

Teaching Methods: Building a Learning Community in the Large Classroom

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1. Building and enhancing a learning community in a classroom can help you to accomplish your teaching goals as well as potentially have an impact on the learning that students engage in outside of the classroom. Perhaps one of the toughest places to develop such a learning community is in the large classes that many of us are assigned to teach. This outline provides you with some modest suggestions based on my experiences and those of others as to how you can develop the learning community in your classroom.

2. We begin with a definition of the learning community. For me, a learning community is one where both the professor and the students share the responsibility for the learning that occurs in the classroom. This sharing of responsibility is demonstrated by mutual preparation, use of a variety of activities and/or techniques so that you can address the different learning styles of your students, and guided respectful discussion. The learning community is not a touchy feely place without form or substance but rather it is a highly analytical environment that has high standards. But, ultimately, remember that the learning community, in order for it to work and be successful for both you and your students, is a place where relationships matter. The relationship between the professor and the class matters as a whole as well as the relationship between each member of the class and the professor. It is essential that you pay attention to both of those relationships in each class. *See* David Dominguez, Principle 2: Good Practice encourages Cooperation Among Students, 49 J. Legal Educ. 386 (1999).

3. While we share the responsibility for developing a learning community in the classroom, it is important to understand that the learning that actually occurs is something that students accomplish for themselves. Clearly, a professor cannot learn for the students. But the professor can facilitate and support an environment within the classroom that makes learning a more likely outcome. Listed below are some core reminders for building a learning community.

a. “People don’t care what you know until they know that you care.” (Former NFL Quarterback and Congressman Jack Kemp). In as many ways

as possible, you need to demonstrate that you care about the students' learning and about their success. Remember this is a relationship therefore only "one act" of caring will not do. You need to demonstrate caring as a part of the way that you engage in your teaching on a regular basis.

b. Be prepared. Sounds obvious doesn't it and yet often professors will spend more time trying to understand and manage the content of the material than to planning how to get students to "shallow" it. Also, it is important to update your notes and keep up with new developments in your field even if the casebook does not have a new edition containing that information. If you try various activities in your classroom, you will want to plan how to integrate it (and in some cases do a trial run) before you introduce it to your class.

c. Find a classroom style that works for you. You must be yourself and no one else in the classroom.

d. Demonstrate and maintain high expectations for your students. You should be willing to explain the rationale behind assignments, or the kinds of questions that you expect them to be able to handle. Tie your expectations to the reality of the practice or personal experiences that you had in practice. In this way, you can help them to understand what you mean by high standards in their school work and once they leave the law school and enter the work world they will be able to translate these standards into their work life.

e. Be humble. All knowledge does not emanate from the fount – i.e., the podium that you are standing at in the front of the classroom. We can (and often do) learn from our students. Further, there may be that occasion (rare of course) when you do not know the answer to a question or you have made an honest mistake. "Fessing up" when you honestly do not know the answer to a question is an option that a professor can use.

f. Set boundaries for the way(s) in which students will interact with each other and you in the classroom. For example, if you say that students must treat each other respectfully during a discussion then you may want to provide a concrete example of respectfully discourse and one that is not. Name calling for example would never be appropriate and would clearly seriously undermine the cohesiveness of the learning community. You must be prepared to reinforce those boundaries when necessary.

Sources: D.K. Newell, Ten Survival Suggestions for Rookie Law Teachers, 33 J. Legal Educ. 693 (1983); Kent D. Syverud, Taking Students Seriously: A Guide for New Law Teachers, 43 J. of Legal Educ. 247 (1993); C. Tomkovick, Ten Anchor Points for Teaching Principles of Marketing, 26 J. Marketing Education 109 (2004); C.J. Auster & M. MacRone, The Classroom as a Negotiated Social Setting: An Empirical Study of the Effects of Faculty Member's Behaviors on Students' Participation, 22 Teaching Sociology 289 (1994).

4. What can you do to help students to share in the responsibility for the learning community? There is much research on the kinds of conditions that need to exist in the classroom to help increase students' motivation and help the professor to achieve his/her goals in the course. See Sara E. Quay and Russell J. Quaglia, Creating a Classroom Culture that Inspires Student Learning, 18 The Teaching Professor 1 (February 2004).

a. Create a sense of belonging in the classroom. One easy way to accomplish this condition is to learn the names of your students as quickly as possible. In addition, the use of an electronic classroom along with the live classroom can create more opportunities to help students to feel a part of the class.

b. Recognize that your students look up to and admire their professors. Whether you like it or not you are a role model for your students. Make a choice as to what kind of a role model you will be.

c. Recognize your students' accomplishments not just their grades. It is useful to take time to acknowledge students who may have successfully competed in a moot court competition or assumed a leadership role in or outside of the law school.

d. Build moments of fun and excitement into your course. You can do this with the kinds of activities that you plan for your course or by allowing yourself to laugh (or even have a good time) in class.

e. Encourage your students to be creative and curious about the subject matter. You can accomplish this by exposing them to another jurisprudential perspective on a case or principle of law. See Okianer Christian Dark, Incorporating Issues of Race, Gender, Class, Sexual

Orientation, and Disability Into Law School Teaching, 32 Willamette L. Rev. 541 (1996).

f. Encourage healthy risk-taking by making it safe for students to both fail and succeed. Think carefully about how you would want to respond to the student who offers an interesting or even intriguing comment but it feels really way-out-there from your perspective.

g. Provide opportunities for students to be leaders in the classroom and to take responsibility for their choices. This can be done by using small group activities in the classroom where a student is selected or volunteers to be the spokesperson for the group.

5. Variety is the spice of life and important to the learning community in the large classroom.

a. The Socratic Method. You really must consider supplementing this method in your large classroom. Remember that this method assumes that one student is engaged in discussion with the professor while the others learn from listening in (and stay alert based on fear that they may be the next victim to be called on by the professor). The assumption is that the student who is on the hot seat is learning something and everyone in the classroom is learning something from that student's performance (or is it the faculty member's performance?)

b. The Problem Method. The use of a problem or a case file can be a very effective way for teaching content, process and raising other issues that may be important to your teaching objectives in the course, e.g., raising ethical issues. There is no need to use long involved problems in order to utilize this method. Casebooks often have problems in the notes that can be just as helpful for the students. See G. L. Ogden, The Problem Method in Legal Education, 34 J. Legal Educ. 654 (1984).

c. Incorporating Writing to Learn Techniques. There is considerable research that writing can be used in the classroom to help facilitate extended thinking on a subject, empower the students to make meaning of the subject and to encourage students to become active learners. These techniques do not necessarily increase the paper load (i.e., grading/evaluation load) for the faculty member. See <http://wac.colostate.edu/intor/pop2d.cfm>.

d. Role-plays. Often I combine the role play with a problem that I have assigned to the class. I will select students to play the roles in the problem ahead of time so that they have ample time to prepare. The role-plays are very effective form of active learning that can allow the student to combine his/her perspective of the facts, law and/or the roles of a client, attorney or judge.

e. Use audiovisual and audio materials in the classroom whenever possible. This comment would extend to the use of power point or other technology in the classroom as well. Remember to check the equipment before class to make sure it works and you know how to operate it as well.

f. Collaborative Work or small group work. I often use buzz groups throughout the semester in the large classroom. The students get a great deal out of the groups, mainly, it provides everyone in the classroom an opportunity to offer his/her opinion or viewpoint on the issue/case/problem all at the same time. It is important to have some dialogue or follow up to the small group work each time so that important teaching points are identified for the students.

g. Show and Tell. Sometimes I might bring in an example of an item in a case or assign students to bring something in so that we can use it in our discussion. For example, when we discussed warnings in products cases I asked each student to bring in an example of a warning from a product. We had a very rich discussion about the necessity for the warning, its purpose, and its effectiveness as a warning.

5. Always debrief or self-evaluate each class in terms of whether you accomplished your teaching objectives for that particular class and any activity that you may have tried. You can also seek student input by asking them to evaluate a particular activity.

6. The Final word – you cannot please everyone so don't try. Your goal is to create, build, and support a learning community for your students. Many students will profit from this environment but there will always be one or two who simply are not compatible with you, the notion of a learning community or have other issues unrelated to you. As long as that student(s) do not disrupt the class or actively undermine the learning community, then you simply have to let them go and focus on the overwhelming majority of your class who are interested in learning and interested in learning from you.