



May 2020

Community in the College Classroom- Onground or Online

The literature is clear. Building community in the college classroom is essential to student success. This is true not only for the “traditional” college student but also for first generation and minority/ underrepresented college students. By building community students are more likely to attend and remain enrolled in their classes. As well, college students who are in classes that have a shared sense of community are more likely to be highly satisfied which can lead to strong academic performance and persistence to graduation. This article explores how this shared sense of community can be gained in both the onground and online environment.

To develop a clearer understanding for how students and faculty create a shared sense of community in the classroom, a study was conducted involving 500 undergraduate students from 25 diverse colleges and universities in southern California. The findings from this student indicated there are essentially four themes that student respondents felt define community in the classroom (Elliot et al, 2016).

The first theme involved a *shared space*. The students who were interviewed noted that community happens when people come together on a regular basis, sharing the space and seeing the same individuals week after week. Shared space for onground courses is not difficult because classes are slated to meet at the same time in the same place each week and these students are able to engage in before, during, and after class discussions. Such physical opportunities are essentially unavailable online because such classes lack the usual demarcation found in the brick and board classroom, unless, of course the instructor intentionally builds “space” into their online classroom. To do so, faculty can build “water coolers” or “cafes” where the students can freely discuss current events and common interests through discussion boards without having to worry about assessment. Or faculty members can create social media pages unique to their classes where students can freely share their ideas or watch a virtual event followed by discussion (Wehler, 2018). Thinking outside the box to build online shared spaces takes imagination and maybe some research but it can be done.

Openness and acceptance was the second theme. One of the respondents in the study said that, “Community to me means accepting others as-is and being accepted in return” (pp. 33). Many professors ask questions but only expect their students to respond with the professor’s answer not allowing for other ideas or opinions. Such behavior doesn’t lead to openness and acceptance and can drain a class of community. So even though you expect that classroom interactions happen as a result of proximity, it is not guaranteed in the onground class so it must be built into both the onground and online course. Discussions, are just that. A few ways to build better discussion are to vary the kinds of questions you ask. Try to use inclusive, goal oriented questions. Begin and end each class/module with discussion asking students to reflect on prior knowledge of a subject and then later what was learned during class/module. And remember, if you expect students to engage in discussions, you should start on day one asking questions and seeking answers.

The third theme involved, *common interests*. One of the respondents in the study commented that, “Community is a complicated thing to explain, but when you see the world similarly as someone else... you know you’ve found it” (pp. 34). To connect students’ common interests can involve reminding them of the fact that they are a part of a larger community...in our case, SVSU. You can do this by finding out what interests the students’ about their campus. Engage them in conversations regarding athletics, writing, varying co-curricular activities. Try to discover which beliefs are shared by the class or how they view life...what their outlook is. Both of these approaches can be accomplished both in an on ground and an online course.

The fourth and final theme is *sense of belonging*. Study participants, “specifically referred to the need to “know their place,” (white female) “know [they] belong,” (Asian male), and “know that they’re welcome to stay” (white male). One participant likened the notion of having a sense of belonging to the theme song of “Cheers.” To this respondent, “Community is a place where everyone knows [your] name, where you’re greeted by name and invited to relax and be yourself” (pp. 35). For faculty, accomplishing this sense of belonging can be accomplished through teamwork and group work. Although many of the students noted that they hate/avoid group work, they also noted that oftentimes, as a result of group work, groups gel and valued friendships can develop.

As indicated above, creating a shared community in the classroom is important for many reasons. If you work toward using these themes as a way to build community in either your online or onground course, your students will know that they are valued and that is a huge contributor to student success. However, there is also something to be said for how a shared sense of community can create ripples in society. As our students leave your classroom and our University and move into the greater society what they might remember most is the community they experienced.

References:

Elliot, D., Garmino, M., Jenkins, J. (2016, June). Creating Community in the College Classroom: Best Practices for Increased Student Success. *International Journal of Education and Social Science* 3 (2).

Wehler, M. (2018, July 11). Five Ways to build Community in Online Classrooms. *Faculty Focus*.
<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/five-ways-to-build-community-in-online->

Self-Care in the Age of COVID-19

Self-care can be defined as an intentional process of engagement in ways that will promote physical and mental health and enhance one’s well-being. It is important to remember that as you care for your family and your students, you also need to take care of yourself. Self-care helps one deal with stressors that can’t be controlled. So, be sure that you are getting enough physical exercise as the physical connects to the mental. Continue to maintain and build your social relationships but do so at a distance. Activate your brain by engaging in challenging mental activities. Make sleep a part of your self-care routine. Take care of yourself by getting organized...it isn’t as though we don’t have time these days! Take a self-care break by getting outside and enjoying the sunshine. Eat right and drink a lot of water. Good nutrition and fluids help your brain functions allowing you to again, deal with stressors.

There is no one size fits all self-care guide. But by being mindful of your activities you will find that you will be more relaxed and able to handle whatever stresses present.

Food for Thought

In a recent blog, a faculty member from University of Buffalo stated that, *“The connections we build are more robust than the subject matter we teach or the flexibility we create in our courses. They are essential for students personal and professional growth and even more critical in these challenging times. Teaching is more than knowledge. Now more than ever it takes heart, bravery, and compassion.”* It is our belief that SVSU’s adjunct faculty make those connections and always do so out of heart, bravery and compassion.

Jessica Kruger in *scholarlyteacher.com*