Community in the Classroom

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Classroom community is an integral part of facilitating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Teachers, architects of community, recognize the importance of encouraging collaboration and respect among students in our classrooms and schools, and the value of nurturing atmospheres of respect. In her 2009 presidential address to the members of NCTE, Kylene Beers challenged educators to move away from one-dimensional practices of the old status quo and embrace more global practices in the classroom. As a high school classroom teacher and as a literacy specialist, respectively, we have come to understand that the most effective way to combat the current negative rhetoric about education is to guide our classrooms to community. Our students value spaces where they are safe to respect others' ideas and to take intellectual risks. Equally important is the collaborative community that teachers build alongside their students with fellow teachers and educators.

Walt Whitman's pledge, "I will plant companionship," as spoken in his poem "A Song" encourages teachers to pause and reflect on the types of communities that exist in our classrooms and schools, and on our obligations to nurture the seeds of collaboration and respect. We wonder, in the hectic pace of our daily routines, if our practice mirrors Whitman's enthusiasm to advocate for companionship and community. As language arts teachers, we often find that the best and most effective moments of our teaching occur when we allow for students to interact authentically with literature and when we create spaces for them to participate as invested members of literary communities. As Whitman embraces companionship and camaraderie, how have we modeled for students that literacy is a social event? What can we do to help students acknowledge their roles as members of literary communities, as described by the NCTE/IRA Standards?

Creating Safe Spaces for Students

Merriam-Webster lists several definitions for *community,* most notably that a community is "a unified body of individuals; society at large; or joint ownership or participation." Pulling from these definitions, we can build classroom communities that merge and respect the individual stories of our students, while encouraging them to become stakeholders in their own communities and experiences. Teachers who are intentional about building successful, dimensional, and vibrant classroom communities can experience the joy of invested students who understand the value of respecting and challenging competing ideas and experiences.

Often, after her AP students move through the process of writing a synthesis essay, Karen will videotape her students' discussions. The class will watch the tape the next day and analyze the discussion for evidence, both its quality and relevance—a key element of a successful synthesis essay. Through her work and reflection, Karen has discovered that when her students see themselves in a literate, thoughtful exchange of positions and ideas, they see the importance of thought and research. Karen also maintains a healthy classroom community by randomly matching her students in Think-Pair-Share activities. As a result, students learn that participating in a community demands a level of risk, as students work on topics outside their comfort zones and learn to collaborate with a variety of classmates and diverse opinions.

In her ninth-grade classroom, Katie uses Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks* as inspiration for creating a classroom quilt and opening conversations about the meanings of community. During the novel-based unit, students are also encouraged to interact with literary devices and authors' purposes in meaningful and authentic ways. Her students explore technical writing as they brainstorm questions, conduct interviews, and craft their own *Seedfolks* characters based on their families' ethnic heritages. Katie's students work collaboratively to explore interdisciplinary connections as they engage in reflective discussions inspired by their own research. The essential question of the unit embodies one of the tenets of active participation in the classroom community: How can a person maintain individuality while simultaneously participating as an involved member of a community?

When students feel valued and respected, they gain the confidence that they need to share their own experiences, to engage in authentic opportunities for learning, and to work in spaces that might be challenging or unfamiliar.

To help her students balance the challenge of knitting their experiences into the diversity of the classroom, Katie asks each of her students to create a quilt card, a 6" by 6" card displaying the student's name, favorite quotes, and self-describing symbols. Since *Seedfolks* contains rich examples of symbolism and character development, students interact with literary devices as they create tangible quilt cards while simultaneously demonstrating their understandings of symbolism and characterization. After each student creates a quilt card, he or she creates another one, on the reverse side of the card, for one of the characters in the novel. As a class, the students connect the cards together using hole-punchers and string and create a paper quilt, which provides an opportunity for the students to react and comment on one another's symbols and cards. The quilt features the characters of the *Seedfolks* community on one side and the members of Katie's classroom community on the other.

Positioning Teachers as Facilitators

Through the creation of dynamic and supportive classroom communities, teachers are no longer responsible for serving as the sole overseer of the classroom; instead, teachers are positioned as active members of the conversations that occur within classrooms and among students. We are facilitators, and we help to model for our students the importance of exchanging ideas in a respectful manner, challenging one another to discover new knowledges, and creating spaces in which students can succeed in becoming critical thinkers.

The classroom community also creates opportunities for teachers to model the fluidity of knowledge and learning in the 21st century. While teachers remain content experts, the cohesive nature of the classroom community creates a space for students to share their unique experiences and encourages students to become advocates of their own learning. When students feel valued and respected, they gain the confidence that they need to share their own experiences, to engage in authentic opportunities for learning, and to work in spaces that might be challenging or unfamiliar.

The overarching definition of community stresses the importance of respecting individual voices within the context of shared goals. In addition to supporting the diverse stories and experiences that our students bring into our classroom communities, it is also important for teachers to engage in different communities. Teachers are not only members of their classrooms but also members of a larger "classroom of educators." As we encourage students to engage actively as members of their educational and personal communities, teachers must also strive to partake as invested members of professional communities.

To model collegiality and avoid the creation of superficial communities, we must work to erase the practices that treat teachers as "lone rangers," where novices and veterans are left to create communities behind the closed doors of our classrooms. When we engage with one another, participate in professional learning opportunities, and welcome one another into the communities of our own classrooms, we are strengthened by one another's ideas. The classroom community, for both teachers and students, requires a proactive attitude and demands the willingness to support an environment of collegiality and respect.

Plugging into Professional Communities

To participate more fully as members of the NCTE community, we encourage you to read the excellent

advice featured in NCTE's professional journals and to explore other resources on the NCTE website, such as ReadWriteThink (RWT; http://www.readwritethink.org). A collaborative project between the International Reading Association and NCTE, ReadWriteThink provides an online, fully searchable space for teachers to share standards-based and innovative lesson plans. RWT lessons are aligned to individual state standards and allow for teachers to work together, as members of a community of educators, to unpack the new Common Core State Standards.

The Secondary Section Steering Committee also encourages you to participate actively in professional learning opportunities that are offered through your schools and through NCTE, by participating in local affiliate conferences or submitting an article to an NCTE or affiliate journal. Through the sharing of ideas and best practices, our classrooms and schools can continue to promote high academic standards, strong collegiality, and openness to new ideas.

We also hope that you are already a member of NCTE's Connected Community. If not, registration through the NCTE website is easy, and the site immediately connects you with hundreds of NCTE members. Through the Connected Community, teachers are already engaging in professional conversations and participating in interactive conversations, ranging from educational policy, language arts "hot topics," and classroom curriculum. The Connected Community allows users to join a variety of different communities within NCTE and creates a welcoming platform for individuals to post responses to NCTE resolutions, discuss NCTE activities, and ask questions of other NCTE Connected Community members.

Works Cited

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Katie Greene teaches ninth-grade Literature and Composition in Milton, Georgia. Her current research examines the use of reflective writing practices and the incorporation of multicultural literature in secondary language arts classrooms. She serves as the associate chair of the Secondary Steering Committee and is also the editor of *Connections,* the Georgia Council of Teachers of English affiliate journal. **Karen Conn Mitcham** loves to facilitate literacy across the curriculum for all students. Her degrees from Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and The University of Georgia in Athens confirmed her preparation for the English language arts classroom. Her National Board Certification affirmed her lifetime investment in education. She has served as ELA department chair at Jones County High School in Gray, Georgia, and her move to Arkansas this past year has been a natural progression in her desire to support literacy across the secondary academic arena.

Candidates Announced for Section Elections; Watch for Your Ballot

The Secondary Section Nominating Committee has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

For Members of the Secondary Section Steering Committee (three to be elected; term to expire in 2016): **Gary Anderson**, William Fremd High School, Palatine, Illinois; **Lawrence Butti**, Mineola High School, New York; **Bob Dandoy**, Slippery Rock University, Pennsylvania; **Dana Huff**, The Weber School, Atlanta, Georgia; **Janis Mottern-High**; Twin Falls High School, Idaho; **Tara Seale**, Bryant High School, Arkansas.

For Members of the Secondary Section Nominating Committee (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2013): **Tom Beach**, St. Ignatius High School, Cleveland, Ohio; **Chris Crowe**, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; **Karen Conn Mitcham**, Bryant High School, Arkansas; **Patricia A. Rand**, University of Albany, New York; **Shekema H. Silveri**, Mount Zion High School, Carrollton, Georgia; **Juli Stricklan**, Rexburg, Idaho.

Members of the 2011–12 Secondary Section Nominating Committee are Linda Milanese Kerschner, Conestoga High School, Berwyn, Pennsylvania, chair; Brandon Bolyard, Vallivue High School, Caldwell, Idaho; and Maja Wilson, University of Maine, Orono.