

Creating Community in the Writing-Intensive Online Class

As social beings, we learn from each other. We may learn what not to do, we may seek to emulate others because we admire them, or we may understand complicated concepts differently as a result of someone else explaining it to us in a way that makes more sense than the teacher's explanation had. ~Darby & Lang, p. 76

In their book *Small Teaching Online*, Flower Darby and James M. Lang directly address the importance of the interactions between the teacher and the student needed for a good learning environment. The online classroom needs to be a site of social interaction as students not only learn from the content and the teacher, but they also learn from each other (76). The writing-intensive classroom especially lends itself to relationship development, and taught online, the opportunity for communication assignments to contribute to community building is heightened.

The materials on this slide before you is drawn from a number of sources, including my own experiences, and though this is not an exhaustive listing of methods and activities that can create community in a writing-intensive online class, these are presented to help you begin brainstorming about your own classes. What triggers community development in your classes? Are there differences from class to class? What kind of flexibility is inherent in the class? How can you deliberately change or develop the class to be more intentional about building a community of learners around your content area, using writing as one of the tools in that building?

Crafting a Real Teacher Presence

Experts continually point to the teacher presence in the online class as a crucial part of community development. Lang and Darby, refer to this as “showing up!” Your students, remotely learning away from you, need to be able to understand or “read” your personality. They will learn better as they feel connected to you. You might begin by depositing in your learning management system (LMS) an opening video of you or a picture along with some writing that tells your hobbies, your research specialties, or any other thing you might be willing to share with students. If you are teaching a special topics, you might share with them your journey into a passion for that subject area.

Showing up might also mean actually engaging as a full participant in online discussion, either writing or verbally speaking with them in zoom breakout sessions or small group meetings. Some teachers post short videos at the top of modules to introduce the subject of the module. Writing announcements and reminders are important, especially for asynchronous classes. Your teacherly presence will motivate students to continue in the class in productive ways.

Your feedback on projects and small assignments is all important as it creates a dialogic environment for the students. Taking a moment to also respond to the whole class by summarizing the high points in their projects and the matters which need more attention as they learn can also be a way to connect with students. That encouragement for them as writers and

thinkers is valuable as is knowing that they are not alone in working to achieve the learning outcomes of the class. This feedback should be as prompt as you can make it. Students can begin to feel alone and that their work did not find an audience without feedback. Consider using check in appointments on the phone or on zoom to convey feedback occasionally to students as well. Your voice and face will make the feedback more meaningful and compelling.

During the semester, especially when a major project is introduced, hold a synchronous tutorial or a question and answer session so that students can get your ideas about the project and hear the ideas and questions of their peers. Have the students do an invention exercise in which they brainstorm ideas for their projects and share them with each other. In this exercise and in other settings where you are working synchronously with students, plan on writing with your students. Participate in the sharing part of the exercise, too. Students will see how valuable you perceive communication in the class to be because you are a full partner in those activities.

Developing Student Interactions in the Class

Equally important in creating a real community of writers and learners is developing activities and assignments that require collaboration in order to complete the assignment. If there is a group activity, make sure that they report back or have some other deliverable that demonstrates they have done the work of the group. Clear instructions and timelines are vital to the success of these events. Writing classes are especially fertile ground for establishing permanent writing response groups. Grouping students together around their chosen topic areas, or other means of sorting, can foster real dialogue and a community of writers, who over the course of a semester get to know each other well because of the multiple opportunities to share their developing projects.

Some instructors use the standard discussion board in the LMS to great effect, going beyond posting and responding via text. Posting a student-made video about content in the course and having students write or record their responses can make a discussion board environment more lively and interactive. If speeches and presentations are required in your class, this would be one method of encouraging interaction. Students audio-record or video-capture their speeches, and the class responds using the toolkit they have learned about good speechmaking in the class. The speaker then can use the feedback and do the speech over, improving it. Once again, the students feel they have a real audience which has knowledge to listen and respond to their work.

Early in the semester, the students might engage in creating an [encomium](#) or speech of praise. They interview each other, take notes, write a speech of praise and introduction, recommending the student to the class community, and record it. Such a compendium of speeches housed in the LMS or password protected website creates a catalog of the accomplishments of the class and a sense of well-being and welcome. Other speech-type projects require preparation and writing and also require students to engage with each other. Class debates either in synchronous time or in videos delivered to the LMS on class content build relationships as well. Pairing weaker students with stronger can mean mentoring and support for students who need it, as well as leadership opportunities for well-prepared students.

A teacher can also have students create content which then becomes useful in the class itself. In a “Writing in the Humanities” class, I decided to use Flannery O’Connor as a touchstone writer. We’d examine her growth as a writer and use some of the genres she wrote as models for our own writing. To save me from doing a great of non-interactive lecturing/video creation on O’Connor’s life and letters, we began the class with a conference. Every student was given a subject area from O’Connor’s life or her writing. Two advanced students were made moderators and editors. Once students had their projects completed, these could be mounted into the LMS or on the teacher’s website along with a video of the presentation (or done synchronously). The introductions, keynote, and conclusion were done by the editors as was the final assemblage into a single document of all the work. That work was then important as the class proceeded into the areas. The students became the experts who would lead the whole class into understanding a new subject area.

An Inclusive Pedagogy

Designing your class so that every person in the class feels safe, supported, and valued is an important part of building real and community. Early on, ask students about their learning needs if they are willing to share. I have a student who has been in several of my classes—he uses his tutor from high school, working online, because he trusts him. Though we have an excellent writing center, this student’s needs are met better by a tutor who understands his particular learning abilities. Teachers can make changes as needed to provide the needed learning methods to help individuals—and such changes might even help the whole class.

Thinking about how cultural differences can impact the classroom community is an important part of teacherly practice. Do your materials encourage development of cultural awareness? Do your assignments have the flexibility to allow students to express their difference in ways which would build awareness in the class as a whole? Teachers should monitor discussions and perhaps even work with the class to set ground rules of engagement. Open discussion of how to handle sensitive subjects and language, gaining full class agreement beforehand will stave off situations which might damage class harmony while still allowing disagreements and discussion.

Developing projects which allow students to share their own cultures can contribute greatly to a feeling of community. Some teachers have used story-circles (see [this resource](#) from Emory University, for example) as a way to introduce the cultural and family stories of each class member into the materials of the class. Others have had students share the stories of their names which works in much the same way. Another significant project which gives value to the individual experience and thus creates an inclusive environment is the reflection project. Each student writes the journey of their learning in the class, referring to projects and work which mattered to them, and also analyzes the impact of the community of learners around them. Parts of this can be shared in a final celebration either synchronously or in the LMS. Such activities are also useful for assessment purposes by the teacher.

Establishing a Pedagogy of Care

Another binding force for creating community in an online class is the teacher’s manifesting a real pedagogy of care and concern. Using reflection and peer-to-peer responding and feedback

activities which are guided and shaped by empathy help create a community of support and celebration for work well done. Speaking activities, too, can have celebratory responses built into them. Students often do not know what they do well. Many are hypercritical of themselves. Teachers and peer groups can be important in showing the good in the writing they read before offering suggestions for improvement. That turn toward the positive is part of the care that a teacher instills in the class. By making sure that successes and gains are celebrated, the class becomes a welcoming place for all students.

Teachers should take care to always be fair with students, encouraging all voices in the class a hearing. If some students are more vocal than others, teachers can develop discussion activities which require that each student says something. In commenting and scoring projects, teachers should ensure that all students are treated equitably. Giving a chance to review a poor performance is a sign that the instructor is trying to make sure that all students have a chance to succeed and emphasizes that the process of learning to write is more highly valued than the final product. The teacher should admit to the student or class when she has made an error. This humanizes the teacher and further builds trust and a community of care.

Private emails and other communication with student writers are an important part of building a caring community of learners. Check-ins, surveys, and beginning class with the question of how they are doing and listening to the answers, all help. Giving of your time as a teacher to tutor a student, run a writing conference, answer questions are all valuable ways to build community. In online environments, letting students know you log on 15 minutes early and are willing to stay logged on after class can go a long way to settling confusions, hearing their stories, and forwarding writing projects with very little effort.

Conclusion

Vygotsky is known for his thinking about “proximal development” or that zone of learning that “awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the [student] is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers.” Once these proximal zones are formed and relationships developed, he claims that the processes become “internalized.” The learning from that experience in community with others “become part of the [student’s] independent developmental achievement” (90). This means that the work you do as a teacher to build community, teacher-student relationships, and peer-to-peer relationships matter greatly to the transfer of learning in your course to other learning experiences and post graduate work.

The last slide contains a set of articles and book chapters which can serve as further resources for you in your work building a community of learners in your classroom.

Thanks so much for your attention to these materials. Let me know if I can be of help in anyway.