is defined according to a “classical,” masculine model of the professions, that creates a distance between teachers and the clients they serve, and that is especially prejudicial to feminine “caring” ethics of teaching
4. Political geographies which relate to the emotional and cognitive lacuna created between the teacher and students due to hierarchical power. These geographies, however, block the flow of communication between them.
5. Physical geographies "where fragmented, infrequent, formalised and episodic encounters replace the possibility of a relationship between teachers and students.”

Applying emotional geographies to classroom environment connotes that teaching and learning have emotional tendencies. Both the teacher and students are emotionally dependent on one another without which learning will take place. Soh illustrated this by avowing that “just as teachers have power (the power of the grade for instance), students also have power (the power of the will as an example) too. When student wield their power in defiance of teachers, the contest of wills creates an emotional climate.” Good interpersonal relationships between teachers and students within the classroom setting cannot be overemphasised if any successful teaching-learning exercise will take place.

Teachers’ attitude to teaching matters a lot in creating conducive classroom climate for learners. Laziness, desire for gratification above service, arrogance, transfer of anger and aggression to learners and employers, teachers’ personality, leadership styles as well as teachers’ incompetence can determine the
classroom climate in the Seminaries. The method of classroom management adopted by each teacher will determine the effect it has on students. If a teacher is motivated to work or has a negative disposition to work and vice versa, the students will be at the receiving end. Steve Grubaugh counsels that it is important for a teacher to understand this cause and effect in order to understand how to organize their classroom to create a better learning environment.\(^{27}\) The classroom is described as a community by Elliot Ziwira who posits that as a community, everyone plays a part, with the teacher being the head; in control and commands respect. Free interaction should be the hallmark so that every member is given a chance to air his or her ideas. Regardless of their different backgrounds, learners are equal, as should be reflected through group work and emphasised throughout the learning process. All contributions should be respected to encourage participation and foster a sense of belonging.\(^{28}\)

**Teacher’s Leadership Styles in the Classroom**

Understanding the personality types or temperament of teachers which James Berkley regards as “God-given behavioural style”\(^{29}\) will help students understand their teachers and relate to them as they are. Each teacher has his or her behavioural style which directly or indirectly affects his or her relationship with students and dictates the classroom environment. There are four leadership styles that correspond with the four temperaments which some authors such as Tim LaHaye, Voges and Braund have identified as “choleric, sanguine, melancholic and phlegmatic.” The following leadership styles are summarized by Berkley:

**Autocratic:** Teachers with this type of leadership style “exhibit a dominant style that is highly task oriented.”\(^{30}\) They like being in charge and are good disciplinarians. They tend to focus more on their curriculum and avoid distraction to ‘finishing’ their course outline. According to Berkley, due to their high task orientation, autocratic leaders risk offending people in the process.\(^{31}\) The autocratic teacher "uses criticism and "put-downs" when students make mistakes.\(^{32}\) This implies that students may not expect a warm classroom environment from teachers with this style of leadership. Such teachers may be harsh with the use of words particularly against lazy, weak or slow students in their classes. Elliot Žiwira cautions teachers with this type of leadership style they should always be unintimidating, friendly, respectful, tolerant and accommodating in order to encourage students to respect them and be free with them. Students tend to withdraw into their shells if the teacher exhibits aspects of intimidation and patronization. Under no circumstances should the teacher use disparaging remarks even to those physically or intellectually challenged, neither should he/she allow such remarks in the classroom.\(^{33}\)

**Democratic:** Teachers with this leadership style are “enthusiastic and enjoy being around others and motivating them.”\(^{34}\) The teacher is kind, caring, and warm, but also firm. The democratic leader avoids criticism and "put-downs." Instead, self-esteem is developed by sharing responsibility as students are encouraged when they make mistakes. The classroom environment is that of openness, friendly communications and independence.\(^{35}\)

**Laissez-Faire:** this is a permissive type of leadership of teachers in the classroom, but the teacher is “patient, good at listening, and able to calm excited people.”\(^{36}\) However, there is no decorum in the class as every student does what seems right to him or her. “It produces disorganization, causes student frustration, and results in any little work….Students often experience stress and a feeling of being overwhelmed and lost.”\(^{37}\)

**Bureaucratic:** This type of leader is “very analytical, paying close attention to standard and focusing on details. They are critical thinkers who check for accuracy and comply with authority.”\(^{38}\) This type of teacher is interested in quality work; hence lazy students will find it tough with him or her as he demands originality, creativity, and beauty from every assignment submitted to him or her.

**An implication for Theological Institution**

Learning activities in theological institutions involve compulsory class attendance for students at all levels to receive lectures, assignments in the form of reading log, research/fieldwork, projects, paper presentations, and essay, programme notes, thesis, dissertation writing for graduating students as well as
test and examination. Learners in the context of this paper constitute pastors-in-training (commonly called student pastors) at the baccalaureate or postgraduate level. They fall within young and middle adulthood stages of their lives and pursuing courses to qualify them to serve in their denominations as church pastors, denominational administrators, or lecturers in their denominational theological institutions. Many of these students are married, and some are actively engaged in their various places of assignments as full-time church pastors, theological school teachers or administrators, but had the opportunity to study thus doubling their roles as students, workers and family persons.

Most of these students are under pressure before coming to class and many look forward to their classroom interactions with teachers to be emotionally warm and welcoming. Where the environment is cold, hostile, and negative, learning may not take place. Howard Hendricks notes that “the teacher exists for the student….If the student has not learned, the teacher has not taught. His highest fulfilment comes in pouring his life out like a drink offering for his students.”

Since student pastors have responded to God’s call need to be trained to acquire the necessary tools for ministry which theological education provides for them, it behoves the teacher to pour his life into them in other to equip them for ministry.

Fred Smith states that "leadership… is both something you are and something you do. However, effective leadership starts with character. When leaders fail, more often it is a result of a character flaw than of competence." The character of teachers as leaders in Bible Colleges and Theological Seminaries are expected to reflect Christ. Christian teachers should know that “God is into character, not credentials. He is not impressed with what we do but with what we are becoming.” Godly lifestyle coupled with the manifestation of the fruits of the Spirit should produce warm and safe classroom environment where students are trained to be like the Master, Jesus Christ. Christian teachers “must create learning environments in which students are not only free to ask life-related questions but are encouraged to do so.”

**Practical Steps to Creating Conducive Classroom Environment by Christian Teachers**

The following suggestions serve as guidance to teachers working in Bible Colleges and Theological Seminaries in building positive classroom environment:

**Building Trust**

Since most students in Bible colleges and theological seminaries are adult learners it may take time for teachers to gain their trust. Where teachers are harsh and treat students as somebody who is inferior and academically poor, such students will keep their distance. Hendricks counsels teachers to “earn the right to be heard.” When teachers encourage their students and reinforce their performances positively, they tend to believe in themselves that they can improve and will trust the leadership provided by the teacher in the classroom.

**Cultivate Self-esteem and Respect**

Everyone wants to feel important and respected. Respect is reciprocal, where students are treated with respect, they tend to respect the teacher in return. “Try to plan and assign work so that every student can experience some success.”

**Providing Adequate Feedback**

Feedback is a communication process. The commonest thing in the classroom is to find out what the learners know through questioning, test, and examination. Students can be asked to apply what they have learned to their lives and ministries when they are asked to put concepts learned in their own words. Howard claims that “feedback brings us back to where we started: the concept-feeling-action is being translated into words.” However, much as students provide feedback to their teachers to enable them to assess the level of students' understanding of concepts taught in class, teachers also have the responsibility of providing feedback to their students. Assignments, tests/quizzes, examination scripts and other means of assessment should be marked and graded and returned to students early to enable them to know their performances and improve on their weaknesses.

**Know Your Students:** There is an invisible wall between teachers and students which the knowledge of students individually may remove in the class. Each student is unique with unique challenges. This can be
possible when teachers are willing to stoop low to the levels of their students by creating time for them out of their busy schedules, knowing them by name and willingness to serve them.

Listening: Good communication is essential to resolve problems in the classroom. This implies the two parties involved to listen. The teacher should “learn to listen and allow students to talk and have input in finding solution to classroom problems.”

Motivation: Motivation is an abstract concept which cannot be seen or touched, but the effect is noticed in students. According to Wlodkowski the “motives people bring with them to the learning situation strongly affect how and what they learn.” Motivation is “based to a large extent on an individual’s needs, attitudes, and sense of self-esteem.” Teachers should be concerned with these needs of students in order for worthwhile learning to take place.

Model Desired Behaviour: Teaching through example is the same as leading by example. Model the type of behaviour expected of students. For instance, the teacher of the course is expecting spiritual vibrancy and he or she is not vibrant spiritually, all efforts will lead to mere academic ritual. Modelled behaviour is contagious, once it infects students, the classroom becomes lively and learning can be amazing.

Reduce Anxiety: Subjecting students to unnecessary pressure will make students to worry and be fearful of the teacher. Moore counsels that teachers should watch their “use of competition, unrealistic assignments, and exams, all of which represent areas of anxiety to students.”

Praying for Students: Prayer sets the spiritual tone for the class before teaching-learning exercise commences. There are students with challenges who feel belonged when they are prayed for and encouraged through the pages of the scriptures.

CONCLUSION

Teachers are indispensable and have important roles in creating a positive environment through which learning will take place. Leadership is what a teacher is and does. Hence teachers have the responsibility of raising gospel ministers who will affect their denominations positively through the knowledge they acquire in the classroom. If learning takes place, there must be positive classroom created by teachers which should be warm, safe, positive and receptive. Hostile classroom environment will alienate students from teachers emotionally. The leadership roles of teachers in the settings of Bible Colleges and Theological Seminaries call for caution, self-control and obedience to the Holy Spirit. Deliberate efforts should be made to welcome students to class as host and serve them the best meal of instruction and good relationship.

Endnotes
3 Ibid
6 Ibid
7 Coleman Lucien E. “An Improved Learning Environment: More Than Just Space.” In Sunday School Leadership, 8, February 1988, 16
9 Ibid, 43
11 Vernon Hicks and Frank H. Blackington, 99
13 Vernon Hicks and Frank H. Blackington, 101
15 Vernon Hicks and Frank H. Blackington, 102
16 Moore Kenneth D. *Classroom Teaching Skills: A Primer*, Toronto: Random House, Inc. 1989, 4
17 Ibid, 5
18 Ibid
19 Ibid, 79
22 Soh Hui Leng Davina, 78-79
25 Hargreaves, Andy. “Emotional Geographies of Teaching.” In *Teachers College Record*, 103, no. 6 (2001), 1060
26 Soh Hui Leng Davina, 101
30 Ibid
31 Ibid, 179
32 Moore, 179
33 Elliot Ziwira, para 11-13
34 James D. Berkley (Ed.), 178
35 Moore, 197
36 Berkley, 179
37 Ibid, 197
38 Ibid, 179
41 Howard G. Hendricks, 245
42 Ibid, 249
44 Moore, 202
45 Hendricks Howard, 83
46 Moore, 204
48 Moore, 200
49 Ibid, 203