

Strategies for Creating Sense of Community in Classrooms

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Introduction and Need for Strategy

Learner-centered teaching requires students be viewed as participants in learning, not recipients of learning (Helgevold, 2016; Smith, 2001). Participation in learning is elevated when learners hold a sense of community within the educational space (Burden, 2025; Nieto & Valery, 2006; Watkins, 2005). Sense of community occurs when all learners feel the classroom environment is mutually respectful, open to divergent perspectives, and values the intersecting identities of all (Eden et al., 2024; Nieto & Valery, 2006). Given the salience of community in learner-centered teaching, this abstract identifies methods four educators use to foster sense of community within the educational spaces they facilitate.

Connection to Literature

Existing literature highlights sense of community within postsecondary classrooms is critical to student success, especially first-generation college students seeking comfort and acceptance on college campuses (Nieto & Valery, 2006). Scholarship exploring strategies instructors use to foster community illuminate instructors create physical spaces that support collaboration (Calvo & Sclater, 2021; Nieto & Valery, 2006); utilize learning experiences (e.g., reflective writing, individual and group activities) which foster openness and respect (Nieto & Valery, 2006; Yaacob et al., 2021); and implement pedagogical moves (e.g., holding back, passing on, and non-valuing) which support learner openness (Helgevold, 2016).

Cases Exploring How Creating Community Works

Four educators were asked to describe the educational environments they facilitate (description), the characteristics of community they seek to develop within that environment (goal), and approaches they use to cultivate the desired community environment (strategies).

Case 1 Description: A postsecondary course that introduces students to practical applications on how to teach and engage college students.

Goal: I seek a balance between individual autonomy where students choose examples of how they wish to apply pedagogical content and skills and creating a sense of community by engaging learners in small group discussions where they can learn from peers.

Strategies: Three practices include: (a) engaging students in playing card games to explore how students learn differently, (b) engaging students in rotating stations and having them share what they learned with the whole class using jigsaw as a pedagogy, and (c) organize teams using a mixing strategy called lined up, which quickly creates heterogeneous teams based on levels of knowledge and experience of a specific topic.

Case 2 Description: A postsecondary class which covers foundational concepts related to self-leadership, team leadership, and leadership through communications.

Goal: Sustained, small group, in class interactions wherein learners feel comfortable. These small groups operate as “micro communities” where students feel authentic, open, and supported.

Strategies: Three practices are: (a) form micro communities early and keep them consistent throughout the semester, (b) initiate connections within micro communities through simple collaborative competitions, and (c) progressively increase challenge and candor within the micro communities.

Case 3 Description: A postsecondary class which equips emerging leaders with fundamental procedural skills to support organizational success.

Goal: A community rooted in shared ownership, mutual respect and courtesy, and psychological safety. I want students to feel empowered to engage fully, even if it means risking failure.

Strategies: Before the first class, I open communication via email with students to set a tone of collaboration and transparency. During the first week, we co-create class norms, and I share my intentions for the course. We also connect the course content to the broader challenges of leading diverse groups, using parliamentary procedure as a lens. Additionally, the structure of the course reinforces shared leadership.

Case 4 Description: A nonformal nature camp for learners age 5-7. Each week includes a new subject relating to a different aspect of nature (birds, reptiles, ecosystems, etc.).

Goal: The community has two distinct characteristics – embracing failure or current shortcomings and a welcoming atmosphere that cultivates feelings of belonging.

Strategies: Modeling is important in striving toward these community characteristics. Overcoming failure or shortcomings is often met with encouraging students to feel their disappointment before moving forward. Vulnerability on my behalf is often a component as I share my own experiences of learning from mistakes. I make it a priority to value student differences in the way they approach problems and understand the world around themselves.

The four cases highlight the utilization of diverse strategies organizable into (a) adapting the physical environment, (b) innovative learning experiences, and (c) diverse pedagogical moves. Thus, the cases support and extend existing literature on strategies for building community (Helgevold, 2016; Nieto & Valery, 2006).

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The individuals who shared their strategies plan to continue implementing these strategies and adopting new strategies to foster community within the educational spaces they facilitate. During the proposed workshop, the four individuals will share their description, goal, and strategies. Then, all participants will engage in small-group discussions in which they will share a description of a learning environment they facilitate, the goal community environment sought within that environment, and strategies they use to cultivate that environment. Small groups will share summaries from their discussions to introduce all participants to a broad range of strategies used to cultivate community within diverse educational spaces. In this way, the workshop will result in all participants exploring new strategies for fostering learner-centered teaching through community building.

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