Community Building Position Paper

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Community building as a classroom strategy continues to play an integral part in creating a foundation for learning. A positive and safe learning environment must be created and cultivated before students are able to thrive. When properly implemented community building can give students a sense of belonging and improve self-esteem, fulfilling needs akin to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. However if community building is not utilized, a culture of gossip and toxic norms can arise and impede both learning and a students' social-emotional wellbeing. Left unaddressed, these issues can cause students to feel isolated or left out of the learning community, especially when learning online. To that point, community building online remains just as is important for teachers to help students feel a sense of community and provide clear communication guidelines. If teachers fail to implement community building strategies in their classroom, students will lose out on learning and personal growth.

The importance of community building in the classroom is rooted in Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. In Maslow's (1962) theory, that people are motivated to achieve certain needs and some needs take precedence over others, he suggested that teachers should create a supportive environment to show students that they are valued and respected within the community. Moreover, Maslow stressed the importance of the support, noting that students with a low self-esteem will not progress academically until their self-esteem is strengthened (Maslow, 1962). In the classroom, if proper community building strategies are implemented, students are more likely to be, "stronger, healthier, and would take their own lives into their hands to a greater extent" (Maslow, 1962). Conversely, if teachers are not aware of a students psychological needs, failing to address physiological, safety, and belonging needs, students will suffer and not attain

their potential. In building classroom community, it is the teachers role to understand these needs and how they can impact their students.

When these psychological needs are ignored or community building strategies are disregarded, it can be detrimental to student learning. According to Deal and Peterson (2009), when community building is not implemented a toxic culture can arise. Toxic communities are characterized by negativity, working independently all the time, and divisions across racial and ethnic lines (Deal & Peterson, 2009). These characteristics hinder a students' ability to learn in the classroom because while conflict in the classroom is a normal occurrence, in the toxic environment the conflict goes unaddressed. As toxic cultures arise, more and more students are likely to experience fear, holding them back from their potential (Aguilar, 2018). In addition to toxic cultures, improper community building could also lead to an unhealthy peace (Dubner, 2020). In an interview with Stephen Dubner on the *Freakonomics* Podcast, Priya Parker, a group conflict resolution facilitator, claimed that American meetings often take on an unspoken norm that meetings should be de-risked which can lead to unhealthy peace (Dubner, 2020). While not a classroom, this idea that conflict should not occur within a community is unrealistic. Parker takes this one step further claiming, "unhealthy peace can be as threatening to human connection as unhealthy conflict" (Dubner, 2020). It is important for educators to build an environment where concerns are voiced and addressed, rather than ignored or glossed over.

Building a sense of community remains an important strategy for both online and face-to-face learning environments, but it may be more difficult for teachers to cultivate classroom community online. With this in mind, Conrad (2002) points out that online teachers understand that safe and nurturing environments relate to a students' sense of comfort and tend to place community building high on their list of priorities. Furthermore, when building

community for online learning, McInnerney and Roberts (2004) assert that starting classes with a

"warm up" is an effective strategy to help students form a sense of community. For example,

when first starting a course, students are more likely to be excited and anxious about being in a

group with new members (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). To this effect, McInnerney and

Roberts (2004) stressed the importance of posting introduction questions and communicating in

chat rooms to build their virtual presence in the online community. When cultivating community

online, the most important goal is to ensure communication is maintained between students and

teachers. Without consistent communication, trust in the community can falter. According to

Aguilar (2011), online teachers should implement a consistent communication protocol like

Lewis' (2000) *W.R.I.T.E.* (warm, responsive, inquisitive, tentative, and empathetic). This system

reminds teachers to engage warmly with their students, respond to communications with students

as soon as possible, and put themselves in the shoes of their students (Lewis, 2000). A

consistency in communication can improve trust in the classroom community, satisfying

physiological and self-esteem needs defined by Maslow.

Community building in the classroom remains a critical strategy that if not implemented,

students are more likely to have issues with trust, isolation, and connectedness. Cultures of

gossip and toxic interaction can take over and prevent a teacher from establishing a safe and

positive learning space for students. However, when implemented properly students can reach

their potential, continuing to climb Masolow's hierarchy of needs, reaching heights they would

not have reached had it not been for the support of the learning environment.

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