

Building Classroom Community

A strong classroom community—one characterized by a sense of collegiality and teamwork among students, and between students and faculty—might show up in vibrant class discussions (both face-to-face and online), deep engagement in peer review, or something as simple as calling classmates by name. When students feel a sense of belonging in their classes, they are often more motivated in their coursework; indeed, scholars have linked this sense of belonging to academic achievement and college retention. Furthermore, a cohesive classroom culture often allows students to raise and engage challenging academic issues, learn from one another, and take productive risks in their work.

Some ways to build classroom community:

Facilitating classroom community calls on the “soft skills” of pedagogy, although it is often most effective when it joins social activity with academic learning.

- Set the tone with the first class of the semester. Plan a thoughtful format for introductions—and space for students to engage conceptually with some aspect of the course, perhaps sharing interests, concerns, or questions about the syllabus on index cards.
- Learn students’ names (and how to pronounce them correctly), and hold them accountable for learning one another’s names, too. Seating charts, name placards, or ice-breaker activities can be helpful, particularly in large classes.
- Wherever possible, arrange the classroom to ensure students can see one another’s faces.
- Integrate low-stakes, informal **group work** into class time, perhaps building up toward **peer review** of their work in progress.
- Invite students to engage with course content by instituting regular reflective, **in-class writing** exercises, and ask students to briefly share responses in pairs.
- Celebrate course milestones such as the completion of major projects or exams, and share exemplary work with the whole class.

References

- Johns, Ann M. and Maureen Kelley Sipp, eds. *Diversity in College Classrooms: Practices for Today’s Campuses*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- Kay, D., J. Summers, and M. Svinicki. “Conceptualizations of classroom community in higher education: Insights from award winning professors.” *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research*, vol 5, no. 4, 2011, pp. 230-245.
- Morcum, V., MacCallum, J. “Getting personal about values: scaffolding student participation towards an inclusive classroom community.” *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, vol. 16, no. 12, 2012, pp. 1323-1334.

See also

Inclusive Pedagogy
Peer Review
Teaching with Small Groups