The Changing Role of the Teacher Using a Learning Community

Bryan Wetherwax

Affiliations:

Burton Glen Charter Academy-Social Studies Teacher

Michigan State University-Graduate Student

**Problem Statement**

Every school year, teachers have the goal in mind to include all students in each lesson. Over time, some teachers flourish and produce learning communities that enable every student to prosper, while other teachers provide unintended hindrances, making learning difficult for some students. Adding more difficulty for teachers, our classrooms are very diverse, presenting many differences in the student population that may be unfamiliar to most students. To make sure every student has the opportunity to perform at his or her highest level, regardless of disability, language differences, socioeconomic background, race and creed, the teacher must carefully plan how they will make every individual feel as if they belong and are a vital part to the classroom. Educational research shows the foundational principle for making classrooms inclusive is to insure that every student in the classroom feels welcomed and valued as a member of the learning community (The Evergreen State College). Also, at the heart of every community is the principle that the people are as important as any information to be learned or techniques to be used (Larrivee, 2009, 64). When creating an inclusive classroom, it is important to consider the strategies the teacher will implement throughout the entire school year, classroom procedures and classroom design.

**Definitions**

Learning Community: A student centered approach that allows students to help guide the culture of the classroom under the guidance of a teacher. This group of students has a common goal of success, sharing emotions, values and beliefs to help each other learn to the best of their ability.

Community: A group of people who have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed a

commitment to rejoice together, to delight in each other, and to make others' conditions their own.  The underlying principles here are those of open and honest communication, mutual vulnerability, significant commitment to each other, and collective responsibility for sustaining the community (Larrivee, 2009, 78).

**Facts/Statistics**

Strategic Benchmarks for Classroom Management (Evertson and Neal, 2006).

| **Benchmarks for…** | **Moving from…** | **Moving toward…** |
|---|---|---|
| Building community | Little emphasis; sense of membership unavailable as a means of social regulation. | Strong emphasis; members share authority, expertise, and responsibility. |
| Establishing norms and rules | Teacher-determined and enforced. | Co-constructed by teacher and students; shared responsibility for enforcement. |
| Practicing classroom procedures | Simple procedures explained by teacher. | Procedures more complex. |
| Handling conflict | Teacher responsibility. | Students given opportunities to learn through experience. |
| Locating authority and control | Teacher sole authority. | Shared teacher-student responsibility.  Distributed authority; concern for student autonomy. |

- Educational research shows the foundational principle for making classrooms inclusive is to insure that every student in the classroom feels welcomed and valued as a member of the learning community (The Evergreen State College).

- The physical arrangement of a classroom environment will largely determine if and how inclusion will happen (Eredics).

- Many students may have misconceptions and concerns about their peers with learning difficulties.  In addition, students with disabilities often feel isolated, even in a general

education setting. Many students with disabilities are not included in the daily classroom routines, instead, at separate tables with paraprofessionals who help them work on individual projects (Purnell, 2007).

**Implications for Classrooms**

The past few decades have shown a dramatic shift in the expectations that all students perform at a high level. We as a society, no longer view a wide gap between the most advantaged students and least advantaged students as being acceptable. Instead, we are trying to formulate ways to decrease the gap between these students. Theory across education has pushed teachers to create a student-centered approach to their learning. The traditional classroom involved the teacher leading all activities, while the students played a passive role in their learning. In this previous model, a sense of community was unnecessary for students to have success. Today, student-centered classrooms involve a teacher who facilitates learning, giving the students an opportunity to have an active role in their learning. For today's model of teaching, the community plays an active role in the success of every student. Teachers must now build the community and help sustain the community for the duration of the school year. Learning in communities emphasizes "joint productive activity" through which teacher and students work together on shared projects that require them to assist and learn from each other. Knowledge is seen as distributed within the group, and each member is expected to contribute. In learning-centered classrooms, students and teachers share authority, expertise, and responsibility for inquiry. Their roles become less distinctly separate. Students do not construct knowledge in isolation; rather, discourse takes place among students and between teacher and students as the norm rather than the exception through conjecture, questioning, criticism,

constructive discussion, and presentation of evidence (Evertson and Neal, 2006). The most striking change is the shared role of authority. Teachers will need to consider what constitutes judicious authority and how and when they can enhance student autonomy through shared decision making, negotiation and problem solving. In the learning community, power over students is transformed into power with students (Larrivee, 2009, 86).

Before students can begin to feel comfortable within a learning community, the teacher must establish most procedures that provide structure to the varying activities and tasks that happen within the classroom, but also allow students to have a choice in specific procedures. Teaching in a student-centered classroom has many more complexities, compared to teaching in a teacher-centered classroom. Classroom management must become an area of emphasis for the teacher, to ensure success (Evertson and Neal, 2006). To implement procedures into daily activities, successful teachers establish procedures within the first few days of the school year. Creating effective procedures will improve the quality of a learning community, giving each student the understanding of how every aspect of the class should run. Because of fragmented homes, with single parents running the home, or multiple families living together, creating a sense of community within the classroom can help nurture a child to show that the teacher is there to support the student and provide missing support if needed (Larivee, 2009, 67). To begin the school year, every teacher must have a correct method for how to do multiple tasks and model the tasks. It is important for each student to walk into the classroom each day and understand the expectations of the teacher. If the teacher demonstrates his or her expectations for procedures consistently, each student eventually will hold other students accountable to follow the class expectations.

The students decide the remaining procedures to decide how they will complete a task. To start the year, the teacher will make decisions about procedures. Gradually, the teacher will decrease the amount of decisions made by the teacher and place the responsibility on the students. Larrivee (2009, 87) gave some examples about procedures, or learning task choices that students make the decision about.

- The order in which students do their assigned classwork

- Where to sit, or whether they sit for certain activities

- Which community service project they would like to adopt

- Which classroom activities require silence

- What to write about given some general guidelines

- How they would like to study a topic and in what order

- How to present a project (e.g., oral report, video, visual display, play, poem, song)

A portion of procedures involves the daily rituals that happen within the classroom. Establishing and practicing rituals can help the teacher create a peaceful environment and lay the foundation for the students to develop skills that will be useful to them in resolving conflicts peacefully throughout their lives (Peace First, 2013). As Dewey once noted, school is about life, not preparation for life (Larrivee, 2009, 67). Rituals help each student feel like they are a part of the community, making them more willing to show involvement within the class. Rituals can take on many different forms. Many teachers like to use morning announcements, good news/bad news, a daily current event that students are responsible to share, or a chant to begin, or

end a class (Larrivee, 2009, 70). Regardless of the ritual used, the students will feel a comfort level knowing exactly how each class will begin, or end.

When creating a successful learning community, the teacher plays the most pivotal role, making sure that all interactions, teacher-student and student-student, are done in a respectful manner. Larrivee (2009) created the mnemonic RATE for teachers to use to promote healthy relationships within the classroom. **R**espect: The teacher should respect every student in the classroom, refraining from the use of calling students names or using sarcasm. The teacher must also monitor the respect that students give to each other. If a student acts in a disrespectful manner, the teacher must hold that student accountable. **A**uthentic: The teacher must remain consistent and acknowledge that they too, can make mistakes. **T**houghtful: Teachers must also consider the emotional well-being of every student and accept each student for who they are as a person. **E**motional integrity: The teacher understands the emotional climate of the students, whether it be tense, happy, or sad and act on the emotions the students demonstrate. The teacher also must honestly share how they feel about how well the class interacts with each other and demonstrate their feelings. Many students who demonstrate resilience often times had the guidance of a caring adult, often times a teacher (Larrivee, 2009, 68). Using the mnemonic, RATE will demonstrate to children that the teacher truly cares about their well-being.

Within our society, we like to use respect as an all-encompassing word that has varying meanings, depending on the person and their background. One successful way to help all members of the community understand what it means to treat people with respect is to create a classroom social contract at the beginning of the school year. A social contract outlines what any member of the group needs to do to keep from infringing on the rights of the other members. A

more empowering social contract will outline what members can do so that they and the class get better. The contract classroom exists as a set of rules, principles, boundaries, expectations and consequences that govern the interactions of all members of a class (Shindler, 2013). To create a social contract, the teacher must develop questions for students to answer how they believe everyone wants to be treated and how they want to be treated. The written document is not the contract itself. Instead, the contract exists within the willingness of every stakeholder within the classroom to meet the demands that everyone set when the community created the social contract. Most importantly, the teacher has to make sure the social contract stays within the spotlight of the community throughout the school year. In many cases, the teacher will need to refer to the social contract, in positive and negative interactions that happen between everyone in the classroom (Shindler, 2013). When a teacher implements a social contract correctly, the students view the teacher as a caring adult, who will make sure every member of the community is treated correctly. Research consistently demonstrates that when students perceive their teachers as caring and supportive, they are more likely to be both academically motivated and engaged as well as regulate their own behavior to act responsibly (Larrivee, 2009, 65). In addition, the students believe the teacher is there to listen and will feel more open to share ideas, which they otherwise may not share.

In a student-centered classroom, the physical environment is an aspect that the teacher may consider changing. The physical arrangement of a classroom environment will largely determine if and how inclusion will happen. Arranging desks in small groups (2-4 desks per group) is the best method to use. This arrangement gives so all students opportunities for cooperative learning, collaboration and discussion. As well, place the teacher's desk on the

periphery of the classroom. Teachers in an inclusive class rarely sit down during their day and don't need their desk getting in the way (Eredics). The teacher must also expect the desks to move around into smaller or larger groups depending on each lesson. The students do not always remain in the same desk. As one teacher has done, students were members of different groups. Depending on the activity, the students would move from desk to desk to meet with their group. When room arrangements change, the students must be socialized to working in these different configurations (Evertson and Neal, 2006). The classroom walls also can become too stimulating for some students, causing many distractions in the learning. An inclusive classroom needs to be decorated in a way that does not create distraction and sensory overload. Too many bright colors, posters, clutter and furniture can easily distract the most focused child (Eredics).

To make sure the students are willing to work together and learn from one another, it is important that community building activities are used often. Teachers need to infuse the classroom with community-building experiences and create a safe place where students feel secure enough to disclose and share what has purpose and meaning for them (Larrivee 2009, 83). Many students may have misconceptions and concerns about their peers with learning difficulties. In addition, students with disabilities often feel isolated, even in a general education setting. Many students with disabilities are not included in the daily classroom routines, instead, at separate tables with paraprofessionals who help them work on individual projects (Purnell, 2007). So to help get rid of these misconceptions, great emphasis should be placed on community building, especially at the beginning of the year, but should continue at various points through the year. Larrivee (2009, 73) created the following are examples that could be used to build the community.

- Have students create personalized CD covers with a title, an illustration, and twelve song titles that tell something important about themselves and share with the group, or class.

- Have students pair up and interview each other with a set of questions the class has formulated.  After the students have interviewed their partners, they introduce each other to the class.

- Students write a statement about themselves that they think others won't know.  The papers are folded, collected, and put in a box.  Students take turns drawing a paper and reading the statement aloud.  Everyone guesses who wrote the little known fact.

Throughout each lesson, or activity, the teacher must also recognize the abilities of each individual and teach to his or her needs.  The best method to do this is to differentiate instruction.  It is important that the differentiated instruction teach higher order thinking skills, regardless of grade level content that is being taught.  Instruction simply needs to meet struggling learners at the point of their current achievement and systematically escalate their learning (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh and Reid, 2005).  Differentiating instruction provides motivating and engaging classroom instructional environments…that foster social collaboration and interaction; that provides access to coherent knowledge domains and structures (Reutzel, 2011).  When students have success and they worked collaboratively with other students on an activity, the students will realize they belong within that classroom.

**Conclusion**

Creating a student-centered, learning community can improve the education of many students.  Before any learning occurs, the teacher must emphasize the treatment of individuals in

the classroom, what classroom management and procedures will look like, the arrangement of the desks and the community building activities needed for everyone to feel comfortable within the class. Each student must understand that they hold value in the classroom and believe that their purpose is to learn, but also to help others who struggle. Creating a learning community is a very complex process that will take a great amount of focus for a teacher to include in his or her classroom. The teachers approach to classroom management and procedures will change if the teacher previously used a teacher-centered approach. Students and teacher will create many of the norms and rules jointly. Procedures will be more complex, with the emphasis of students actively choosing their work and working together in groups. Teachers will also have to reconsider their classroom layout. Traditional layouts individualized students permanently in rows. With an emphasis on group learning within a learning community, student desks should be organized in groups, with the understanding that the desks and students will move around the classroom, depending on the activity. The teacher must emphasize building the community to make sure every student feels comfortable with disclosing the learning to other students. To make sure every student experiences success and learns to the best of their ability, the teacher must differentiate instruction. Working as a group, the students will have the ability to collaborate and share knowledge to develop their learning. To learn more about how to incorporate a learning community into your classroom, look at the additional sources provided below.

**Additional Resources**

**Books**

Larrivee, B (2009). *Authentic Classroom Management: Creating a Learning Community*

    *and Building Reflective Practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ:  Pearson.

Reutzel, D.R. (2011).  Organizing Effective Literacy Instruction:  Differentiating Instruction to

    Meet Student Needs.  In Farstrup, A.E. Editor and Samuels, S.J. Editor (Eds.), *What*

    *Research Has To Say About Reading Instruction* (4th ed.), (94-114).  Newark, DE:

    International Reading Association.

Shapiro, Nancy Sherman., and Jodi Levine Laufgraben (1999). *Creating Learning Communities:*

    *A Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organizing for Change, and Implementing*

    *Programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**Journal Articles**

Broderick, A., Mehta-Parekh, H., and Reid, D.K. (2005).  Differentiating Instruction for

    Disabled Students in Inclusive Classrooms.  *Theory Into Practice, 44*, 194-202.

    http://www.jstor.org/stable/3496998

Brooks, K., Adams, S.R. and Morita-Mullaney, T. (2010).  Creating Inclusive Learning

Communities for ELL Students: Transforming School Principals' Perspectives.  *Theory*

*Into Practice, 49*, 145-151.  http://www.jstor.org/stable/40650728

Purnell, P.G. (2007).  Strategies for Creating Inclusive and Accepting Middle School

    Classrooms.  *Middle School Journal, 39*, 32-37.  http://www.jstor.org/stable/23044325


**Web Sites**

"All Things PLC, All in One Place." *AllThingsPLC — Research, Education Tools and Blog for*

    *Building a Professional Learning Community*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 July 2013.

http://www.allthingsplc.info/.

"Learning Communities." *Learning Forward*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 July 2013. http://www.learning

forward.org/standards/learning-communities.

Lenz, Bob. "A Community of Learners: Building a Supportive Learning Environment."

*Edutopia*. N.p., 16 Nov. 2007. Web. 30 July 2013.

http://www.edutopia.org/envision-schools-learning-community-respect.

**National Groups**

ASCD

1703 North Beauregard St.

Alexandria, VA 22311


National Council of Teachers of English

1111 W. Kenyon Road,

Urbana, Illinois 61801

Phone: 217-328-3870 or 877-369-6283


The National Resource Center for Learning Communities

The Washington Center

2700 Evergreen Pkwy NW

Olympia, WA 98505

Phone:  360-867-6611

**References**

Broderick, A., Mehta-Parekh, H., and Reid, D.K. (2005). Differentiating Instruction for

    Disabled Students in Inclusive Classrooms. *Theory Into Practice, 44*, 194-202.

    http://www.jstor.org/stable/3496998

Eredics, N. "Arranging a Classroom to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment."

    *National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25

    July 2013. http://nichcy.org/arranging-a-classroom-to-create-an-inclusive-

    learning-environment.

Evertson, C.M., and Neal, K.W. "Looking into Learning-Centered Classrooms:

    Implications for Classroom Management." *National Education Association*. N.p., 2006.

    Web. 29 July 2013. http://www.nea.org/tools/44455.htm

"Inclusive Classrooms." *The Evergreen State College*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 July 2013.

    http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/professionaldevelopment/inclusivec

    lassrooms.html.

Larrivee, B (2009). *Authentic Classroom Management: Creating a Learning Community*

    *and Building Reflective Practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Peace First. *Creating a Peaceful Climate in Your Classroom & School Using Rituals: A Toolkit*.

N.p., n.d.  Web. 29 July 29 2013.  http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/files/

rituals _toolkit_10.30.pdf

Purnell, P.G. (2007).  Strategies for Creating Inclusive and Accepting Middle School

Classrooms.  *Middle School Journal, 39*, 32-37.  http://www.jstor.org/stable/23044325

Reutzel, D.R. (2011).  Organizing Effective Literacy Instruction:  Differentiating Instruction to

Meet Student Needs.  In Farstrup, A.E. Editor and Samuels, S.J. Editor (Eds.), *What

Research Has To Say About Reading Instruction* (4th ed.), (94-114).  Newark, DE:

International Reading Association.

Shindler, J.  *Chapter 11: Creating Social (Contract) Bonds*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 July 2013.

http://www.calstatela.edu/faculty/jshindl/cm/Chapter9socialcontract.htm.