



Science²Practice

Volume 1 | Issue 1

September 2023

How to Create a Good Class

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“I have a really good class this term.”

This is something teachers say when things are going well. Often, it means their students are engaged, focused, curious, and connected. I am convinced that what researchers call relatedness, a sense of belonging, is a basic building block to the creation of a “good class.” I use the word creation intentionally because we have the ability to design our instruction to promote a sense of belonging.

In *The ABCs of How We Learn*, Daniel L. Schwartz et al. (2016) have collected a bounty of research-tested best practices, including a number that cite the benefits of students working together. For example, studies show that students experience heightened alertness while socially interacting, which increases attention and sharpens memory. When students help one another, researchers conclude, not only do novice learners benefit from being taught by experienced students, but the experienced students gain a deeper understanding of the material by teaching it. In terms of creating a sense of belonging, research also indicates that having students regularly work together builds community, and if students believe they are accepted by their peers, their motivation and risk-taking are more likely to increase.

So, what can we do to help our students feel like they belong in our classes? By nature, college students are transients trying to find their footing, and like all temporary dwellers, they are susceptible to the anxiety change can cause. In my experience, if I am to help my students feel welcomed in my classes and willing to participate in the learning of my discipline, I must enact two priorities from day one:

- Make my intentions clear that the benefits of creating a positive community environment in the classroom is necessary if we are to fully engage and learn.
- Give my students time to get to know one another and to regularly work together.

What might this look like?

Here are three face-to-face classroom collaborative activities:

- Place students with new partners and give them a short task, early on, five minutes to learn about each other. Every other class, for the first weeks, alternate partners. Then, begin to assign partners discipline-related tasks, such as reflecting on key points covered in the previous class or a discipline-related strategy they use.
- Have students individually generate topic-specific ideas/answers, share with a partner, and then the whole class.
- After lecturing for ten minutes, have students partner up, share notes, and create one question pertaining to the lecture, and then share with the entire class.

For online classes, I have found the following community-building activities effective:

- Use breakout rooms, if teaching synchronously, where face-to-face activities such as the ones mentioned above can be facilitated.
- Create groups. For instance, establish term-long Success Teams of three to four students who work together on accomplishing their course goals; for assignments, form peer groups to help each student prepare and improve their work (e.g., essays); or have students create group presentations (with follow-up class quizzes) that are presented to the class and assessed with an exam of student-supplied questions.
- Hold individual conferences in TEAMS for one-to-one interactions with students. The goal of the conference can vary from reviewing a course project, to offering assistance, or simply asking how the student is doing.

“I don’t have the time.”

I have heard teachers say this, too, when it comes to implementing collaborative learning experiences. This is true. An effective learner-centered lesson takes time to create and facilitate. But is it also not true that if we do not give our students a chance to talk with one another then many will remain passive, withdrawn, and alienated? I have also heard teachers say they do not have time for partnered work because they have too much content to cover. This is a real concern, is it not? Maybe. Richard Felder (1989), the former Chemical Engineering Professor at North Carolina State University and an expert in collaborative learning, once observed, “Our second-worst assumption as teachers is that if we don’t cover something in class, the students won’t learn it. Our worst assumption is if we do, they will” (p. 26). In other words, just because we say it does not mean our students will learn it.

The benefits of student collaboration—enhanced engagement, deeper learning, and improved retention—are well documented in the research, and my thirty-plus years of teaching have brought me to the same conclusion: students who are comfortable talking to each other are more involved in the class, work better together, create superior products, and have more fun while doing it. While sometimes it is simply a matter of good fortune that we have a “good class,” let us not forget that we do have a tremendous opportunity to influence the learning environment we want to create. All we have to do is design and implement it.

References

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