Community Building in the Online Classroom

Community Building in the Online Classroom

By

Dominique Moyse Steinberg

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Community Building in the Online Classroom

By Dominique Moyse Steinberg

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2021 by Dominique Moyse Steinberg

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-6929-2
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6929-4

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

There is no doubt that distance education in its many forms is here to stay, which means to me that helping people to remain connected will become increasingly relevant, necessary, and appreciated. Add to the mix several years of online faculty supervising, and what is revealed is an ongoing set of struggles to deliver a rich and full educational experience that feels alive to all participants. My hope is that this work will help to mitigate some of that struggle by offering ideas for helping online students to connect and to experience the virtual classroom as a place of deep, full, and happy learning.

When I was first asked to teach on line I thought, *Oh no*. However, I had been invited to teach research, a subject I love and love to teach, and for a brand new online social work program, to boot, which was in and of itself exciting. I'm not sure that many people would say they love to teach research, but I love to teach it for several reasons, and years of positive student evaluations tell me that I am good at it. So, with that in mind I said yes to teaching on line, although with quite some trepidation about what I thought would be a pretty impersonal experience (not to mention being daunted by the technology of it all...).

As it turns out, teaching on line became a richly rewarding addition to my teaching repertoire, one that brought to bear many aspects of my professional career, both practical and educational, including my work with and love of groups, my love of writing, my many years of teaching, and of course, experience in helping hundreds of social work students to overcome the many perceived hurdles of learning research.

Several years later, I now see that distance learning is not necessarily relational distance either among students or between students and instructor. Certainly, teaching people who collide from the north, south, east, and west for a class session and further, who do so as tiny little blue-lined boxes on a computer monitor, has implications for practice. Hence this work, written from the desire, as a group worker both in heart and in practice, to bring people together in ways that make them feel good about colliding.

Best of luck,
Dominique Moyse Steinberg

UNIT 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to help instructors to enhance their online teaching in the synchronous classroom by providing practice principles, tools, and strategies for developing the online classroom as a deep and full learning community. Throughout the narrative creating community in online education is conceptualized and thus promoted as a values-based practice, front and center stage in all discussions. The intent is to serve as a teaching resource for higher education venues; however, many principles may apply to secondary-level education as well. The primary criterion for considering applicability is the psycho-social and cognitive development of the learning group along with instructional goals.

Use of Terms, *Classroom* and *Online Classroom*

Please note that the terms "classroom" and "online classroom" are used interchangeably throughout this book, with the former used more than the latter simply because of the cumbersome nature of the latter term. When a distinction is intended, it is offered specifically. For example, when referring to the traditional physical classroom particularly, the term "brick/mortar" classroom is used. Thus, when referring to the online classroom in particular, that term is used. Otherwise, whenever "classroom" is stated, it should be assumed that the reference is to the online classroom, which is the primary focus of all the discussions in this book.

How this Book is Organized

Exposition and discussion is organized such that each unit builds on previous units. For example, the discussion on mutual aid in Unit 4 will be clearer and more useful if Units 2 and 3 have been read, because each of them helps to set the stage for integrating the material in Unit 4. The book begins by presenting and discussing its premise, which is that feeling a sense of community in the classroom-any classroom-has benefits for the learners in that classroom and that therefore, helping them to build a happy and

healthy learning community is a worthwhile endeavor. It continues by addressing the significant role of groups and group work in a community-building process, identifying strategies for harnessing the potential of all possible group types that can exist in the online classroom. As a foundation of group-based community building, mutual aid is then described and discussed as a specific set of dynamics aimed at helping students to both give and take help to one another, often in ways new to them, as they participate in building a committed learning community.

The book then presents some stage-setting strategies for helping online students to engage in mutual aid. That is followed by a discussion of the role and importance of sharing authority with students in community building so that the end result is, in fact, a learning community that is of, by, and for them rather than one in which they are merely guests of the instructor. Strategies are then suggested for helping to increase the visibility and voice of online students, to help them to take the kinds of risks required to expose their needs and strengths, and to help them to form connections with other students so that they will wish to shift the self-interest they bring to the classroom to interest in the classroom community's collective welfare. The last unit explores the applicability of community building to the asynchronous learning venue.

The next section offers a nutshell glimpse of the purpose and substance of each unit.

Units at a Glance

Unit 2 (*Community in the Classroom: Does it Belong?*) introduces the question of whether or not the concept of community is even relevant to learning, focusing particularly on its relevance to the online classroom. The unit takes a detailed look at the following concepts: community, membership, common ground, participation, investment, commitment, authenticity, authority, leadership, and conflict. It discusses the characteristics of a "good" community and describes the various elements of a community-building process including values and advantages of community membership.

Unit 3 (*Groups, Community Building, and Learning*) proposes that it is through the development of group identity that students will come to build a deep and full learning community that is of, by, and for them. The role of groups and the importance of group work in building community is described and discussed with focus on using both small break-out groups as vehicles for helping students to get to know one another and the large overall

classroom group to help them to fully develop their identity, commitment, and participation as an active classroom community member. Strategies are offered for harnessing the potential of each group type as a community-building mechanism.

Unit 4 (*Mutual Aid as a Community-Building Tool*) presents, describes, and discusses the value of mutual aid, a "package" of nine dynamics representing specific ways in which people in groups can help one another. Central to social work with groups, mutual aid is a way of working with groups that is strength centered rather than problem focused. Mutual aid is proposed as a framework for shaping instructional activities in ways that focus on helping students to exchange their strengths (skills and talents) in order to build a community that is relevant and significant to their needs and goals. To that end, activities are designed to create connections among students, to foster collaboration, and to promote values of mutuality. The unit includes a definition of mutual aid, a brief history of its transposition from biology to sociology and ultimately to social group work. It examines each of the nine dynamics for their ability to be fully catalyzed in the online classroom group and discusses ways in which online students can be engaged into this unique and special community-building process.

Unit 5 (*Setting the Stage for Community Development*) speaks to the importance of setting the stage for community development and the ability of community to enhance the collective learning curve of the online classroom. It describes the roles of leadership, both formal and informal, in setting the stage for transforming a classroom into a mutual-aid community that is perceived by students as theirs. A number of stage-setting strategies are offered including instructor modelling, the use of varied written materials, and ongoing verbal references to desirable norms to help guide community-building behavior and good community citizenship in the classroom.

Unit 6 (*Authority and Community Building in the Classroom*) addresses the importance of allowing learners in the online classroom to share in authority over course affairs whenever possible as a community-building tool. The right to participate in shaping one's destiny is widely accepted today in much of the world as a variable in the ability to realize that destiny, and on a small scale the same axiom holds true for the classroom. When students are given the opportunity to participate in shaping their learning process, their learning greatly benefits, because their voices ensure that the process remains relevant and significant to their needs and goals.

Unit 7 (*The Importance of Student Visibility and Voice in Community Building and Learning*) presents some strategies for promoting active student participation in the online classroom. It also identifies opportunities that either exist or can be created for engaging these strategies as community-building and learning tools. Combined, these strategies promote student presence by encouraging visibility (being seen by others) and voice (being heard by others), both of which can be easily lost in the online classroom. Interventions that help to ensure that certain conditions for keeping these norms in play as the course unfolds are identified.

Unit 8 (*The Importance of Student Risk Taking in Community Building and Learning*) offers some strategies to help students to take the risks inherent in active classroom participation. In the online classroom in particular it is easy for students to get lost in the proverbial shuffle by remaining silent, creating an "out of sight out of mind" scenario. However, to participate fully students must disclose what they do not know, which can be risky to the ego, especially in a new group. However, only by exposing what they do not know can an appropriate instructional baseline be set. This also allows the discovery of what they do know, helping to design activities that draw on their special skills and talents for mutual aid.

Unit 9 (*Promoting Familiarity and Connection as Community-Building Tools*) presents some strategies to foster familiarity and connection among students, both of which are necessary to create a platform for mutual aid. Structured interactions and tasks, both small-group and in the larger classroom group, can help students get to know one another and to care about one another's welfare along with their own, helping in turn to build a happy and healthy learning community. Interventions in class process are presented as strategies for helping students to shift from the normal self-interest that they bring to the classroom to a mutual interest in and commitment to the welfare of their classmates as well.

Unit 10 (*Community Building in the Async "Classroom:" Does it Apply?*) explores the applicability of community building to the async venue. A review of primary purposes and characteristics of the async learning context suggests that community-building strategies undertaken in a classroom, such as initiating collaborative group activities, have less application to that venue than do strategies that help async learners to connect with peers if they wish to. What does have great application, according to async learners, is access to communication mechanisms that will connect with peers if and when they so wish. Thus, strategies that set the stage for connection (planning,

preparation, organization, and design) create significant value-added benefit to the async learning experience. The unit discusses the relevance of community, community building, and connection to the async learning venue; offers some considerations in designing (setting the stage for) peer-based communication forms aimed at peer connection; and identifies a number of strategies that will help async learners who wish to connect with others to do so.

Endnote: This book concludes with a brief endnote, which provides a backward glance at intent, major points, and implications for practice.

UNIT 2

COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM: DOES IT BELONG?

This unit explores the relevance of community to learning with particular focus on the relevance to the classroom generally and online classroom, more specifically. It proposes that such characteristics, concepts, and dynamics as membership, common ground, participation, investment, commitment, authenticity, authority, leadership, and individuality, all of which are integral to a good community, are also integral to developing a classroom climate in which students can move at full steam toward deep and full learning.

The unit begins by defining the term, *community*, followed by a discussion of what makes a "good" community. It continues with a responsive discussion to the question, *Is community essential to the classroom?* It then discusses the community-building process including the values and advantages of belonging to a community and explores community building in the online classroom, specifically. The unit ends with a summary, roster of major points, and list of references.

Community Defined and Deconstructed

What is a community, exactly? This is one of those concepts that everyone believes they understand in the same way, but here is how the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "community," accessed January 29, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) defines it:

- People with *common interests* living in a particular area (broadly: the area itself)
- A group of people with a *common characteristic or interest* living together within a larger society
- A body of persons of *common and especially professional interests* scattered through a larger society

- A *body of persons or nations having a common* history or common social, economic, and political interests
- A *group linked by a common* policy
- An *interacting population* of various kinds of individuals (such as species) *in a common location*
- A *social state or condition* (the school encourages a sense of community in its students)
- *Joint ownership or participation*

The term *community* is derived from an Old French word, *comuneté* (now *communauté*), which in turn comes from the Latin *communitas* (public spirit). Note that the concept of common ground is inherent in all of the ways in which the term is understood; commonality of one kind or another, physical or spiritual – its role, relevance and significance – is recognized as central whether related to social or other types of interests, pursuits, demographic characteristics, or location. Thus, it might be stated simply that the term, *community*, connotes a group of people with significant common ground, a definition that can certainly apply to a classroom.

When students enter any classroom they inevitably bring with them a wide variety of personal and social descriptors, demographic and otherwise; but what binds them together in this place at this moment is the common cause of learning a subject. Thus, while students of the online classroom certainly meet the criterion of coming together in common cause and thus have the makings of a community, the fact that they are not in one another's real physical presence can make it more challenging for them to feel a sense of that community.

In the brick/mortar classroom students collide in the doorway as they come and go. At the beginning of class they settle into chairs or desks within close proximity of one another and in a very short time are likely to be chatting with those immediately around them. Further, as a course progresses they often return to the same spot, gaining comfort from always sitting in the same immediate surrounds, in a way marking their territory. In fact, should a student decide to take a seat that "belonged" to another student for the previous classes, trouble may well brew! Finally, as they meet up with one another coming and going, they can take full measure of the environment – of their fellow students, of the instructor, and of the overall classroom.

In contrast, students in the online classroom have a dramatically different entryway to the new class. First of all, they are never in physical proximity of one another and often not even in the same city or state, leaving them keenly aware that they are not together in a traditional way but rather

each one in a personal spot somewhere in the world and perhaps far from all others. Thus, while the ability to collide with peers through technology is a marvel, it is also, ironically, an isolating and even somewhat lonesome state of affairs. The greatest measure that online students can take is of a number of little boxes on their computer screens in which reside the portraits of their peers. They cannot even see the whole of the other students, just mostly heads and shoulders!

Also, there is no such thing as "marking territory" in the online classroom. Every time someone enters or leaves, those little blue-lined portrait boxes on screen shift so that just as individuals become used to seeing their own portrait in the upper right corner of the screen, they all of a sudden find themselves in the lower left corner and perhaps a few seconds later in another row. This kind of consideration may seem insignificant or even simply irrelevant at first. However, a little further thought will recognize that in fact, this kind of jumping or shifting around of place can be disconcerting, especially in a learning situation in which focus and energy are supposed to target the acquisition of new content, not on keeping up with the location of one's portrait. Few people enjoy the surprise of finding themselves in different circumstances (in this case, screen spot) every few seconds or minutes for an hour or two. There is comfort in the familiar, which is why, once a student scans a brick/mortar classroom and chooses a spot, that student is likely to want the same vantage point for class after class unless the spot was deemed undesirable, in which case that student is likely to find another more desirable one and stick with that one for the long term. For the online student, this kind of shifting around means that focus and energy are constantly split in direction, resulting in a slight but palpable flux, which detracts from the ability to "settle in" and to take full stock of the classroom as a community in the making.

Furthermore, the online picture is confounded by the fact that each student is likely to have a completely different (and sometimes chaotic) background. One student's little box on screen is well lit. Another is so dark that one cannot really see the student except in profile. One seems to be in a closet in full glare from a very bright overhead light. Another seems to be in a bedroom with a clearly unmade bed. One has a puppy jumping around. Another has a child jumping around. Another is leaning back on a sofa looking half asleep. And yet another whose head is a mere inches away from the camera is clearly sitting in the driver's seat of an automobile but with a forehead missing from view! So much for the kind of physical confirmation of community-to-be that the brick/mortar classroom offers, making the need to identify the potential and value of community that much more urgent for the online group.

Thus, as the online course begins the classroom consists of a number of individuals each loosely connected to the instructor as the centerpost of that classroom, a state of affairs that needs to change in order for students to develop a community that is of, by, and for them and that will promote full and deep learning for each and all of them. This makes the task of community-building in the online classroom, in effect, one of replacing the spokes that bind each student to the instructor with multiple spokes that reach between and among students so that together, using their strengths to meet their needs, they can create a community that will feel like it is theirs, that will feel useful as a context for helping and receiving help, and that will propel them forward to their goals.

What Makes a "Good" Community?

When people are asked to identify the variables of a "good" community, a long list of factors always results, but in all cases these four factors consistently crop up as essential (see, for example, McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Reich, 2003):

Membership: A good community makes one feel welcome and invested with a right to belong; thus, a sense of rightful placement. When we feel welcome, we feel we are in the "right" place, in turn causing us to wish to invest in the health and welfare of that group, both emotionally and materially. The group becomes a primary reference point for our ways of being, thinking, and doing; and ultimately, our involvement leaves us feeling that our membership in this group is "rightful." Once we feel that the community is right for us and that we are right for it, we become invested, committed, and prepared to take action that we believe will benefit both it as an entity and us individually, as well. Thus, in a good community people feel that they are in the right place at the right time for the right reasons.

Influence: A good community leads us to believe that we have a say in addressing and managing the issues of the community and that our perspectives are valued. Once we are invested in the health and welfare of the group we define as "rightful" for us, and once we feel accepted into that community and become active in it, we begin to believe that we can contribute to its health and welfare as well as use it for our own ends. As we interact with others and share our ideas about that health and welfare, we receive approval from other members, and we begin to believe in our right, as a viable community member, to have a say in shaping community affairs. Thus, a good community projects the desire for membership influence including leadership on any number of fronts related to its *raison d'être*.

Integration and fulfillment of needs: A good community makes us feel that we are in the right place and time to interact with other community members for meeting various social and individual needs. As we enter a community we meet other members, and as we interact we discover significant commonalities that confirm for us that this group is right for us, we also discover useful individuality expressed as differences, differences that stimulate our ways of thinking, being, and doing and that encourage us to reflect on our own ways of being in the world. Thus, both commonalities and differences (as long as those differences are within, not outside of, the parameters of the community's *raison d'être*) are valued as potential avenues to personal and interpersonal enrichment. In sum, a good community values its members for their ability to interact in ways that enrich both their existence and that of the community as a whole.

Shared emotional connection: A good community offers us emotional connection. Over time the members of a good community receive enough rewards of membership to feel emotionally connected to both the community as a whole and to co-members. Thus, a good community provides us with enough visible common ground and enough opportunities to experience other members along emotional dimensions so as to keep us emotionally connected with one another and to keep us emotionally invested in and connected to the community as a whole.

Given that these four conditions are consistently found in definitions of a good community, it seems reasonable to propose that any effort to develop community regardless of venue needs to focus on providing opportunities for these conditions to develop and flourish.

Is Community Essential to the Classroom?

This is a good time to introduce the question of whether or not community is important or even relevant to the classroom, because there is no doubt that community building of any kind takes effort. The question is whether such an effort is truly required in order for students to have a deep and rich learning experience.

Clearly, this is a personal pedagogical decision, and the issue may simply boil down to an instructor's perspective regarding whose responsibility it is to make sure that learning actually takes place. Is it the educator's or the learner's? Or is it a combination thereof? Whose responsibility is it to make sure that content is actually ingested? Courses always require some kind of assessment tools, so whose responsibility is it to help ensure that students meet those measurements successfully? Is the learner integral to the process as a contributor or just a recipient of expertise

with personal responsibility for making sure that understanding is reached (such as getting tutored, for example)? At its simplest and although any number of possible variants are likely to arise in response, the question is this: Is the educational task one of giving information, or does it also include some kind of other involvement to ensure that the information has been ingested correctly? Both approaches with any number of variations exist in western education, with the Socratic method (see, for example, Vlastos, 2013) representing one end of the extreme and lecture format, the other.

The Socratic method of teaching gives enormous attention to the learner as active participant in the educational process, and many educators throughout history have adopted this approach (see, for example, Dewey, 2019). However, a great deal of variation exists even among those who espouse this approach, many veering away from the central core that requires a very particular kind of dialogue based on very specific questions, choosing rather to just use its general precepts of discussion, reflection, review, and debate. Thus, if examined in detail, one sees that the method has several very specific components, but in general terms it can be said that its main thrust is to engage the learner in discussion of a subject with an overall aim of encouraging critical thinking and a search for answers beyond the obvious. This makes the educational role one that includes confirmation of content ingestion, digestion, and integration and although a very active approach to instruction, the primary role is one of support, sometimes referred to as side-lining, which in terms of using groups to build community in a classroom has tremendous goodness of fit with the social group work concept of taking a back seat as a way of promoting internal group leadership (see Unit 3). Although this approach does not micromanage the delivery of information, it does to some degree micromanage the classroom by carefully designing and managing the activity that takes place to make sure that students fully engage in critical thinking.

In contrast, one might call the lecture approach (assuming a straightforward lecture without variation) a *laissez-faire* approach to instruction: the expert (instructor) offers information, which students are expected to ingest and digest on their own. Unless activities are initiated along the way to ascertain the degree to which content has been learned – in which case the process is no longer straightforward lecture-quality and quantity of ingestion and digestion remain unknown until measured by formal assessment, such as an exam.

There is nothing inherently bad about or wrong with a lecture format of instruction. Some subjects in some contexts lend themselves very well to that approach, and some lecturers are brilliant in their delivery. That said, a group game called “Telephone” offers a good example of how dangerous it

can be to impart information without confirmation that what was imparted is in fact what was received. The game consists of a group member whispering something in the ear of the next person, who then follows suit with the next person. This continues until everyone in the group has received a whispered message, and the last one to receive it speaks it aloud. Invariably, the message articulated at the end is not the original message, a good illustration of the possibility (probability) that what one intends to be transmitted does not always end up in the same form with the receiver. In fact, the literature on communication suggests that if one wishes to truly ensure that a message has been accurately received, even if directly and loudly offered, one must have the receiver repeat it.

Clearly, a lecture has some of those characteristics; it is not a given that what the lecturer says is actually what is heard by a learner. In contrast, the classroom in which learners have opportunities to test their hearing, so to speak, by discussing what they heard on an ongoing basis offers precisely that: the chance to confirm or correct. This does not mean that a lecture might not be fascinating; certainly, lectures can be stimulating and inspiring. However, the potential for a lecture to inspire is not the question here; the issue is the value of offering students opportunities for full form and presence in their learning journey, an offer that is not part and parcel of a lecture format.

Rather, the point of view that drives this work, shaped over years of instruction, is that in fact, if one wishes one's pedagogical efforts to be useful, finding ways to make sure that they are relevant and significant is a worthwhile endeavor. One can even say that it is especially worthwhile in the online classroom where it is so easy, without purposeful effort to the contrary, to lose student presence and thus lose sight of who is or is not keeping up. In fact, it seems reasonable to propose that in the online classroom, where students are so distant from one another even when they are inside the classroom, virtual as it is, community building takes on some urgency.

All this suggests that community can be highly relevant to the classroom and that thus, community building in the classroom is a legitimate, viable, and worthwhile endeavor. It further suggests that the online classroom will benefit particularly from community-building efforts that promote connection in a context in which people are so separate even when they gather to learn.

The Community-Building Process

The degree to which a sense of community of, by, and for students can develop in the classroom first and foremost depends on instructor mindset. Does the instructor see community beyond that which is inherent in being at the same place at the same time as integral or not? If so, then it is up to the instructor, who is in the best position at the start, to get the ball rolling. The instructor has a sense of what needs to happen. The instructor has a vision of the results. The instructor has the authority and thus the platform for making what needs to happen, happen. However, the process does not end with the instructor. It ends with, or perhaps better said, falls squarely on the shoulders of, the students with the instructor offering from the metaphorical back seat ongoing reminders about desirable norms and values in a good community. The part in between the beginning and end consists of a blend of the two, with the instructor taking an increasingly less active role as students learn the ropes of community building and become increasingly good community citizens. Thus, as the course progresses and students become increasingly confident in their right to help shape a relevant learning journey, they take on an ever larger share of community building (strategies for helping them to do just that are offered throughout the rest of this book). Ultimately, a community that is felt by students to be truly of, by, and for them will be actualized full force when they see themselves as essential movers and shakers in their classroom.

The next section identifies some of the major advantages that people perceive in being part of a community, advantages that have implications for community building the classroom.

Need to Belong

The need to belong is considered a universal human need. In the classroom, a sense of belonging helps students to connect with peers, who are perceived to have similar needs and goals and thus, to also belong in that space at that time.

Being in a Common Boat

People find comfort in being in the same boat as others who feel or think alike. In the classroom, being in the company of others who share similar needs and goals provides comfort, which helps to allay anxiety. Once their anxiety is allayed, students are able to relax, open up to the aspects of

learning that they might find challenging, and engage deeply and fully with the learning process.

Being Involved in Positive Relationships

Community membership helps people to find and form social connections. In the classroom, the positive relationships that they form with their peers help students to enjoy collaboration, to feel valued, and to feel supported.

Appreciation of Individuality

When people interact in common purpose they discover one another's skills and talents (strengths) as well as their needs. In the classroom as students work together they get to know who needs help with what and who can help with what. Even as they discover their common ground, then, they also discover how their individual ways of being, doing, and thinking can keep them stimulated and stimulating as they move forward.

Honing Social Skills

At first glance this perceived benefit seems somewhat tangential to the classroom. However, another glance reveals that in effect, as a secondary gain from working with peers, classroom process can help students to enhance their social skills. Thus, for example, the good listeners model even if inadvertently good listening for those who tend to interrupt, while those who take a chance at answering a question model for those who fear speaking up. The list of skills to be tweaked is endless, of course. The point is that even if it is not the primary purpose of interaction, improving one's interpersonal skills is always a potential byproduct of being with others.

What does all this mean for community building in the classroom? It means, in effect, that efforts need to be made to help students to not feel alone, and this is particularly true for the online classroom (see in particular Unit 6). It means that groups and group work are central to the process in order to help students to engage with one another and particularly so for the online classroom to ensure that every little portrait on the computer screen is closely connected to at least a few other portraits who will miss them if they are absent from class (see in particular Unit 3). It means that the strengths (individual skills and talents) that students bring with them to the classroom must be exposed as well as their needs so that they can help one another to meet their learning goals (see in particular Unit 4). Reaching for those skills and talents will highlight students' individuality, helping to keep

the individuality and thus unique "persona" of each little portrait on the computer screen visible and in full voice (see in particular Unit 7). It means that students need to learn how to replace competition with collaboration and to do so in ways that harness those individual strengths (see in particular Unit 9). Finally, it means that all community-building efforts in a classroom generally and in the online classroom particularly need to help students to understand their centrality to the collective learning journey (see in particular Unit 5).

In sum, a well-developed community provides to members of that community a sense of belonging, acceptance, and being appreciated and makes them feel safe in expressing the whole of themselves: all parts welcome. In a learning community that desires to be relevant and significant, it is particularly important that students feel safe to be authentic, because needs must be exposed in order to set an appropriate baseline of instruction (see in particular Unit 8). Students must, therefore, feel safe enough to be themselves in full form and presence-safe enough, in fact, to risk ridicule by peers or rejection by the instructor if and when they speak up. In brief, they must have faith that all efforts to contribute to advancing the collective learning journey – whether the contribution is exposure of need or offer of strength – will be appreciated.

Fostering Community in the Online Classroom

The discussion now turns to the potential for catalyzing a sense of community around a "bunch" of small boxes on a computer monitor that fulfils all its potential as identified above. Can one actually do so? Can the gaps be closed between students and instructor and among students, each one sitting alone staring at a screen? Can a sense of *we-ness* (see Unit 3), a concept that reflects a tightly-knit emotionally-bonded community, really be created in such a context? If so, how so? How can all those little portraits on a computer monitor be helped to identify themselves as a single community, in it together, however "it" is defined? How can one engage a wobbly group (Lang, 2010) of people into a process that will transform their collectivity (Lang, 2010) into a self-identified community with the potential for forward motion that carries everyone in that community to a common end goal? Can that be done? Can what needs to happen be made to happen?

The answer is a resounding yes! Yes, a community that is of, by, and for students can be created and catalyzed in the online classroom. Yes, that relatively unaffiliated group of portraits on the computer screen can in fact come to identify themselves collectively as a specific community with greater capacity for deep and full learning than individual effort alone could

achieve. Yes, that aggregate of individuals not yet coalesced but who have collided for a common purpose – under leadership and with proper stage setting (planning, preparation, and design of classroom process; see Unit 5) and ongoing support – has the potential to become a well-oiled system that works to the benefit of everyone in that system. What needs to happen is education (i.e., explaining the what of desired classroom process), indoctrination (i.e., explaining the why and how of it), and implementation (i.e., the doing of it, or said otherwise, designing and conducting course activities that promote visibility, voice, collaboration, connection, and contribution). The rest of this book offers some strategies to those ends.

Summary

This unit has described and discussed the relevance of community to learning with particular focus on the relevance to the classroom generally and online classroom, more specifically.

What is a community, exactly? In effect, every definition of the term refers to the existence of some kind of significant common ground, a definition that certainly applies to the classroom. However, while online students meet the criterion of coming together in common cause and thus have the makings of a community, that they are not in one another's physical presence makes it more challenging for them to feel a sense of that community. As the online course begins the classroom consists of a number of individuals connected to the instructor as the centerpost of that classroom, a state of affairs that needs to change in order for students to develop a community that will be felt by them as theirs and that will promote full and deep learning for each one. The task of community-building in the online classroom, therefore, is in effect to replace the spokes that bind each student to the instructor with multiple spokes that reach between and among students so that together, using their strengths to meet their needs, they can build a community that will propel them both individually and collectively toward their learning goals.

Four variables consistently stand out in people's perceptions of what makes a good community: feeling valued, feeling influential, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection. Thus, these four variables stand out as obvious targets for community building in the classroom – that is, for efforts to be directed to helping these conditions to take root and to flourish.

Whether or not to engage in community building, which requires greater effort than preparing lecture notes, is a personal pedagogical decision. The basic question is one of whose responsibility it is to make sure that information to be imparted is ingested, digested, and retained well

enough for application. The point of view that drives this work is that instruction has the best chance of reaching its full potential if the learner is heavily involved in shaping the learning trajectory. That said, whether or not a classroom can develop an identity as a community beyond that which is inherent in coming together to learn a subject is up to the instructor, who has the formal authority and thus platform to shape classroom process. Further, the degree to which the instructor values the concept as integral to helping students to master course content will go a long way in determining the nature of the community that does develop and will be reflected in the choice of classroom activities.

Five factors have been identified as advantages to being a member of a community: feeling that membership can help one to meet one's needs; being in the company of others who share significant common ground; access to positive peer relationships; access to potentially useful differences in ways of being, thinking, or doing; and opportunities to hone social skills. Therefore, building a sense of community in the classroom can help students to feel less alone, a state of affairs that gains a certain poignancy for the online classroom; can help them to entertain new ways of doing things or doing things better; and, especially as they work together on classroom activities, can help them to strengthen their interpersonal skills.

In sum, not only can a community be catalyzed in the online classroom with a capacity to enhance the online student's learning experience, to do so has many and multi-faceted rewards for both instructor and student. Leadership with that in mind along with careful and creative planning, preparation, and ongoing support, can help the online classroom to become a well-oiled system that works to the benefit of everyone in that system.

Major Points

- Every definition of the term, *community*, refers to the existence of some kind of significant common ground.
- That online students are not in one another's physical presence makes it challenging for them to feel a sense of community.
- One goal of community building in the online classroom is to replace the spokes that bind each student to the instructor with multiple spokes that reach between and among students.
- Four variables are consistently identified as part and parcel of a "good" community: feeling welcome and accepted, believing oneself to be influential in that community, feeling "right" in place and time; and access to emotional connections.

- The point of view that drives this book is that instruction has the best chance of reaching its full potential if learners are heavily involved in shaping the learning trajectory.
- Whether or not a classroom can develop an identity as a community beyond that which is inherent in coming together to learn a subject is up to the instructor, who has the formal authority and thus platform to shape classroom process.
- The degree to which an instructor values community as integral to teaching will go a long way in determining the look and feel of the classroom.
- Five advantages of community membership are that it can help people to meet needs of all types, it provides the company of similar others, it offers access to building relationships, it can provide new ways to look at old pictures, and it can help people to improve their interpersonal skills.
- Under leadership and with creative planning, preparation, and ongoing support, the classroom can become a well-oiled system that works to the benefit of everyone in that system.

References

Dewey, John. 2019. *Democracy and education: an introduction to the philosophy of education*.

Lang, Norma. 2010. *Group work practice to advance social competence: A specialized methodology for social work*. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "community," accessed January 29, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community.

McMillan, David. and Chavis, David. 1986. "Sense of Community: Definition and Theory." *Journal of Community Psychology*. 14(1): 6-23.

Reich, Rob. 2003. *The Socratic method: What is it and how to use it in the classroom.* Speaking of Teaching. Stanford University Newsletter on Teaching, 13 (1). Retrieved from http://web.stanford.edu/dept/CTL/Newsletter/socratic_method.pdf

Vlastos, Gregory. 2013. *The philosophy of Socrates: a collection of critical essays*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

UNIT 3

GROUPS, COMMUNITY BUILDING, AND LEARNING

The use of groups and group work are major factors in community building in the classroom. Membership in small work (break-out) groups both during class sessions and independently outside of class will help online students to connect with other students in a more intimate way than they might right away in the larger overall classroom group. The larger classroom group plays a role as well, however, and this unit addresses how each of these two types of classroom groups can help online students to develop a happy and healthy, well-functioning learning community that they feel is of, by, and for them.

The unit begins by defining three concepts that form the building blocks of community building based on social group work theory and philosophy: *group work*, *we-ness*, and *group work*. It then discusses the role and practice of group work in the online classroom in particular, including the special value of both small break-out and large classroom groups to community building. That is followed by a number of strategies for harnessing the potential of each type. The unit ends with a summary, roster of major points, and list of references.

Although there is more to community building than using groups, group work as conceptualized by social group work, a specific approach to working with people that is strength based rather than problem focused, does play a major role. Thus, in this unit especially, many citations are offered throughout the discussion to provide further related reading if expanded understanding is desired.

Terms Defined and Deconstructed

To ensure a common understanding as they are used here, it is useful to define and deconstruct three terms that are so important to this discussion: *groupness*, *we-ness*, and *group work*.

Groupness/We-ness

Groupness and *we-ness* are similar but also a little different. They both refer to the way in which the members of a system think of themselves and that system. If we feel our *groupness*, then we see ourselves as belonging to that group and understand that we are together in some kind of common cause (therapy, support, social action, organizational task, etc.). *We are a group*. Thus, to feel our *groupness* means to understand our connection – why we are in a particular system. A family is a group, and a family usually has a sense of group identity, or *groupness*: *We are a group, this family*. Staff in a particular organizational department has a sense of *groupness*: individuals who work in that department all identify with its purpose and work and see their own role as a participant in advancing that department's common cause (such as maintenance, for example, or financial health and welfare or nursing).

We-ness also refers to a sense of belonging, but a sense of *we-ness* refers more specifically to feeling the bond that exists among group members. It connotes emotional attachment, perhaps even ownership and pride of membership. It is a more intimate connection both to the group system and to others in the system. The difference is subtle, but the distinction is useful here because a collectivity of individuals can have a sense of *groupness* (as they enter a new classroom with the common purpose of learning a subject, for example) without a particular sense of *we-ness* (feeling emotionally bonded to others in the group).

Thus, when students of any classroom first come together, simply by virtue of being in the same place (real or virtual) for the same reason (common cause), they are likely to sense or feel their *groupness*. *We are in this classroom all together at this time for a common purpose*. It is a rather intellectual stance, and only when the group (classroom) develops its identity as a community are its members likely to really feel their *we-ness*.

Further, this relationship of *we-ness* to community is reciprocal and synergistic: the evolution of each advances the potential of the other. Once established, this emotional relationship forms the basis for the mutuality that will be requested of group members (in this case, students) to participate in a strength-based group process, whatever its purpose. That is, it will become the impetus for members to share their skills and talents for getting the work done, however the work of that group is defined. In the classroom, it is essentially mastery of course content.

As students see one another in the same place at the same time for the same purpose, then, they will have a sense of their *groupness*. However, as they are called upon to collaborate on course activities, they will inevitably (all things equal) develop a sense of *we-ness*. They will become familiar