

**Community Time: A Learner-Centered Strategy for Building Belonging and Agency in
Graduate Agricultural Education**

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Introduction & Need for Strategy

Graduate-level education often emphasizes content mastery and individual academic achievement, yet meaningful learning depends on students' ability to engage with, learn from, and contribute to one another (DePauw & Gibson, 2022; Lovett et al., 2023). While learner-centered teaching encourages student agency, many courses struggle to create the sense of community, trust, and shared ownership necessary for students to fully participate in the learning process. Without intentional opportunities to build relationships and establish belonging, participation can become transactional, limiting dialogue, intellectual risk-taking, and collaborative knowledge construction (Lovett et al., 2023; McDowell, 2024). As institutions seek learner-centered approaches that foster engagement across increasingly diverse learning environments, there is a need for instructional strategies that intentionally cultivate community and agency. *Community Time* was inspired by Daniel Pink's (2011) motivation framework, which argues that sustained engagement in complex cognitive work is driven by autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Embedded within EDCE 530: Teaching and Learning in Agricultural Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University, the practice creates a recurring cycle of community building, self-directed exploration, peer-led dialogue, collective reflection, and shared decision-making. Students become active contributors to both their own learning and the learning of their peers. The result is a scalable, learner-centered strategy that strengthens a sense of belonging, promotes meaningful engagement, and fosters student agency in graduate-level learning environments.

Connection to Literature

Community Time is grounded in literature emphasizing the importance of belonging, safety, and agency in the learning process. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs suggests that individuals are unlikely to fully engage in higher-order learning when fundamental needs for belonging and connection remain unmet. Consequently, *Community Time* begins with intentional community-building processes designed to establish shared norms, trust, and a sense of collective purpose before emphasizing course content. This emphasis on connection aligns with research on psychological safety, which suggests that learners are more willing to ask questions, share ideas, challenge assumptions, and take intellectual risks when they perceive their learning environment as supportive and inclusive (Edmondson, 1999). Once this foundation is established, *Community Time* draws upon Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1999), positioning learning as a social process in which knowledge is constructed through participation, dialogue, and shared experience. *Community Time* creates conditions that support both individual motivation and collective learning.

How it Works & Implementation of Strategy

Community Time begins with an intentional focus on forming and norming the learning community. During the first class session, students collaboratively establish shared values, expectations, and norms for engagement while exploring the characteristics of effective educational programs and educators. This process creates a foundation of trust, inclusion,

intellectual risk-taking, and shared purpose that supports student-led learning throughout the semester. Each week thereafter, students spend 30 minutes outside of class engaging with self-selected media related to teaching and learning, choosing resources, such as books, articles, or videos, that align with their interests, questions, or professional goals. Before class, students complete a structured online 3-2-1 discussion in which they generate teaching-focused questions, identify practical insights from the media, connect their learning to course content, and respond to peers' posts. At the beginning of each in-person class session, students are assigned to new small groups and engage in 30 minutes of uninterrupted *Community Time*, where they discuss their media engagement, build on ideas surfaced through peer interactions, and connect emerging perspectives to course concepts. The instructor serves primarily as a facilitator, providing limited prompts while allowing students to direct the conversation, challenge one another's thinking, and co-construct understanding. Students document key takeaways and questions in learning journals before groups share insights with the full class, extending learning beyond individual discussions and reinforcing collective inquiry. Each *Community Time* concludes with a community needs process, in which students identify questions, clarifications, concerns, or suggestions related to course content, assignments, or classroom culture. This creates an ongoing feedback loop that positions students as co-creators of the learning experience. This cycle of community building, independent exploration, peer interaction, and reflection is repeated throughout the semester, with students also recommending formal revisions to the *Community Time* process at multiple points in the course to strengthen learner agency, ownership, and engagement.

Results to Date/Implications/Impact

Community Time has been an educational strategy incorporated into EDCE 530 in all five annual offerings since 2022. Eighty-seven graduate students representing 20 nationalities from 16 disciplines have actively engaged in *Community Time*. One student in the 2026 cohort reflected, "I valued having dedicated time with my classmates to ask questions, adapt routines, and advocate for what we needed to be successful in working with one another and with the instructor." Another student from the 2025 cohort shared, "I love seeing what my peers share in *Community Time* online and then being able to discuss their *Community Time* post in person. It really streamlines and connects class content with what we engage with outside of class time."

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future plans include maintaining student voice and choice in implementing *Community Time* through structured checkpoints throughout the semester, with ongoing revisions informed by student feedback. Resources most frequently utilized by students will be archived to develop a centralized resource guide for future cohorts. Instructors should avoid shortchanging the explanation of why *Community Time* matters; dedicating time during the first class session to establish class norms and build community is essential for student engagement. Finally, a summative application will be explored to challenge students to synthesize their *Community Time* experiences and connect them to their broader scholarship of teaching and learning beyond the course.

2References

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