

A Quick Explanation

HOW TO CREATE A LEARNING COMMUNITY

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How to Create A Learning Community

A learning community is a place where teachers and students *want to be* and where teachers and students *have positive feelings* about what they are doing.

At the conclusion of a recent school staff development program, a teacher wrote the following comments on the evaluation form:

What I liked most: *This program makes us look at ourselves as well as the children whom we touch each day.*

What I liked least: *I didn't like what I saw in me.*

This teacher (1) acknowledged the use of *negative* interactions with students, and (2) the teacher reflected and self-evaluated. She had discovered two of the three overriding practices in creating and maintaining a community of learners. The three practices are the continual use of *positivity, choice, and reflection*.

Practices

Positivity is a more constructive teacher than negativity. Each of the following two statements means exactly the same, but notice the difference in the emotional effect.

“Sure you can go to the activity center as soon as your assignment is completed.”

“No, you can't go to the activity center until your assignment is completed.”

Negative comments engender negative attitudes. Positive feelings engender positive attitudes. Positive attitudes are critical for academic learning.

Choice empowers. When we think of empowerment, we normally think of obtaining power. But there is a paradox: *The more power a person gives away, the more effective the person becomes*. Teachers truly become effective when their students are successful. Success requires effort, and effort is enhanced by ownership. The key strategy to student ownership is to offer choices. Giving students options in areas of instructional strategies and homework assignments empowers them and makes them citizens of their community—in contrast to being merely visitors or tourists. In addition, an empowerment of choice strategy is particularly effective when dealing with classroom disruptions. This approach allows the teacher to use authority without being punitive

Reflection and self-evaluation are necessary for continual improvement. Teachers become more effective when they begin assessing their *interactive* instructional approaches—where students are consistently involved and active in contrast to being passive and inactive. For example, instead of asking a question *to one student* (where the other students may or may not be engaged), the teacher can involve *the entire class* by having each student discuss the question with a learning partner. Increasing participation enhances learning. This is born out by what we know regarding left-right brain hemispheres, multiple intelligences, learning modalities, the connection between emotions and learning, and personality styles.

Students also should be using reflection and self-evaluation strategies regularly. Effective learning consists of anticipation, participation, and reflection. While we know that anticipation is a motivating key to learning, and participation makes a student an active learner, the third part—which is often overlooked—is long-term memory reinforcement. Before elementary students leave for the day or middle or high school students leave a class, teachers should lead students to reflect, e.g., “What did I learn today?” and “What do I need to work on tomorrow?” Reflection is a much-neglected, powerful learning strategy.

Establishing a Noncoercive Environment

Peter Drucker, perhaps the best known of American management gurus, said that people fail because of what they will not give up—that we cling to what has always worked clearly after it has stopped working. This is important to keep in mind because, although we think we know the situation, we don't realize or we deny that the situation has changed. Young people today come to school with a different orientation than did past generations. Traditional approaches are no longer successful enough with far too many young people. We need look no further than the influence of technology, the mass media, and promotion of young people's rights.

A parent related the following to me after a discussion of how society and youth have changed in recent generations:

The other day, my teenage daughter was eating in a rather slovenly manner, and I *lightly* tapped her on the wrist, saying, "Don't eat that way."

My daughter replied, "Don't abuse me."

The mother had grown up in the 1960s and volunteered the point that her generation tested authority but most were really afraid to step out of bounds. She related that her daughter was a good child and added, "*But the kids today not only disrespect authority, they have no fear of it.*"

When students are not afraid, punishment loses its efficacy. Yet, we often resort to punishment as a strategy for motivation. For example, students who are assigned detention and who fail to show are punished with more detention. But in my questioning about the use of detention in hundreds of workshops around the country, teachers rarely suggest detention is effective in changing behavior. The reason it is ineffective is that detention is punishment—a negative, coercive approach. Punishment is based on the belief that it is necessary to cause suffering to teach—to hurt in order to instruct. The fact of the matter, however, is that people learn better when they feel better, not when they feel worse. This is important to keep in mind when dealing with classroom disruptions. Education is being referred to as the "profession that eats its young" because fifty per cent of those entering the profession drop out within five years. A main reason for this is that we have clung to punishment, or the threat of it, as a strategy for motivating students to behave appropriately. If punishment were effective in reducing inappropriate behavior, then discipline problems in schools would be a footnote in history. The irony of punishment is that the more you use it by trying to control others' behaviors, the less real influence you have over them. This is because coercion breeds resentment. In addition, if students behave because they are forced to behave, the teacher has not really succeeded. Students should behave because they *want* to—not because they *have* to in order to avoid punishment.

In his book, *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*, William Glasser speaks against coercion. He refers to coercion as "external control psychology." This psychology is based on the idea that one person can change another person. Think of any person with whom you have had a long association—spouse, child, parent, fellow worker—and reflect upon whether *you* changed that person. And if the person did change, reflect upon whether *you* did the changing or if the person changed him/herself.

People are not changed by other people. People can be coerced into temporary compliance, but internal motivation—where people *want* to change—is more lasting and effective. Coercion, as in punishment, is not a lasting change agent. Once the punishment is over, the student feels free and clear. The way to influence people toward internal rather than external motivation is through positive, noncoercive interaction.

Relationships

Three categories of interactions or relationships help foster community: *teacher/class*, *student/student*, and *teacher/student*.

We start with interaction between *the teacher and the class as a whole*. The Association of California School Administrators reported seven characteristics associated with this topic when it discussed student discipline problems. Of the seven characteristics associated with discipline, four were associated with rules or their effects. They were (1) rules were unclear or perceived as unfairly or inconsistently enforced, (2) students didn't believe in rules, (3) teachers and administrators didn't know what the rules were or disagreed on the proper responses to student misconduct, and (4) teachers tended to have punitive attitudes.

Although rules are necessary in games, they are counterproductive in relationships. Very often, what a teacher refers to as a rule is really a *procedure*. For example, students are taught at young ages to raise their hands before speaking in class. The same rule appears year after year in many classrooms—even in many middle school classrooms. Haven't students already learned this "so-called" rule? Reteaching a procedure is more effective than enforcing a rule. Rulemaking, by its very nature, breeds enforcement and results in a teacher's moving from *the role of a coach to the role of a cop*. This often results in some type of psychological pain, anger, or resentment to both teacher and student. Teachers would be better served by referring to rules that are *not* procedures as *standards*. Irresponsible social behavior and quality of work are two categories that are better served by standards than by rules. The term *standard* connotes a positive orientation. When a standard is not met, a helping mentality is engendered, rather than a punishing mentality.

A second area of interactions concerns *students with each other*. Students need to spend some time interacting with each other in order to establish a sense of belonging. The National Association of Secondary Principals reported, "Student anonymity must be banished because too many youngsters are alienated from the learning process." As much as we want to have learning to be the major attraction for students to attend school, during the adolescent years we find that relationships are the major motivational factor. Kids need kids. When a student lacks a sense of belonging, when the student feels anonymous or isolated, a major motivation for school attendance is diminished. Belonging is a basic human need, and without the satisfaction of this need—especially for young people—little else matters to many of them, including learning. To *reduce anonymity*, engage students in activities where they can relate and get to know each other.

The third area of interaction is the relationship between *the teacher and the student*. Spending a few minutes each day in a *tutoring* role at a student's desk establishes a bond between the teacher and student. Especially at the middle and high school levels, too many teachers deprive themselves of working with individual students, viz., spending quiet time in a personal relationship with them. Every teacher can afford investing a few minutes with individual students on a daily basis. In a couple of weeks the teacher will have had the opportunity to personally observe and communicate with every student. A few moments at eye-level with a student sends the message that the teacher cares and believes the student is capable, responsible, and valuable. Encouragement is the engine that drives motivation. Time and time again, one hears that the most powerful factor in student effort is that "The teacher believed in me." Tutoring affords the perfect opportunity for this type of communication.

Strategies

In maintaining a learning community, three strategies are used: *classroom meetings*, *solving circles*, and *working collaboratively*.

Classroom meetings held regularly at the elementary level are an excellent way to foster impulse control and empathy. At the middle and high school levels, having such meetings is a wonderful way for teachers not only to obtain instructional feedback but also for solving classroom concerns.

Solving circles is a simple strategy that easily resolves conflicts when they arise between two students. Two interlocking circles are drawn. The first circle represents student A; the second circle represents student B. The overlapping area represents the common goal, most oftentimes that of getting along. In a disagreement, the *usual* approach is for each person to tell the other person what that person needs to do or stop doing. That is, how the *other* person needs to change. But with the realization that no one can change another person—that a person can only change him/herself—student A describes what he himself will do differently to reach the common goal. Student B does the same. By discussing *one's own behavior*, instead of the other person's behavior, problems are solved simply and easily by the two parties involved.

Collaboration is the third strategy. One needs look no further than the sports section of any newspaper to see how pervasive competition is in our culture. As a problem-solving approach, however, competition has given way to compromise—where we are willing to give in order to get. But now even compromise has given way to a better approach. We should follow the lead of W. Edwards Deming, the teacher who brought quality to the workplace. The key is collaboration and teamwork. Applying Deming's approach to the classroom, teachers' workloads can be reduced while simultaneously increasing the quality of student performance. For example, one simple approach is using "three before me." Before the teacher corrects any paper, it has been seen by at least three other students or by one other student three times. For example, if the assignment is an essay, each student first writes a draft that is exchanged with another student. Each student gives feedback to the other. A second draft is then written and exchanged with the same or another student. Discussion ensues, followed by writing a third draft. After more discussion, the final copy is completed. Using this process, students improve both listening and expression skills—oral as well as written. The result is improved quality work, more involvement on the part of students, increased motivation because of learner-generated feedback, and reduced teacher load. Such collaboration builds community.

In summary, to create a learning community, a noncoercive environment must be established so that students will intrinsically *want* to learn and will *want* to behave appropriately. The atmosphere must be positive, ownership is fostered through the empowerment of choice, and both teachers and students reflect and self-evaluate. Relationships are built between the teacher and the class as a whole, between students among themselves, and between the teacher and each student. Strategies are used that make discussion of problems easy, resolving conflicts simple, and which encourage collaboration. If schools are meant to be learning communities, what better means of implementation than to have classrooms become communities of learners.

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