

Intro to Establishing Community in the Classroom

By Martin Barrera, Board Member of the IBWEP

Often when attempting to establish community norms, guidelines or expectations for our students, our efforts may unintentionally come off as inauthentic displays of forcing community and ultimately mirror the reproduction of colonial tactics by imposing rules and having students police one another under the guise of collaboration.

Given that many of us are socialized to navigate a society where policing is prevalent, it is often difficult for students to envision a community with autonomy over their own norms and practices, especially in a historically oppressive system like schools.

However, as educators we have the opportunity to model authentic community building within our classrooms. Although it is in no way simple to facilitate a task like this, it is imperative to make efforts to do so in order to empower our students to envision a better tomorrow where honesty, communication, conflict mediation and collaboration is centered.

Here are some guidelines to cultivating community in the classroom setting, created by IBWEP Board Member Martin Barrera.

1. Before taking on this endeavor, it is imperative to keep in mind that each student is bringing their own lived experiences and community cultural wealth into the classroom. That means it is necessary to get to know each and everyone of them **BEFORE** beginning a community collaboration in order to anticipate how to best facilitate dialogue and encourage student participation in community. Examples of how to do this include:
 - Ice breaker activities that emphasize sharing who they are in a fun, low-risk environment
 - Survey questions that gauge student values and interests
 - Art projects that allow students to visually express who they are
 - Circle conversations where students engage in discussions on topics that will showcase individual ideals and perspectives
2. Next, transition from centering the individual student in activities to encouraging collaboration between students. Modifying previous efforts by adding a teamwork component is a great way to organically build on past experiences and begin the process of establishing a sense of community. For example:



- Team building ice breakers
 - Collaborative Art projects
3. Once you as an educator feel adequately informed of student personalities, behaviors and interpersonal relation skills, you are more prepared to navigate potential conflict within the classroom community. This is when it is encouraged to facilitate a circle conversation on rules and their purpose. By opening up the class to an honest dialogue on rules and enforcement, you allow students to express their perspectives and inform future discussions on community norms. I encourage you to display their comments on the board or on a spreadsheet to refer to later. Often a reflection on existing school rules or local, state, federal laws or even historical examples of oppressive laws targeting specific communities can help students reflect deeper on the intention of rules and the unfortunate downsides of imposed rules set by outsiders who disregard community culture.
 4. Once the foundational steps of building awareness of the self, the community and the role of rules are taken, it is then ideal to facilitate a community guidelines session that is modified to work best for your class. After investing time in building relationships, interpersonal collaboration and holding space for honest conversation on rules, students will feel more invested in the creation of community norms rather than parroting common rules or merely acquiescing to what we deem as best practices. At this point it is still encouraged to guide facilitation, but the goal should be to tap into student strengths in order to build genuine investment in the process. (For support on having a community guidelines session, see the IBWEP resource [Introduction to Building Community Practices](#))
 5. As the year progresses, it is key to continuously tap into the collective consciousness of the class through intentional activities related to content or simply taking time to reflect as a class periodically. It is crucial to spend time maintaining that community identity and practicing stepping back and letting students take up more space and have more autonomy over how things are discussed and dealt with in the classroom.

Oftentimes, efforts like this may start strong but may fizzle out for one reason or another. It is important to cultivate a spirit of honesty and integrity with students when this happens. Resisting oppressive systems aimed at disconnecting community members is hard work on top of all the other responsibilities on our plate. But we must remember that if we only talk about communities in resistance but never model it, our students will cling to the idea that these efforts are things of the past or the distant future, instead of options we have in the here and now. So we must do our best to carve out time to build our communities and practice holding space for conflict, vulnerability and empowerment so our students can feel inspired to do the same as they grow and progress in life.

