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To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Community in a College Classroom
Date: Thursday, November 7, 2019 9:06:35 AM

Community in a College Classroom

by Joshua Rashon Streeter

Community is a word that gets thrown around. At the moment, it is a buzz word on college campuses. There is no single definition for the word “community” as it means something different to each person. And each of them might be right! Furthermore, the word is found in our professional context as a descriptor for the work we might do or be asked to participate in—professional learning communities, community engagement, or community service-learning, to name just a few. The multiplicity of the term and idea makes me wonder then, *what is community in a college classroom?*

Before embedding community principles in our classroom, we must interrogate how we build and define community in the first place. In chapter 2 of [Transforming Teaching and Learning with Active and Dramatic Approaches \(2014\)](#), Edmiston analyzes building of a classroom community. He offers a few key ideas: make core values visible to the whole group, create ensemble tasks to build a collaborative community, invest time and commitment, offer opportunities for leadership in the classroom, and engage in dialogic exchange through multiple modalities. He also reminds us that a community is evolving, responsive, and varied. The building of the community in a college class will never be done; it is something to constantly attend to.

Edmiston goes on to unpack the finer points of community building, aspects often overlooked or unnoticed. He argues that instructors should embrace “dissensus” (i.e., diversity of people’s actions and ideas rather than expecting consensus), which tests a group in a healthy and productive manner. Edmiston also considers community building along three dimensions: being generous for our community (“I am acting for us.”), caring for individuals (“I am acting for you.”), and including everyone (“we are acting for you.”) Being aware of decision making helps both students and instructors alike understand the tension between the individual and the group within the teaching/learning process. Each of these nuanced practices contributes to an individual's experience within the classroom, impacting the larger group’s understanding of the classroom climate and culture.

The notion of embedding community-based principles in a university classroom to influence culture and climate is an emerging practice. For example, in a [2010 study](#), researchers took six “neighborhood community” principles and embedded them into a university classroom: connection, participation, safety, support, belonging, and empowerment. They found that students had an increased sense of “community” when neighborhood principles were being used as intentional and pervasive practice within a university context. For example, students were encouraged to get to know classmates immediately around them (connection). They were then asked to engage throughout the semester as a group, serving as a “functional unit” (safety). Additionally, during the semester, students participated in several tasks where support came from their peers instead of the instructor. Finally, the instructor worked to get to know the students on a personal level (belonging) and provided opportunities for the class to ask questions, offer suggestions, or provide feedback that

drove instruction (empowerment).

While these neighborhood community practices are likely values that many instructors hold, students and instructors may each define community differently. In the article, "[Creating Community in the College Classroom: Best Practices for Increased Student Success](#)" (2016), Elliott, Gamino, and Jenkins found four ways that students understood community in a university classroom: shared space, openness/acceptance, common interests, and a sense of belonging. The idea of a shared space was examined as both a "location" and as an "action." Students found that returning to the same space provided a sense of belonging, but that the space could feel inclusive (or the very opposite, uninviting) based on behaviors and language. Students also examined when they felt a sense of community in a college classroom. They identified that being able to share thoughts, opinions, questions, and concerns without being embarrassed contributed to a sense of openness and acceptance. Finally, while students admitted that they didn't always enjoy ensemble-based tasks or group work, they found it valuable in order to build, support, and sustain community in the classroom.

Community is essential to establish a positive and productive classroom climate and culture. While many [strategies can be used to build and sustain community](#), it is critical to first consider and define what community means to you and your students. Only by interrogating and unpacking the term first are we able to discover the beliefs and values that underpin or shape our pedagogies and practices.

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