



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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BUILDING A COMMUNITY IN A COLLEGE CLASSROOM

Aristotle once said that man is a social animal, and modern research confirms that people thrive best in an environment to which they feel connected. No matter how esthetically pleasing, any environment soon becomes dull and meaningless if there are no people to humanize it. Humanization requires emotional connection. The classroom is a focal point for laying the foundation for this connection to college environment, but that initial interaction does not happen by accident. It has to be carefully orchestrated and engineered by the classroom guru, the instructor.

Many college students are too busy in their personal and academic lives to be engaged with other students—even if they are savvy enough to know how important engagement can be. In addition to their college courses, they hold jobs, run households, and have extensive family obligations. Often, the only contact students have with the instructor and other students occurs during class. When students are given the opportunity to connect with other students, they not only become more conscious of the tremendous benefits of collaboration but are more willing to make efforts to maintain that connection. It is crucial that instructors lay the groundwork early in the semester for connecting the students to each other, anchoring them to the college, and facilitating interaction throughout the semester. To achieve this goal, instructors, especially those who teach developmental courses, must design assignments that meet a three-prong test. One, does the assignment connect students to each other in and outside the classroom? Two, does the assignment connect students to important and relevant events on the college campus? Third, does the assignment deepen students' understanding of related events in their communities as a result of individual and collective involvement in and out of the classroom?

Laying the Foundation

On the first day of class, I give students notecards and ask them to write their name, address, phone numbers, and any other contact information they want

to share. I jokingly assure them that I will only call them with issues that affect their grades. I started this practice after years of frustrating and fruitless effort to contact students through the contact numbers they provide on the college profile. I also divide students into groups and give the class a few minutes to meet, greet, introduce themselves, and choose a group leader. At the end of the meet-and-greet, each group introduces its members to the whole class and gives me a list of members' names and contact information they want to share. I inform students that the list they give me is for my use and that I will not share any of the information, including with members of their group; therefore, they will need to exchange phone numbers with more than one member in their group. Collecting this list may seem redundant, but I sometimes find it useful because students may include contact information they have not listed on the notecard or elsewhere. I also stress the importance of respecting each other's privacy by not sharing phone numbers without asking permission and that the information we gather will pertain only to the class. I encourage students to call each other when they miss class, go over notes, and obtain other information about activities that occurred while they were absent.

Another important strategy for keeping the members of the group connected and engaged is to give them multiple opportunities to work in groups. At least once a week, I ask students to sit in their groups and go over certain assignments, brainstorm on an assigned topic for an essay, or proofread paragraphs.

I inquire from group members the whereabouts of students who are absent. At first, students seem puzzled or even irritated but soon become willing to be their neighbor's keeper. This particular technique has been most helpful in locating students who suddenly disappear from class. I have found students are sometimes the only and most effective links. For example, about the ninth week of one semester, a student, let's call him Jim, who had been attending classes regularly and was doing very well, stopped attending class. My efforts to contact him failed. His group members noted that he had also stopped coming to the math class they take with him. Every class, I asked if they had heard from or seen Jim. One group member reported that when he called Jim's home number



(different from the one I had on record), the message was that his answering machine was full. Finally, one student revealed that he lived in the same building with Jim and promised to check on him. Later, he reported that no one answered the door. Finally, about two weeks later, when Jim was no longer incommunicado, he came to my office, quite excited because he learned that the whole class had been concerned about his well being. With help from his group members, he was caught up in no time and finished the semester successfully. Other examples demonstrate that group members often are more effective in helping other students get back on track than are instructors.

Building a Bridge in the Classroom

Group projects are an important collaborative experience. At the beginning of the semester when students are divided into groups, they are instructed to choose one episode or scene from a novel we read and prepare to dramatize the scene in class. As students read assigned chapters each week, they are instructed to note specific episodes that they can use for their group projects. Periodically, I check with each group to see if it has come to agreement about a chapter or episode. In their regular group work, I sometimes give them extra time to decide an episode or I end class early and give them the remaining time to meet and work on their presentations. By week eight, each group is required to turn in a written explanation of its project. About the twelfth week, students make a mock presentation to the class. The presentations are critiqued by the class, so each group has an opportunity to improve before the final presentation, which takes place during the last week of the semester.

This group project is by far the most meaningful experience the students have to connect to characters, settings, and actions in ways they cannot possibly do by just reading the novel. For example, a popular episode from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the church scene in which Sister Monroe experiences the Holy Spirit, and ecstatically calls out "Preach it!" The scene is humorous and entertaining; it resonates with many who have experienced this phenomenon and provides a background for others. Another episode involves Mama and Maya going out to look for Bailey at night. This scene was powerfully evoked when students switched off the lights, closed the blinds, and came in with lighted lamps. Students also reconstruct an object in the novel and use it in the project. For example, one semester when the class read Mark Twain's *Pudd'n'head Wilson*, one group made an outstanding replica of Count Luigi's Indian knife with exquisite gemstones for less than a dollar of materials from a thrift store. Every semester, I am surprised at the different scenes students choose and how powerfully and imaginatively they evoke them.

Extending and Bolstering the Bridge on Campus and Beyond

I also invite students to other activities on campus—e.g., poetry forum or chess club. This gives students opportunities to show talents or creativity that they may not have had opportunity to share in the classroom. It boosts their self-confidence. I ask students to memorize and recite particular poems for extra credit. They can collaborate on longer pieces and do dramatic readings at the campus poetry forum. Another assignment for extra credit is to bring in a newspaper article that discusses any topic with which we have dealt in class. For example, one semester, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* offered an article about why Mark Twain continues to be topical. A student brought the article to class and shared the main ideas with the class.

Creating the right assignments to help students connect with each other and life outside the classroom requires extra effort, but the benefits are incalculable. Students become more critical thinkers and active, creative, and independent learners. These attributes will serve them well in other subjects and areas of life even after they have forgotten your class.

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