

A Checklist for Building Community in the College Classroom

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Instructors have temporary experiences with groups of students each semester. Even so, these brief moments have the power to change lives. As professors, we decide the impact of our semester-long relationships. We decide to what degree we will work towards student engagement and transformation within our courses. If you would like to create a community of engaged learners within your classroom, it takes more than regurgitating the most compelling content, and it goes beyond collaborative pedagogical practices. The secret to inspiring and transforming students rests in the power of building a community of learners. These steps will get you started:

1. **Make connections with students**

Imagine a classroom without connections. The professor neither learns students' names nor engages with learners in meaningful ways. Instead passive and isolated students take notes as a professor dumps content into their laps. The students do not put in as much effort to understand the material simply because the instructor has not built a rapport with the class. However, the instructor who learns students' names (try portable name tents), asks

students about upcoming exams and events in their lives, and regularly checks in, where the instructor creates an environment in which students become intrinsically motivated to thrive.

2. Be enthusiastic and passionate about the content

The content is your passion. You have the power to captivate, intrigue, and engage your audience. Being prepared and including up-to-date revisions in your presentations show your learners how much your content means to you. For students to really benefit from your content, they need to analyze and synthesize it; they need to experience your content in meaningful ways. Critical thinking and discourse allows students to make sense of what they just learned. Create opportunities for collaboration so that students share in your enthusiasm and look forward to discovering what is next on the agenda.

3. Build trust

Trust building happens in small incremental moments. Being reliable, non-judgmental, and generous with your time and attention are actions that build trust. Students, like all people, also appreciate emotional honesty. Moments of vulnerability, perhaps when telling a story related to the coursework, builds trust.

4. Model empathy, kindness, and compassion

Students will initially sense what you will and won't tolerate in the classroom from your response to certain situations. For example, consider a situation from the student's perspective and then decide how to resolve it based upon everyone's needs, not just your own. Small acts of kindness build trust and community. If you want a compassionate community, then model compassion. Most importantly, be your authentic self.

5. Empower students through their strengths

As you get to know your students, identifying and sharing their strengths can be an empowering experience. Using a strengths inventory to determine students' talents and gifts allows learners to feel confident as they begin the semester, and it helps you to group students with complementary strengths. For example, you may create a group based on these individual strengths: determination, teamwork, curiosity, and humor. During the semester, notice how combining diverse strengths in groups supports student achievement.

6. Consider how students best learn

I don't know how every student prefers to learn, and you won't either unless you ask. With 15 weeks or less of a semester, we do not have the luxury of slowly getting to know how students best learn. Instead during week one, give students a learning inventory and ask them about their study habits and their preferred ways of learning. Also, invite students to

reflect on an outstanding course they've previously taken and cite instances of professor and student behavior that led to positive outcomes. With a wide range of learning preferences, you have the opportunity to provide different ways of learning to your students. For example, give choices on readings and assessments, schedule conferences to check in with students, and use the data from the learning inventory to drive your instruction.

7. Expect a growth mindset

The idea of promoting a growth mindset in your classroom requires modeling. If we expect students to embrace challenges and accept feedback from their peers, then we must as well. It is challenging to create an environment of a growth mindset if the instructor does not have one. Consider explaining a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset to your students and ask them to choose one area of growth to develop throughout the semester (Dweck, 2008). Our impact should go beyond our course material. Challenging students to improve their mindset changes lives.

8. Welcome mistakes as part of the learning process

As adults we know that we cannot grow and become better without making mistakes. Mistakes are part of improving and succeeding. Students must know from the beginning that mistakes are viewed as powerful growth opportunities in your classroom. Create a grading policy that recognizes mistakes as part of the process. Grade for growth and progress. For example, recognize effort and overall advancement in the course as part of the class grade.

These strategies are not content-specific and can be used in all classrooms. Our job transcends the content. As we strengthen our connections with our students and reveal our authenticity, we will create communities of engaged learners capable of collaborating with their peers and able to meet high expectations.

Bio: Julie Sochacki, JD, is a clinical associate professor of English and director of the English Secondary Education Program at the University of Hartford. She is a former urban educator and has the Connecticut credentials as an English Languages Arts teacher, literacy specialist, and intermediate administrator. Julie is a life-long learner and has been experimenting with active learning in the classroom for 26 years. One of Julie's passions is resilience education; she is in her second season of her podcast, [The Resilient Teacher Project](#). Julie is also a 200-hour Kripalu Yoga teacher.

Reference:

Dweck, Carol S. (2008). *Mindset: the new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine Books.

