

Building Community in the Classroom

Although no teacher can create friendships among students, every educator can create conditions in the classroom that will give students opportunities to strengthen social relationships, learn about and from each other, and get and give support. The hope is, of course, that these opportunities will eventually lead to the development of friendships.

Developing and sustaining a school community requires that educators use strategies and practices that purposefully encourage and teach sharing, learning, interdependence, and respect. For example, teachers might encourage community through cooperative learning experiences (Frank, 2004), conflict resolution opportunities, games (Glover & Anderson, 2003), class meetings, service learning, social-justice education, cross-age and same-age tutoring and mentoring, and school and classroom celebrations (Houston, Blankstein, & Cole, 2008; Shapon-Shevin, 2007).

Teachers also can cultivate community by working for whole-school change. By lobbying for smaller classes, challenging competitive school structures, and developing ways to connect students across classrooms, for example, teachers can not only strengthen the classroom community but also help the school as a whole become more responsive to a wider range of learners. A sense of community also can be developed and sustained through curriculum and the use of community-building activities.

Community Through Curriculum

One of the most effective ways to create a classroom community is to offer curriculum and instruction that is responsive and respectful. (Several examples are shown in Table 6.1.) Many teachers have effectively built community by framing lessons around issues of democracy and social justice, for example. When Erin Gruwell, a high school English teacher in a struggling urban community, confiscated a racist drawing from one of her students, she decided to reshape her curriculum to respond to the incident:



I went ballistic. "This is the type of propaganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust," I yelled. When a student timidly asked me, "What's the Holocaust?" I was shocked.

I asked, "How many of you have heard of the Holocaust?" Not a single person raised his hand. Then I asked, "How many of you have been shot at?" Nearly every hand went up.

I immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum. (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999, pp. 2–3)

Gruwell built her entire curriculum around students, their experiences, their concerns, and their ideas. She supported their interrogation and critique of institutions and authorities in their communities. Gruwell's students thrived on the discourse of social justice that she cultivated in her classroom. Students in her classroom became involved in community service and political action as Gruwell helped them connect their own experiences to history. They raised money to bring Miep Gies, a friend of Anne Frank's, to visit their school; they held a peace demonstration; they co-taught a college class on diversity; they visited the Holocaust

Table 6.1. Ways to build community through curriculum

<p>Ask students what they want to study, and integrate their ideas into standards-based lessons.</p> <p>Have different students serve as experts in different units; be sure to find opportunities for every learner to serve in this role.</p> <p>Integrate service learning projects into different subject areas.</p> <p>Assign joint projects that capitalize on individual student strengths.</p> <p>Have students write about themselves and share their writing formally or informally across the year.</p> <p>Have the class create a play, a piece of music, or a piece of art together.</p> <p>Have students learn about individual and group differences through the curriculum itself; talk about both Thomas Edison's and Temple Grandin's learning differences when you study inventions, for instance.</p>	
---	---

Museum in Washington, D.C.; they conducted a candlelight vigil honoring friends and family lost to violence; they mentored local elementary students; and they collectively wrote a book about their experiences.

In another school, Yolanda, a student with autism, was frightened of a mural hanging in the gymnasium. The mural—a picture of children walking in the woods that included the image of a snake coiled on the ground—scared Yolanda because she was afraid of reptiles. The mural had been painted years ago and the principal had often thought of replacing it because at least one student each year had expressed the same fear. Furthermore, the principal and teachers had, at different times, expressed irritation because all of the children depicted in the mural were Caucasian. They did not feel it represented the student body, which was comprised of many different racial and ethnic groups.

When Yolanda came into the school, the principal volunteered to have the custodian paint over the mural. Yolanda's art teacher had a better idea, however; students in the class were charged with creating a new mural that would be both appealing to the students and representative of the multicultural population of the school. Students worked with an art teacher to learn about mural painting. They studied colors, designs, and styles of murals. Yolanda was on the committee to choose a new design, and although she could not speak, her peers paged through books to find images that interested her. Students decided on a beach scene with images of children from racially and ethnically diverse groups. The mural also included a picture of a mermaid because *The Little Mermaid* was Yolanda's favorite book.

Painting the gymnasium inspired further study of murals—the students explored content ranging from the murals painted during Roosevelt's New Deal to the connections between mural painting and social revolution in Mexico—but the painting also brought students together as a community. The art gave students a voice and a forum for expressing themselves and the art teacher found that painting the mural not only helped students to learn more about Yolanda but also brought the whole class together as a group. For example, Armando, a student who was often teased for being quiet, became a leader for the first time as soon as his classmates saw his artistic talents.

Community-Building Activities

Another way to bring learners together is to regularly incorporate community-building exercises. Not only will students with autism need such opportunities to improve social skills and learn in nonthreatening ways but teachers will often have new students in the class who want the chance to get to know classmates. Students who already know each other will benefit from the opportunity to connect with classmates in more meaningful ways.

A variety of community-building exercises such as those listed here can be implemented to enhance relationships in the classroom, encourage friendships, and foster student-to-student learning opportunities. Although all of these activities can be used at the beginning of the year

to help students become familiar with one another, they should not be abandoned thereafter. Community building and team building are not achieved by having students engage in a few games or icebreakers. True team building takes time and involves meaningful and continuous interaction over the course of the school year (and, it is hoped, over the course of the school career). Five community-building structures that K–12 teachers can use in diverse classrooms are *The Story of My Life*, *Compliment Chair*, *Enrolling Questions*, *A Truth or a Lie?*, and *Paper Bag Interviews*.

The Story of My Life

Although many celebrated figures have the unique (and probably transforming) opportunity to share their biography, ordinary folk typically do not have the chance to tell their story. *The Story of My Life* provides this opportunity and allows students to develop new connections with classmates.

One elementary school teacher used this structure as a getting-to-know-you exercise during a year when she was welcoming Beth, a student with multiple disabilities, into her classroom. When Beth's mother asked if she should come and explain her child's abilities, history, and special needs to the rest of the children, the teacher decided it would be nice for all students to learn this type of information about one another. Students spent a day collecting information for their books; this collection process involved interviewing family and friends, gathering artifacts from home, and filling in a questionnaire designed as a brainstorming tool. Then, students worked alone (or in pairs, if assistance was needed) to construct the books. The social worker visited the classroom to help students tell their stories and discuss their differences.

The speech-language therapist also visited during this time to teach Beth some new sign language vocabulary related to the book; she also helped Beth answer all the necessary questions by using both the new signs and some pictures other students tore from magazines. Students spent two mornings sharing their work. Their books were then displayed in the school library.

To use this structure, have students work individually at first. Ask each of them to take a piece of flipchart paper and fold it into quarters so it is shaped like a book.

Then, on the front cover, have students write a title. To add a bit of whimsy, you might instruct them to choose the title of a popular novel, song, movie, or television program to use as their title or part of their title (e.g., *Wendy's "Believe It or Not" Life Story*).

On the inside of the front cover (page 2), have them create an index of their lives, including the following:

- Date and place of birth
- Family information (number of siblings, names of pets)
- Favorite hobbies, sports, and/or interests
- Favorite quotes, phrases, and/or jokes
- Most exciting moment
- Thing that makes them unique

On page 3, ask students to draw a perfect day. Finally, on the back cover, students should draw a picture of their future (family, where they are living, their job).

When all of the books are complete, have each student tell their story using the book as a visual aid. Depending on the size of the class, you may want to have students share stories in small groups. If possible, leave the books in a central location for the day or for the week so classmates can learn more about one another.

Consider how well students know each other when designing prompts for the book; students who have worked together for years likely will be familiar with basic information about one another (e.g., name, family structure) and may be more interested in gathering information that is slightly more in depth, such as their most embarrassing moment, their family traditions, or their travel experiences.

Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Sharing the story of your own life.* Show students a sample book featuring your own family, interests, and/or dreams. If you are working with younger children and you are using this structure to teach about diversity, individuality, or community, you may even want to invite other adults into the classroom to read their stories so that learners can see and hear about differences related to gender, sexual identity, family structure, and cultural and ethnic background.
- *Giving students a brainstorming worksheet before having them complete the activity.* Some learners will need time and some structure to generate answers to the prompts.
- *Using a wide range of materials to create books.* If there are learners in the classroom with fine motor problems, magazine pictures, rubber stamps, and clip-art images can be provided for students to use in the construction of their stories. Some students may even need to create their books using a writing software program such as Co:Writer or Write: OutLoud (both published by Don Johnston, Ltd.).

Compliment Chair

This easy-to-implement activity is appropriate for all ages and can be used throughout the year. First, arrange the classroom chairs in a semicircle with one chair at the front, facing the rest of the class. Then, one member of the group is selected to sit in the chair. As soon as this person is sitting, students take turns offering that individual compliments. You can give a set number of students time to share (e.g., five compliments per student), or you can have every student in the group offer a compliment before moving on to the next participant. When one student leaves the chair, have him or her pick another student to sit in the chair.

The Compliment Chair is ideal for use in classrooms where one or more students need to practice using augmentative or alternative communication. One reason some students with autism struggle socially is because they have limited ways to interact or connect with others. Giving students structured opportunities to communicate within the context of daily instruction, however, can help them hone skills such as staying on topic, expanding utterances, or spontaneously using a communication system.

Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Allowing the student with autism to go first*—especially if he or she has worked hard on developing a comment, saying it, or using augmentative and alternative communication to express it.
- *Splitting students into two or three groups.* This way, more students can sit in the chair at one time and students get more opportunities to ask and answer questions.
- *Teaching students what a compliment is.* Some students on the spectrum and certainly some not on the spectrum will need assistance deciding on appropriate compliments.
- *Playing an express version.* Pick one or two students at the end or beginning of the day or week and have five classmates give those individuals compliments. Compliments can be general or specific to classroom content. For instance, a middle school teacher might show a student's science fair project and ask the class to provide five compliments related to it (e.g., "A unique idea," "You went above and beyond the requirements").

Enrolling Questions

"Raise your hand if you have blue eyes." "Stand up if you have ever been in a car accident." "Sit down if you have ever cried during a TV commercial." These are examples of what Jerry Evanski (2004), author of *Classroom Activators*, calls Enrolling Questions.

Enrolling Questions serve at least two purposes: They bring the group together as personal information is disclosed and connections are realized and they get students moving and interacting and can, therefore, help to punctuate or "shake up" a potentially dry lesson. Keep in mind that beyond community building, Enrolling Questions can serve as a quick introduction to content, too; a teacher kicking off a lesson on the U.S. Congress might use these Enrolling Questions: "Raise two hands if you have visited Washington, D.C." "Walk to the back of the room if you would like to run for Congress."

Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Letting students create the prompts or questions and facilitate the game.* This is a less risky way to participate for some.
- *Adding in more movement.* This will be particularly helpful if students seem particularly restless (e.g., "Jump up and down if you like cheese pizza").
- *Show or write the questions as you speak.* Some students will be unable to process the commands quickly, especially in a noisy and somewhat chaotic environment.

A Truth or a Lie?

A Truth or a Lie? is fun and energizing and can be integrated into the classroom as a "get to know you" exercise or as a curriculum preview or review (Bennett, Rolheiser, & Stevahn, 1991). This may be an especially useful activity for some students with autism who need practice in understanding abstract concepts. For younger students, use of this activity will help them differentiate between the ideas of "truths" and "lies" and give them opportunities to engage in storytelling and verbal expression (Udvari-Solner & Kluth, 2008).

To begin, students simply write three statements about themselves. Two of them are truths, and one of them is a lie (see Figure 6.1 for an example of an A Truth or a Lie? worksheet that can be used for the game). Students then get into pairs or into small groups, read the statements aloud, and ask their classmates to guess which statements are lies and which are truths. Time is often provided for students to share short stories related to their truths and lies. Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Asking students to focus on specific topics*—possibly even topics related to your curriculum—for the exercise; for instance, students can be asked to share two truths and a lie related to Africa, dinosaurs, or woodwind instruments
- *Asking students to share one truth, one lie, and one wish*
- *Having students perform.* Instead of writing ideas down, have students act them out.

Paper Bag Interviews

Paper Bag Interviews (Gibbs, 1995) are a great way to facilitate interactions between students and provide them with opportunities to ask and answer questions. Instead of one or two students having a chance to speak during a lesson, Paper Bag Interviews give all students time to share. This activity can be used to teach younger students turn taking or reading simple sentences. Older students can learn actual listening skills or ways to ask clarifying or follow-up questions.

To engineer the interviews, the teacher writes a series of questions related to classroom topics and places them in lunch bags. Students are then arranged into small groups of three

A TRUTH OR A LIE?



- Write down three statements.
- Two should be “truths” (things that are true) and one should be a lie (something that is not true). Try to fool other people into thinking that your “truth” statements are lies (in other words, choose “truths” that might surprise other people). You might also try to fool people into thinking your lie is a “truth” by choosing something that sounds true or sounds like it could be true.
- Examples of the types of statements you can use include the following:

I am _____ . (e.g., I am a vegetarian.)

I like _____ . (e.g., I like mayonnaise sandwiches.)

I have _____ . (e.g., I have 19 white tank tops.)

I once _____ . (e.g., I once ran a half marathon.)

I believe _____ . (e.g., I believe the school year should be 11 months long.)

My mom or dad is _____ . (e.g., My mom is 6 feet tall.)

#1 _____

#2 _____

#3 _____

Figure 6.1. A Truth or Lie? worksheet.

to five and each group is given one bag. Learners then take turns drawing questions from the bag and answering them. At any point, a student may decide to pass on a question and draw a new one.

Paper Bag Interviews can be used regularly throughout the year. Teachers can either use this activity to give students opportunities to learn about one another or to comment on different topics of study in the classroom, or questions can give students a chance to do both. For example, the question "How are you most like Crazy Horse?" prompts students to disclose something about themselves while they consider information they have about this historical figure. Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Having students generate the questions for the bags*
- *Asking students to use different types of expression.* Have them use gestures, drawings, and facial expressions (e.g., "Draw how you think Jesse feels when Leslie falls into the water").
- *Putting questions in the bags that relate to student interests* (e.g., if a student in the group has just become an uncle, include a question about families; if a student is really interested in the Beatles, include a question about 1960s rock and roll).
- *Collaborating with the speech-language pathologist.* If a student receives help in this area, Paper Bag Interviews might be an ideal time for that professional to work in the classroom. He can help all students improve skills related to maintaining conversations and asking or answering questions.

Order Form

BROOKES PUBLISHING • P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285-0624

ABOUT YOU (write in your specialty and check one field that best applies)

Specialty

Birth to Five K-12 Clinical/Medical Personnel 4-year College/Grad. Comm. College/Vocational Association/Foundation Comm. Services

Name

Address

residential

commercial

City

State

ZIP

Country

E-mail

Yes! I want to receive e-mail about new titles and special offers. (Your e-mail address will not be shared with any other party.)

We auto-confirm all orders by mail; please provide an email address to receive confirmation of order and shipping.

Qty	Stock #	Title	Price
PAYMENT METHOD			Subtotal
<input type="radio"/> Check enclosed (payable to Brookes Publishing Co.)			6% sales tax, MD only
<input type="radio"/> Purchase Order attached (bill my institution) *Add 2% to product total for P.O. handling fee			5% business tax (GST), CAN only
<input type="radio"/> American Express (15 digits)			P.O. customers: 2% of subtotal
<input type="radio"/> Discover (16 digits)			Shipping (see chart below)
<input type="radio"/> MasterCard (16 digits)			Total (in U.S. dollars)
<input type="radio"/> Visa (13 or 16 digits)			

Credit card account number _____

Security code (3 or 4 digit code on back of card): _____

Expiration date __/__/__ Signature _____

Convenient ways to order:

CALL toll-free 1-800-638-3775 M-F, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. ET.; **FAX** 410-337-8539;

MAIL order form to: Brookes Publishing Co., P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285-0624:

ON-LINE www.brookespublishing.com

Money-back guarantee! Ordering with Brookes is risk-free. If you are not completely satisfied, you may return books and videotapes within 30 days for a full credit of the purchase price (unless otherwise indicated). Refunds will be issued for prepaid orders. Items must be returned in resalable condition. All prices in U.S.A. dollars. Policies and prices subject to change without notice. Prices may be higher outside the U.S.A.

STANDARD GROUND SHIPPING & HANDLING

(For other shipping options and rates, call 1-800-638-3775, in the U.S.A. and Canada, and 410-337-9580, worldwide.)

Continental U.S.A.** territories & protectorates†; AK, HI & PR‡

For subtotal of Add*

US\$55.00 and under \$6.49

US\$55.01 and over 12%

**Continental U.S.A. orders ship via UPS Ground Delivery.

†U.S.A. territories & protectorates orders ship via USPS.

‡AK, HI, and PR please add an additional US\$12.00. Orders ship via UPS Air.

Please call or email for expedited shipping options and rates.

Canada

For subtotal of Add*

US\$67.00 and under \$9.99

US\$67.01 and over 15%

Orders for Canada are consolidated for shipping twice each month.

For minimum shipping time, please place your orders by the 9th or 24th of each month.

*calculate percentage on subtotal