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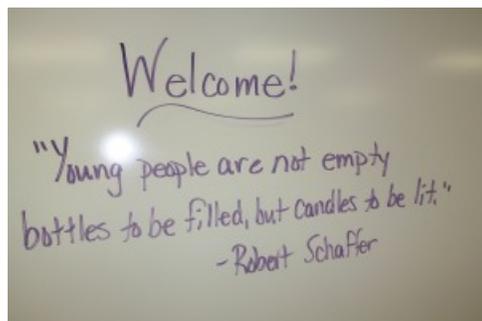
September 1, 2014

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14 Ways to Cultivate Classroom Chemistry

By [Sarah Brown Wessling](#) | September 10, 2012 11:20 am

The Intangibles of a Celebrated Classroom



It's only September and I'm already thinking June. Not because I'm counting down days or because I wish summer were already here; I'm thinking about May because I want to be one of those teachers who breezes into a lunch conversation and says, "I'm really going to miss this class. They are such a special group." Sometimes we get lucky, there's just this natural chemistry

that happens when a certain group of students auspiciously find each other in a classroom. Other times a group will bond over an experience – a shared victory or a great loss. But most of time, this “chemistry” isn't handed to us, it's something we have to go out and create.

And create we do. We cultivate **relationships**, we create **routines**, we investigate how to **create communities** from our classrooms. In fact, if classroom community were my Pinterest board, here's what you would see:

- All of us learning each others' names
- Students being grouped with classmates they might not seek out on their own and then being asked to learn something new about them
- Pictures of student work posted around the classroom
- Photographs of students used to organize students into groups
- A class poem that we wrote together on the first day of school
- Or our class webpage where students can find blog posts of our work in class and photographs of their contributions

There's no doubt that the membership, the trust, the sense of self that comes from being part of a classroom community keeps kids in school and keeps them engaged.

While creating communities takes time and patience, its more elusive partner, “culture,” may be even more challenging to unearth. While fueled by a strong community, culture requires us to delve into creating shared values, beliefs and attitudes about learning. In our room, we call these dispositions and realizing them starts by elevating us all to the *status of learner*.

Building culture is an ongoing process for me. I learned early in my career that

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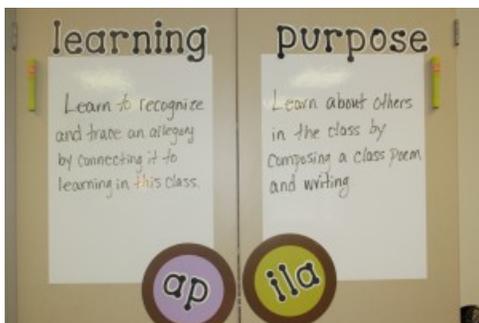
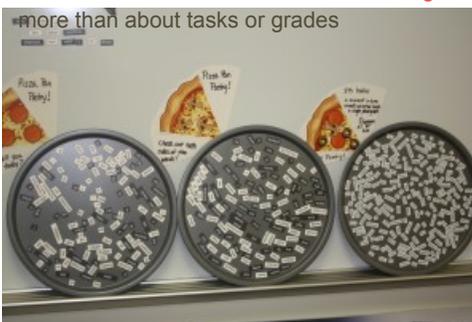
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from year to year and depends entirely on the mindset of the students who walk into the room. This means that I have tried and am always trying new approaches. This year is no exception. If you walked into our classroom you'd see and hear the ways I'm purposefully building culture:

- You would hear “we” more than “me” or “you”
 - You would see my desk in the back of the classroom
 - You would pause on your way through the door to look in a mirror while reading the phrase “Today, see yourself_____.” Right now it projects “See yourself building confidence.”
 - You would overhear us **talk about learning**
- You would be drawn to the “pizza pan poetry” that reminds us we’re always immersed in language
 - You would snicker while I geek out giving a book talk on this unique collection of children’s poems I just found
 - You would notice the curious mantra, “Tell me what your brain is doing right now.”
 - You would see the language of our learning dispositions on the wall, always reminding us of our real purpose



I like to think that community is our sense of belonging and culture ensures the value of what we belong to. So however we go about it, these “strategies” create that “know it when you see it” community and that “love it when you live it” culture.

After all, when Community and Culture take their rightful places in the desks of our classrooms, we can look forward to a June when we didn't just finish a school year, but put learning in its rightful place: their heads and our shared ideals.

Sarah Brown Wessling is a high school English teacher in Johnston, Iowa. She is the 2010 National Teacher of the Year and is the Teacher Laureate for Teaching Channel. She also hosts “Teaching Channel Presents” on public television stations around the country. Connect with Sarah on Twitter – @SarahWessling.

Classroom Community, Classroom Culture, Classroom Experiences, Community, Engagement, Mindset, Motivation | 8 comments

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Taghreed Sbai Aug 30, 2014 8:27am

How do you do the "pizza pan poetry"? I have always seen the pans displayed in the background in you classroom and was intrigued by them. Is there a video lesson on "pizza pan poetry"?



Dolly Cho Nov 6, 2013 10:18pm

Hi! This is a really inspiring article for me as a first-year teacher. I have been struggling with one of my classes because of their already-formed classroom culture. They have cliques and it's hard to break those sometimes. If you have any suggestions for me that would be great! I also was curious to know more about the "pizza pan poetry" you have up here. I'm assuming that you used this during the poetry unit, but how does it work? Thanks!



Eduardo Aguilar Nov 6, 2013 12:29pm

Hi Joanna- I definitely understand the challenges of creating a cohesive classroom environment that effectively engages a group of academically diverse students.

What I have found to be helpful with this dynamic, is to focus establishing a positive sense of team between the students as a whole which would help alleviate some of the "show down" dynamics that you're experiencing. To begin with, I found it to be helpful to set the tone for getting to know each other better through a quick "game" called The Hot Seat. The set up is simple.

- 1- Designate a chair/stool at the front or center of the room as the "Hot Seat"
- 2- Have someone, I'd recommend yourself to begin with, sit in the "Hot Seat"
- 3- Let students know that they can ask any question. Give the caveat that any inappropriate questions will be met with a "Not an appropriate question" response and that they will be skipped.
- 4- Let the students ask questions until they run out

The benefit of this simple activity is that through you, students are able to find connections not just to you but to each other. Someone might ask about a show that they like to see if you like it, which might trigger another student to also state how much they like the show, creating a simple yet powerful connection between the two students.

I have found this activity to be fun and effective for all grades (1st through college) and even with groups of adults as an icebreaker.

Let me know if you decide to use this as a step in helping you create a classroom environment that is more conducive to moving students towards higher outcomes regardless of their current academic levels.

-Eduardo



Joanna C Dec 1, 2012 10:53am

I wasn't sure where to post this, but I was hoping for some input on a school related thing. So, I have large class sections this semester, 23-25 students per class (that's big for our school). The classes are heterogeneously grouped, and our school does not a lot of options for honors/AP at any grade level. So, my classes range from Ivy League material, to extremely low IQ IEP students, to major behavior problems. I have tables, which in the past, I have always set up in a horseshoe or "dining room" set up. Students could discuss as a full class, we were all on the same level, all facing each other. Because I have larger classes, I had to get more tables, and now, although we face each other, we are very far apart. And, frankly, this is not working with these huge, diverse classes this year.

I wonder if there was any set up that worked for you best. I could face the tables all towards the chalkboard and line the kids up, but I really would prefer to teach in the "Gradual Release" manner. Our school has also adopted the "Penn Literacy Network" best practices, and we are all required to run our classes in a co-constructivist manner, always - No lectures.

I'm stumped. I don't want to obviously group kids by ability, however they have already done this on their own, and it's like a showdown since we all face each other: This side of the room wants to learn and is always engaged, that side of the room is... Not as much.

At this point there are actual showdown type looks that go on at times. All the students respect me and they don't misbehave. Some kids do become distracted easily.

There are just super high level kids, and kids who "don't get it" and need a lot more guidance and help to stay engaged.

I'm stumped on how to set up the physical classroom tables in a way that is most engaging and most beneficial to all the students' learning.



Sarah Brown Wessling Oct 17, 2012 12:39pm

Hi Mary,

I start with a series of sentence stems which the students complete by putting their response on strips of paper. We then have two rounds: 1) everyone places a strip of paper on the poem and 2) they can move a strip, add one or pass. The proof of this pudding is in the reading, though. I have to sell it!



May Betancourt Oct 16, 2012 6:32am

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Inspiring article!



Mary Dovey Sep 15, 2012 1:03pm

How do you do your class poem? I like the idea!



Missy Dominy Sep 10, 2012 2:38pm

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as I read this, the students' faces of communities in classrooms of pasts years go through my mind. How I miss them!



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