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A Life-Changing GIFT: The Impact of Classroom Climate and Community Building

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*Invited Article***A Life-Changing GIFT: The Impact of Classroom Climate and Community Building****Joshua Westwick, EdD**Assistant Professor
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Joshua.Westwick@sdstate.edu**Kelli J. Chromey, MS**Doctoral Student
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kelli.chromey@my.ndsu.edu**Abstract**

The study of classroom climate and community has been a hallmark of communication education research for several decades (Dwyer et al., 2004). This wealth of meaningful research has provided scholars and instructors an abundance of practical strategies and knowledge to help develop and strengthen classroom climate and community. Moreover, this research has illustrated the relevance and need for a positive classroom climate and community within our educational institutions. The impact of creating a community-oriented classroom climate was documented by Dwyer et al. (2004), who found that, "Fostering a positive climate and sense of community for students in educational settings has been linked with retention and academic success" (p. 265). Considering the notable educational value of this initiative, the importance of developing a supportive classroom climate becomes apparent. Recognizing the necessity of community development to student success, this essay describes the key elements of classroom climate and community, presents a unique activity to begin building community in the classroom, and concludes by discussing an extraordinary student bond forged through community development in one of our courses.

Elements of Classroom Climate and Community

Many instructors recognize the importance of climate and community development within the classroom and have taken steps to include these elements which can be designed to increase student success. From a pedagogical perspective, overlooking these elements of the course design may have potential negative impacts for students. David and Capraro (2001) posited that, "Teachers who fail in the attempt to build a classroom community will in turn classify students by their ability and will often negatively influence the achievement of those students" (p. 81). Thus, understanding the components of community and climate within the classroom can aid

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instructors' ability to develop and refine classroom activities which can improve community and climate in the classroom. Additionally, we can potentially improve students' academic achievement and development.

According to Rosenfeld (1983), communication climate is defined as "the social/psychological context within which relationships occur" (p. 167). Although initially developed to help assess group interaction (Rosenfeld, 1983), the concept of communication climate has also focused on research which explores the impact of communication climate within educational settings (Dywer, 2004; Gillen et al., 2011; Johnson, 2009; Meyers, 1995; Rosenfeld, 1983).

While a clear definition of classroom climate has not been agreed upon (Gillen, Wright, & Spink, 2011), Myers (1995) suggested that "students' perception of climate rests on how well teachers establish an environment in which mutual interaction is valued, encouraged, and supported" (p. 193). A positive classroom climate exists when student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions are an important and respected component of the course design. Booker (2008) explored the role of the teacher and peers in developing community in the classroom. The results of this study indicated that the role of the instructor, followed by the role of peers, had a significant impact on the students' sense of belonging within the classroom community. This research illustrates the value of providing opportunities for interaction, not only between the teacher and student, but also between students. Achieving the aforementioned interactions within the classroom can be established by a systematic process which often begins on the first day of instruction.

Creating Classroom Community

David and Capraro (2001) suggested that there are various methods used to create community within the classroom. Allen (2000) suggested that, "The first step in creating community in the classroom is helping students drop their guard long enough to begin to get to know one another and their teacher as people" (pp. 24-25). The beginning of the semester is an excellent time to begin building community and encouraging students to interact with each other and the instructor. One way instructors can facilitate this is through the use of icebreakers at the beginning of a new class (Barkley, 2010). Generally, these icebreakers occur within the first couple of days of the semester and are designed to help students form relationships with their peers and instructors. This relationship development is vital to building a sense of community in the classroom that can help students feel secure and supported (Allen, 2000).

Additionally, "students should develop a process of understanding, sharing, compassion and empathy" (David & Capraro, 2001, p. 81). Thus, instructors should create opportunities at the beginning of the semester, and throughout the course, for dialogue, which allows students an opportunity to engage one another. This is especially significant for our undergraduate students as their need for inclusion and communal belonging is particularly relevant (Booker, 2008). Allen (2000) explained that, "Students need to feel not only that their teacher and classmates know a little about them, but that they are accepted for who they are, too" (pp. 25-26). Thus, in order to effectively develop the classroom community and climate instructors must offer their student's opportunities to disclose about themselves and to establish trust amongst their peers. We have found great success through the use of an interactive activity at the beginning of the semester which focused on breaking down communication barriers and increasing the breadth and depth of the student-to-student and student-to-faculty relationship.

Comm Besties: An Activity to Build a Supportive Classroom Climate and Community

Interviewing and introducing a classmate is an icebreaker that has been used repeatedly in several communication classrooms. The activity encourages students both to speak publicly and to become acquainted with their classmates. The authors of this manuscript have used this activity for a number of years; however, we put a unique spin on it to enhance the community development and classroom climate. In order to better acquaint students and help them feel comfortable with one another in the class, we created the “Comm Bestie” activity.

In this activity, students are asked to find a partner and spend time in class getting to know that individual. Random selection of the pairings is important to ensure that students create a new friendship during the class rather than choose a person they may already know. Students ask questions of their fellow classmate that any best friend should know (e.g., hometown, hobbies, something unique about them). After ten minutes of discussion, the students are asked to introduce their new Comm Bestie to the rest of the class.

When this part of the activity concludes, we inform the students that the student they interviewed and introduced is now their Comm Bestie for the semester. We then provide some instructions and guidelines for the pairs. Should their Comm Bestie miss a class session, they have someone to contact for class notes or questions. Additionally, they have someone to look to for a reassuring smile if they are feeling nervous during a speech. Finally, each student has someone with whom they can feel comfortable discussing course concepts or individual challenges that may arise during the semester. This activity heeds Johnson’s (2009) advice to develop multiple opportunities for peers to interact continually throughout the course.

Our hope when engaging in the Comm Bestie activity is to create a friendship amongst the student pair that will last throughout the academic semester and even outside of the classroom into remaining college semesters. This activity begins to build the class community and develop a supportive communication climate. Community is built through discussion and disclosure when students begin to personally disclose and understand each other (David & Capraro, 2001) thus creating an inclusive classroom environment (Booker, 2008).

An Extraordinary Outcome of Classroom Community Building

The outcomes of establishing a strong classroom community extend beyond the outcomes of empirical research. In certain situations the impact of community building can have surprising and life-changing outcomes. One particular life-changing case occurred during the fall semester of 2011, when two students were arbitrarily assigned to be Comm Besties. During the course of the semester, the two randomly-assigned Comm Besties became friends. In a local newspaper, one of the students recalled how their friendship developed in the class: “We sat next to each other and I think we exchanged maybe a handful of sentences and we just knew that we were best friends at that point. It was really strange, but it was pretty cool” (Kubal, 2015).

Unbeknownst to the instructor, the friendship they developed in the classroom continued well beyond the end of the semester. As relationships evolve they grow in both breadth and depth. That is, as the relationship progresses individuals feel increasingly more comfortable sharing more topics with one another and more comfortable going into greater detail with those topics (Gamble & Gamble, 2014). The relationship between our, now former, students continued to grow for some time. In fact, it was long into their friendship when one of the

students disclosed her medical history with the other and explained that one day she would need to have a kidney transplant.

What started out as a joke and friendly banter about being an organ donor soon became a reality. In May 2014, three years after the students met and became Comm Besties, one of the students donated her kidney to the other. As The South Dakota State University Collegian (Smith, 2014) described it, the connection created in the South Dakota State University basic communication course “turned into an inseparable bond when one girl stepped up in her friend’s time of need” (p. A1). Though this extraordinary outcome may not be typical in many classrooms, students choosing to continue their Comm Bestie friendships outside the classroom is typical at our university and has positive impacts on student success – and changes lives.

Conclusion

Allen (2000) writes about the intrinsic value of getting to know each other as individuals in the classroom as well as the positive outcomes of classroom community creation. When classroom climate and community become keystones of an instructor’s pedagogical roadmap amazing things can happen in the classroom. Allen (2000) stated, “The atmosphere of acceptance creates an environment for a lot of positive things to happen” (p. 24). As illustrated in this essay, extraordinary outcomes are possible. The friendship between the two students enrolled in the basic communication course developed through the process of understanding, sharing, compassion, and empathy (David & Caparao, 2001). In our example, creating a community in our classroom resulted in the most positive thing to happen, a true friendship was formed that extended beyond the classroom. Additionally, a student’s life was saved. Community building within the communication discipline holds the potential to foster meaningful, enduring, and even life-changing relationships.

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