

LEARNING TO LEARN: CREATING COMMUNITY BEFORE CRAMMING IN CONTENT

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Abstract

Innovation in the classroom flourishes when learners become part of a collaborative and creative community. All too often, content heavy curriculum supersedes the equally important "process" component of learning in higher education. From our experience across a variety of disciplines, learning can be deepened by spending more time and paying greater attention to creating learning communities—a concept that is highlighted as a “high impact practice” in student recruitment and retention literature. Whether the setting is a conventional university classroom or lecture hall, a field or forest on the edge of campus, or a local neighbourhood, educators can facilitate a learning community through a progression of intra- and interpersonal explorations. This workshop engaged participants in a series of experiential activities that aim to foster initiative, leadership, self-awareness, and trust—factors that underlie effective collaborations for innovative learning. Workshop activities were debriefed from both the participant and facilitator perspectives.

Our Story and the Background Literature

Our interest in creating learning communities extends from work that we’ve both undertaken in the outdoors for the past 20 years. As outdoor educators, one of the learning experiences that we have had in common is that we’ve both worked at Outward Bound Canada, Pat as a wilderness instructor on 14 to 30 day summer and winter courses, and Emily as an instructor and later as a teacher at Outward Bound Canada College. Outward Bound, as an international entity, was founded by German educational reformer Kurt Hahn. Foundational to the organization are 4 pillars: self-reliance, physical fitness, craftsmanship, and service and compassion (Outward Bound USA, 2007). These core tenets were originally derived to help young sailors return from war by learning the community-based survival techniques that their older counterparts accrued through life experience. Many other outdoor organizations have since arisen with similar values that focus on resilience and the ability to overcome adversity. While our research and teaching interests have broadened and shifted since our time at Outward Bound, those experiences did pique our interest in continuing to facilitate group processes through themes such as respect, conflict resolution, leadership, trust, communication, feedback, and self-directed learning.

With research and teaching interests in environmental education and Indigenous decolonizing pedagogies (Emily), and outdoor recreation and behaviour change/advocacy of tourism (Pat), we both moved into academic settings in various countries and at several different institutions. In each case, the facilitation skills we learned through our work in the field of outdoor education often seemed to influence our pedagogical praxis. We acted as guides to help students find information, rather than as

all-knowing experts. In two different teacher education programs, Emily invited students to explore the magic of self-directed, experiential, and community-based learning. Whether in a classroom on campus, on a pebbled beach beside a lake, or in a local sustainability or cultural organization, students came together regularly in a circle to make decisions about their learning and their class community. Pat's academic teaching led him back into the outdoors through field schools, which at their heart require students to enact an effective community simply to conduct daily life and stay safe in the field. These field schools varied in length from 5 to 30 days, and covered a variety of geographic locations from rural field stations, to remote rivers, to literally the end of the earth—Antarctica. In all of these instances we saw our students' (and our) learning flourish because of the community relationships and underlying respect for cooperative learning that existed in these situations.

In the summer of 2013, we both moved to Sydney, NS, mainly due to our interest in the Bachelor of Arts Community Studies (BACS), a unique degree program at Cape Breton University (CBU). We are grateful for the opportunity to teach into this program that we feel mirrors our pedagogical values of process oriented, student-directed, community-based experiential learning. BACS has been CBU's well-kept secret since it began in 1975. It was the university's first degree offering and was based on a pedagogical approach developed at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. It is rooted in the philosophies of John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and Paolo Friere, some of the educational thinkers often aligned with Kurt Hahn and the growth of experiential education (Smith & Knapp, 2011). For a comprehensive history of the BACS degree and its development see Cameron (1995) or Connell and Seville (2007).

In the core courses of the BACS degree we are not entrusted as “single experts” at the front of the lecture theatre, but rather, facilitators who assist small groups of students to create a community of learners. Students are supported to inquire into any community-based topic they choose, and they are encouraged to engage with community members firsthand, learning through conversation, interviews, service, and action. Students have reflected that learning in small groups in a local community compels them to get to know each other more intimately as they need to work together to organize and coordinate learning experiences. This type of “learning community,” as well as community-based projects are recognized as high impact practices within literature on creating life-changing student learning and increasing retention at the undergraduate level (see Kuh, 2008 and NSSE, 2015).

The notion of community has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past decades. Communities may be distinct locales, or groups with a shared sense of belonging, but more so now they can be imagined, virtual, or interconnected, as the manner in which we engage with multiple communities and social networks has become clear (see Blackshaw, 2010). Community Studies might then be described as the “liquid modern stage” (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 14) that we engage with in an open-ended manner. The BACS degree program's experiential process focuses on learning through problem-solving, critical thinking, reflective learning, group work, action research and of course preparing students for the ever-changing job market. Students can imagine getting ready to tackle an assignment on any topic—let's say children's engagement with nature—and even though it may happen in a first year course, the class size is small. Students get to know their classmates and professor as friends and co-learners. Months later they might be working with the local school district to initiate an

island-wide outdoor learning program, or planning to assist their professor with research on the topic. In future years they know they could continue with research or action on this topic in other classes, if they and their group choose, and then they will continue to interact with a diversity of community stakeholders (Maher & Root, 2015).

This type of conscious community building is common in experiential education pedagogies. Frank (2004) has produced an excellent “road map” to community building, complete with educational foundations for collaboration and co-creation, as well as a variety of activities, and thus we would encourage readers to investigate that resource. Frank (2004) connects the conversation to the thinking of Hahn and Dewey amongst others, but also encourages educators to simply go where their own community dictates. Every “caring classroom,” whether it is in P-12 or higher education is unique and needs different insights and constructs; however we must also remember that a caring classroom is not an end, it is a journey, and one that requires ongoing support and nurturing.

More recently O’Connell and Cuthbertson (2009) have envisioned the creation of conscious groups within the fields of recreation and leisure. Employing the seminal works on theoretical group constraints of Lewin (1948) and the sequential stages of group development (forming, storming, norming, and performing) developed by Tuckman (1965), O’Connell and Cuthbertson (2009) move the discussion to one of “conscious groups” as a means whereby personal growth of a group member is in line with other aspects of group productivity. Everyone seeks to learn and grow from their experiences, striving to learn about themselves and the whole community. Like Frank’s (2004) work, O’Connell and Cuthbertson (2009) offer an excellent overview of experiential education literature and offer a variety of activities.

Within BACS—and the approaches of the individual faculty members in the Department of Community Studies—we believe that we can help create conscious groups and caring classrooms, and also do so in a manner that supports disciplinary boundaries and interests. Every student in a BACS degree is enrolled in a series of core Community Studies (COMS) courses, which are based on the process-oriented pedagogy. Students also take majors and minors in whatever field they are interested in. These could be conventional academic fields (such as history, anthropology, or philosophy), or more applied options such as psychology, communication, or sport and human kinetics. Thus, in each of the core courses we find diversity in students’ interests, which further expands once the class learning shifts to include the wider community at CBU or beyond the university. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9) speak to this sense of community in using four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Within a single COMS course these four elements may play out to varying degrees, but they are certainly present across the suite of courses. Using activities, such as those outlined later in the article, courses encourage membership. Once the first year of COMS is complete students feel as though they belong to a group and value the group (influence). As students move to second year and work on community-based research they see their influence turn to integration as they assist with the needs of other communities (those they produce research for). In turn, they have a shared emotional connection to community when they engage in the third year action project, and fourth year seminar, at which point they are reflecting on their entire program. Further integration of work experience placements creates a sense of community for the students.

Activities

In the workshop at the AAU Teaching Showcase we discussed a number of activity options we use to build community within our COMS 1100 classes. COMS 1100, *Introduction to Community Studies*, is a first-year course with a maximum of 18 students. The course is a full year offering and introduces students to a range of community issues, stakeholders, and decision-making processes, but it also teaches them to be self-directed in their learning and try to better understand their own learning as well as that of their smaller group (usually 9 students). We use a number of initiative activities, examples of which can be found in many outdoor and adventure education activity books (See Project Adventure www.pa.org and their three comprehensive “classic” texts: *Quicksilver*, *Silver Bullets*, and *Cowstails and Cobras*). There is a wealth of activity literature available, and we encourage facilitators to also create their own activities. In the workshop we showcased two we used in fall 2014 to start the process in COMS 1100: the Silent Opera and the Group Pencil Maze. These two activities stress different concerns we see when building community in our classrooms—they can ladder together as part of a group progression, but can also stand alone as needed.

Silent Opera: This is a well-loved activity in many programs. Emily first learned Silent Opera while working at the Kinark Outdoor centre in central Ontario, and Pat first encountered it at Big Cove YMCA Camp in Pictou County, NS. We’ve both been implementing it ever since. Variations of it (and specific instructions) can be found easily through a Google search, and because of its wide use, full credit to its origin is difficult to ascertain. The activity requires a group of people to communicate a set of instructions for completing three simple tasks, to a person who is blind folded. For example, the tasks could include locating and picking up a ball, jumping into a hula-hoop, or placing a shoe into a bucket. The catch is that the message must be communicated without speaking (by using actions) to an intermediary who may speak, but who does not know what the tasks are, nor is able to see the blindfolded person. Inevitably the entire group experiences communication frustrations including the lack of a feedback loop, the inability to communicate a consistent message, challenges interpreting/receiving a message, the confusion of non-verbal communication, etc. A debrief of the activity allows participants to review what occurred and share both the frustrations and successes that they experienced through trial and error. Once they have discussed the approaches and strategies that occurred through the activity participants are encouraged to think about how what they learned about communication may be relevant to their group’s ability to function and communicate through other real-world tasks.

Group Pencil Maze: Emily first learned a variation of this activity during an adventure facilitation workshop delivered by Adventureworks! Associates (see www.adventureworks.org). In this activity, participants stand shoulder to shoulder in a circle. Participants are each given one standard, unsharpened pencil. To begin they arrange themselves so that they suspend one pencil between each two people in the circle. The pencils must be held by the touch of the fingertip only. The group is then instructed to walk a certain distance (and often around a tree or a bench) and back to their starting position without dropping any pencils. Should a pencil drop, the group is required to begin again. As you can imagine, the task becomes challenging as the circle of participants morphs and spreads out while the participants walk. To be successful the group needs to negotiate dynamics such as communication,

leadership, cohesion, cooperation, problem-solving, and persistence. The activity can be debriefed to discuss those aspects of group process and can easily be tailored to explore whatever specific dynamics may arise for each particular group. One nice aspect of this activity is that it takes very little prep and almost no props—just a box of pencils.

These activities are a starting point—for COMS 1100 and for the entire suite of COMS courses that make up the core of the BACS degree. These activities establish rapport and help to create community, but they must be supported by a degree of continued nurturing. A community in the classroom needs ongoing “care and feeding” to blossom at the end of first semester, the end of first year and throughout a student’s university degree. One would hope that such community also encourages life-long learning and a sense of conscious citizenship.

Debrief

As is common in most outdoor education programs, following our classroom activities (and in this instance also following our facilitation of other instructors in those activities) we allowed space for a debrief. We debriefed the activities themselves, the facilitation of such, and the wider challenges of creating classroom community. Debriefing allows participants to reflect on what they’ve learned and how they plan to apply that learning; reflection and application are two key components to a cycle of experiential learning as noted by Kolb (1984). Within a debrief, there are a wide variety of questions and activities that can be explored to facilitate reflective learning. Many follow the Funnelling approach, derived from Gestalt therapy (see Borton, 1970), and expand on the themes, “What?” to “So What?” and finally, “Now What?” For an excellent overview of types of debriefing, phases used throughout the history of outdoor and adventure education, and possible facilitation activities see Chapters 14 to 17 in Priest and Gass (2005).

In our debrief of the activities themselves we followed the structure noted above and reached the standard conclusions we seek to elicit from our students: Silent Opera has different roles that then lead to a discussion of communication and Group Pencil Maze informs the groups about topics such as cooperation and problem-solving. For the overall workshop we led a small group discussion to explore the following questions:

1. Why bother to create community?
2. How does community enhance learning?
3. What are the challenges/benefits of this approach?
4. What does community in the classroom look like?
5. Is there a continuum for community in the classroom—a range of possibilities?
6. Do you have any useful strategies/activities?
7. What are the institutional constraints?
8. What are the disciplinary constraints?
9. How does community impact student experience?
10. How might you integrate community building with class assessment? And should we?

These questions, and a more informal approach to discussion, allowed for a lively conversation and contributions from participants who were already well experienced in the field of community building in higher education. The type of cooperative learning environment expressed in our COMS 1100 classrooms and elsewhere, as was discovered in the workshop debrief, is exciting. From the field of educational psychology, cooperative learning is a true success story (see Johnson & Johnson, 2010). From preschool to graduate school, and inclusive of adult workplace training, social interdependence creates positive outcomes—over the last 60 years the outcomes that were once dismissed, and only celebrated as a manifestation in practice, are now also validated by theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Cooperative (community-based) learning works, whether in small or large groups, or in formal or in informal settings. Considering some of the questions we posed to our participants will assist in developing such programs.

Conclusion

With this article, and the workshop from which it is based, we hope to have piqued your interest. How can a sense of community influence learning? Where should a focus on group dynamics and cooperation fit when your discipline-specific course already has a lot of content to cover? By showcasing a few activities that we like to use with our classes, and discussing the background for those, their purpose, and an approach to debriefing, we hope we have provided an engaging example as well as some references and resources for future inquiry. Community is critical, how you create it to foster your students' learning is up to you.

We also hope that if pedagogical theory, particularly around experiential learning, is of value to you inside and outside your classroom that the information we've provided may be helpful. Above all, we encourage educators to experiment: try silent opera or group pencil maze, try other activities from organizations such as *Project Adventure* or other resources, or make up activities that suit your own needs. The scholarly literature supports a cooperative manner of learning that creates community in the classroom, but the best result will be seeing your students laughing, connecting with one another and most definitely ready to learn as their own community.

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