

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN YOUR CLASSROOM

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“**T**eachers who know how the parents and grandparents of their pupils live and think will understand them better and be able to work efficiently with them.” These are the words of Hopi educator Polyingaysi Q yawaym, also known as Elizabeth Q. White (Carlson, 1964). They are especially relevant to today’s classrooms and should be the starting point for the new school year.

The first time we meet our students is key to how the year goes with them and to building community in our classroom. This article will outline a number of strategies that I have used successfully to do this.

Knowing each other

We (and it is important to include yourself, the teacher, in the community) need to get to know each other, to find out who we are, where we are from, how we came to be here, our languages, our interests, our skills, our strengths; in short, the more we know about each other the more likely we are to understand each other and feel we are a community. We also need to know and recognise the values that guide us and will take us through the next year.

A great starter activity is Mobile Maps. You need an open space for this. In a school where most of the students are from the country you are in, you need to display a map of the country with key towns marked and markers on the ground showing the names of these in the correct locations. With a more diverse student body, you might want to display a map of the world and simply indicate the cardinal points: north, south, east and west. You give the following instructions:

I am in XXX... This is north (pointing), south, east and west. (Point out a few towns/countries.) Place yourselves around the area to show where you live now... Now move to where you were born... your mother was born... your father was born... one of your grandparents was born...

Remind students to watch their classmates to learn more about them.

Having learned something about our geographical background, let us learn more about each other. Which Community? is a great way to do this. Ask the students to move physically into sets. For example, students of this school, then students of this class. Of course, they will all then be in one set or community. Now ask them to

divide according to other criteria e.g. girls/boys, “Those who...

- come from the host country
- belong to a religious community
- speak more than one/two/three language/s
- enjoy a particular type of food/sport
- play a musical instrument
- are good at drawing and painting
- have relatives overseas.

Ask the students to take the lead: what else they would like to know about each other?

It is important to observe the similarities and differences within their new community.

Individuals in community

The next activity I bring in here is Potatoes. You need as many potatoes as there are students in the class and a largish container to hold them. Sitting in a circle, give each person in the class a potato. Ask them how they know it is a potato. How do they know it is not a carrot, a banana? Now ask them to look carefully at their potato and really get to know it well. When they are ready, collect all the potatoes in a bag, give it a shake then empty the potatoes out on to the floor or a table. Ask the group to pick out their own potato from the pile. Everyone invariably manages to find their own potato. Here are some questions you might want to discuss:

- How easy/difficult was it to find your potato?
- What made it easy/difficult?
- What does this tell you about potatoes?
- What can we learn from this about groups of people?

What really needs to be brought out here is that within a group which shares certain characteristics that make them a group (in the case of potatoes, brown, roundish, knobby), each individual is nonetheless unique, having qualities which mean they can be identified in a crowd. It is important to remember this when we are thinking about communities of people with different belief systems and different cultural backgrounds from our own. In relation to the community of the class, we need to recognise that, while we have a class identity and are developing as a community, we are a collection of unique individuals, each distinct from the other.

As a follow-up to this activity, I ask them to reflect on who they are in this new community; I might use the One Minute Meditation¹ to do this. Ask the group to sit in silence... what are your strengths, your talents, your skills, your best subjects at school? Of which communities are you a member?

I give each person a paper plate and ask them to decorate it to show their communities, their strengths, talents, skills and best subjects.²

³The plates are shared in a full circle-share, if the class is not too large. Alternatively, have the students sit in groups and share. It is important to stress that, while one student speaks about their plate, the others must give their full attention, listening with their ears, their eyes and their heart. Questions may only be asked once the student has stopped speaking. The plates are then displayed in a cluster to represent the class. If the students are working in teams, the plates can be combined into shields or crests with the team name on.

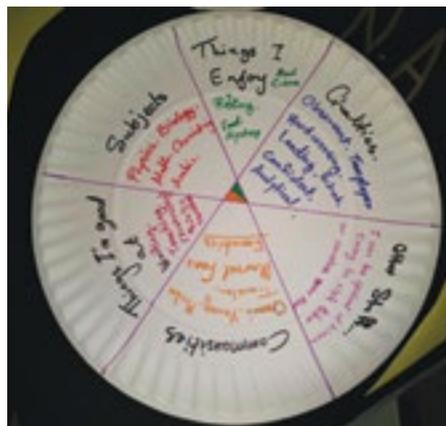
What matters to us

Knowing who we are, it is now important to focus on our values, both individually and as a class. When You're 85 is one way to do this. Have the students sit in a circle, give each one three pieces of paper and a pencil to put under their chair then invite them to close their eyes and go into stillness. Talk them through projecting

themselves into the future to when they are 85⁴, looking back on their long life. Encourage them to think about the qualities or values that have guided them through their life and to focus on the three most important of these. Bring them back to the present in the classroom and ask them to write each value on a piece of paper. A student then reads out one of her values and anyone who has the same value puts it with hers in a pile on the floor. Repeat this until all the values are in piles in the centre of the circle. These are then identified as the class's values.⁵ They can be displayed as they are or, if time allows, translated into statements based on, "What does it

look like when there is honesty?" This forms a credo or set of maxims for the class to live by over the year together. They might like to make it into a poster, adding a photo to it and signing it to indicate their commitment to it.

These activities are simple to do, require little preparation and minimal materials, but their impact is profound. They set the tone for a positive and fruitful school year and help lay the foundation for trust and openness in the class. We are beginning to learn how our, "pupils live and think" and starting to "understand them better and be able to work efficiently with them."



1. Thich Nhat Hanh; the script for this in Values and Visions
2. The plates were created by students on the Takatuf Scholars summer residential programme, 2019
3. The shield was created by students on the Takatuf Scholars summer residential programme, 2019
4. There is a script for this in Values and Visions
5. This credo was drawn up by students on the Takatuf Scholars summer residential programme, 2019



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