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A Self-Study on Building Community in the Online Classroom

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For as long as there have been classrooms, there have been teachers committed to fostering classroom communities. In effective classroom communities, teachers balance learners' interdependence and individuality, promote social and academic growth, and facilitate diplomatic resolution of conflicts. Whether online or face-to-face (FTF), effective teachers seek to create positive atmospheres with a sense of belonging so that all students feel connected and help each other maximize their learning (Rovai, 2007). Though there are numerous definitions of effective teaching, we seek to encompass Collins' (1990) five criteria for effective teaching: (a) commitment to students and their growth, (b) knowledge of subject matter, (c) effective management of the students and the learning process, (d) systematic thinking and reflection about our practice, and (e) membership in the learning community. Consistent with our School of Education's Conceptual Framework, Collins' definition of effective teaching establishes our shared vision for preparing educators to have the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

In our commitment to effective teaching FTF and online, we recognize the importance of managing the learning community while simultaneously participating as a member of that community. The transfer of effective community-building practices from FTF to online environments presents both opportunities and challenges. As with most transformational change events, the shift to

online courses in education has not been without struggle. One of the primary challenges of this transition involves the willingness and capacity of the teacher to deliver instruction in this new format. At the core of this struggle lies a disconnect between the ways most instructors were taught, the ways they were taught how to teach, and the ways they are expected to teach online. In his seminal book, *School Teacher*, Lortie (1975) suggested that the "apprenticeship of observation" has an anchoring effect on learning to teach, as teachers tend to teach the way they were taught. Perhaps for the first time in centuries, however, instructors now have to teach in ways vastly different from how they were taught and from how they were taught to teach.

This paper portrays a year-long self-study of three teacher educators who examined their individual and collective practices in relation to teaching online. Because of its emphasis on reflection on practice, we chose a self-study method with the goal of improving our own practices (Hamilton, 1998). During the past year, we shared our course syllabi, assignments, and student work; we wrote and shared journal entries, met semi-monthly as critical friends, and revised and reanalyzed the ways we taught online. Our department's lack of guidelines or expectations for online courses, challenges from resistant colleagues about the integrity of online courses, and pressure from administration to maintain enrollment prompted us to examine our online teaching more systematically and critically; ultimately,

this enabled us to improve our teaching of teachers.

Our Teaching Context

The three authors are colleagues at a regional state university located in the Upper Midwest of the United States. We all teach both undergraduate and graduate courses in teacher education, though graduate courses constitute the majority of our workload. Our university serves a large geographic area and has felt increased pressure to offer online courses from students and administrators who recognize increased competition from other institutions that offer online courses. Until recently, we had a captive audience for FTF instruction. Now, the pressure to reach beyond our traditional boundaries by offering more courses online is undeniable.

As teacher educators experienced in the world of FTF classes, we took pride in our abilities to create strong learning communities in which students felt valued, able to take risks, and could fulfill their potentials as learners and as people. As we have moved into teaching online courses, we each questioned our own abilities to create such communities among students who never met face-to-face. We have typically used both verbal tools such as enthusiasm, humor, facial and vocal expressions and non-verbal cues such as smiles, pats on the back and physical proximity to develop community in FTF classes. We took responsibility for fostering classroom climate while remaining aware that students also are contributed to the development of community as they developed relationships among themselves through their informal chats and assigned tasks. With online courses, many of these teacher actions are no longer available due to the lack of a physical presence. Hence, teachers must find other ways to create positive learning climates.

We represent a range of experiences as students and as teacher educators. Derek, an Assistant Professor, the least experienced and the youngest of our group, was not quite a “digital native” but had taken a few hybrid and

online courses during his graduate coursework. Professors Suzanne and Sandy had been teaching online for more than six years, though they had limited experience as students in online courses. To overcome her lack of experience as an online learner, Sandy enrolled in an online poetry course during this self-study.

As “early adopters” in our department, we sought to study the extent to which our online teaching was different from our more practiced (FTF) teaching. We wanted to examine the integrity and rigor of our online courses with the intent of improving our practices. Whitehead (2004) suggested that at its core, self-study stems from the query, “How do I improve what I am doing?” We knew that teaching online was different from FTF teaching in many ways, and we sought to better understand those differences in order to refine our craft.

The Literature on Teaching Online

To explore differences between FTF and online teaching, we drew on established literature on classroom communities as well as emerging theories on learning communities. Human beings have a basic need for belonging and for relating to other human beings (Ormrod, 2008). In classrooms, we learn from the daily experiences we share in class and through the relationships we develop with members of the group. Providing opportunities for students to learn with and from each other is crucial for effective teaching and learning (LaBoskey, 2004; Noddings, 1984; Paley, 1992; Perkins, 2009; Smith, 1998).

Learning communities have been termed “clubs” (Smith, 1988), “teams” (Perkins, 2009), or “public homeplaces” (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock 1997); all of these terms suggest similar characteristics such as interdependence and respect among group members, central purposes that anchor the people to common goals, and trust among group members that creates a feeling of safety within the group.

Learning communities enable members to feel safe and to take the risks needed to nurture infant ideas to maturity (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997). As Taulbert (1997) suggested, strong communities include nurturing attitude, dependability, responsibility, friendship, brotherhood (welcoming those who are different), high expectations, courage, and hope. Barth (2001) posited that learning communities go beyond other communities, as the defining culture is “one of learning. The condition for membership in the community is that one learn, continue to learn, and support the learning of others” (p.13). Within learning communities, teachers and students come to know each other as learners and as people.

Learning community theory is rooted in Dewey’s (1938) distinction between traditional education, which he identified as receiving already known information, and progressive education, which involved developing habits of thought based on authentic experiences. In a similar vein, Vygotsky argued that learning occurred in individual “zones of proximal development” within social situations (Dixon-Kraus, 1996), and Smith (1998) distinguished between classic and official learning. Brown (1994) described a community of learners as one within which multiple layers of learning occur simultaneously as “students navigate by different routes and at different rates” (p. 7) while all “push toward upper, rather than lower, levels of competence” (p. 7). Teachers work within learning communities to differentiate instruction and to support students in finding and achieving their individual potential (Tomlinson, 2004). As students learn from each other within communities, they expand the collective learning of the group in multiple ways (Tomlinson, 2004). These social supports provided for learners within learning communities have been shown to have a positive effect on the learning of both elementary and secondary students (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth 2009).

Methods: The Research Process

This paper stems from a larger self-study that originated during the summer of 2008 as we engaged in numerous informal meetings to discuss our online teaching. While we had no indication that we were ineffective online teachers, we were discontented. We needed to uncover the cause of our uncertainty. What was it about our online teaching that was so different from decades worth of learning and teaching in a FTF format? To help us better understand our online teaching, we applied a self-study methodology to structure our inquiry process. Self-study is a powerful tool to help teacher educators investigate questions of practice through honest, critical, and constructive review (Pinnegar & Russell, 1995). Different from reflection, self-study involves open critique from colleagues and challenges the interpretations we make based on our own experiences (Loughran, 2004).

As a group, we decided to share everything we did in our online courses. In two-hour semimonthly meetings over the course of one year, we shared our syllabi, the learning modules we posted in WebCT, online discussion transcripts, student evaluations, and various other data related to our online teaching. In addition to documenting our conversations during our meetings, at the end of each meeting we wrote reflective journal entries and shared these with each other via e-mail. In addition, we often posed questions to each other online, such as, *What is better/worse about teaching online?* We exchanged ideas, experiences, and opinions over countless e-mail exchanges. Central to self-study methods, critical friends ask challenging questions, provide data to be examined, and critique their partners’ work in roles that are both analytic and catalytic (Schuck & Segal, 2002).

Throughout our self-study, we challenged each other through open, broad, and critical analyses (Loughran, 2004). We described our online teaching through the lenses of our prior

knowledge, beliefs, and experiences with the goal of discovering alternative points of view (Samaras, Hicks, & Berger, 2004). To make sense of our experiences throughout our self-study, we examined and coded the data collectively, including the course documents, our interpretation of these documents, and our experiences. Triangulation enhanced the validity of our self-study; we used multiple sources of data collected at different points in time and interpreted by three colleagues (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). To search for themes, we used a general coding process, searching for recurring regularities or emergent patterns (Guba, 1978). We tested emergent themes recursively, repeatedly challenging and analyzing the centrality of our findings. Ultimately, we sought to answer the question: *How is building classroom community online different and how can we do it well?*

Lessons Learned

After more than twelve months of regular meetings, reflection, analysis, and critical examination, we came to better understand our roles in building and maintaining a sense of community in online courses. From the beginning of our self-study, the role of community was at the forefront of our discussions and reflections. Through this study, we set out to uncover what at first we sensed but could not articulate. Three primary themes emerged from our study; each is presented below.

Setting the Stage

As any class begins, teachers provide opportunities for students to connect with each other in authentic, meaningful ways as part of an emerging learning community. In FTF teaching teachers and students learn about each other through *getting to know you* activities, classroom meetings, discussions, sharing times, and informal chats. Derek noted how he often took up to two hours on the first night of his FTF courses to engage students in team building activities aimed at fostering trust

and communication. As students shared their interests and talents, each person's contributions and connections to the group were acknowledged, valued, and contextualized. Relationships and connections began to form. For example, when a student shared an idea in a FTF class, that student was located within a physical space - such as a seat and a room as well as a timeframe which situated the interaction for each group member and created a stronger memory of that person's contribution (Caine & Caine, 1994). The student's voice, facial expressions, and body language add to the power of the memory and the understanding of the listeners. In addition, the student has most likely had social encounters with many of the group members before and after class, so initial connections are already developing. Opportunities for developing relationships and connections are strong within FTF courses that incorporate introductory opportunities.

As we venture into the world of online teaching, we found that creating communities of learners required both similar and different teaching approaches and skills. For instance, the teacher and students may come together in written and/or visual forms through introductions and shared pictures. However, some of the social interactions and contextual dimensions that one experiences in a FTF class are absent. Thus, in an online course, contextual, human, and temporal aspects are different, requiring the professor to think differently about the ways community develops.

Suzanne added a novel component to her online course introductions. She had each student write a brief personal introduction (e.g., school district, family information, hobbies), post a digital picture, and introduce a professional persona while replying to prompts related to the course content (e.g., Who are you as a reader/writer? Tell about your favorite types of reading, when/where you prefer to read, why you read, and what you remember about learning to read.). After reading the introductions, students were asked to respond

to each member of their small study group (e.g., 3-4 peers) by noting something they have in common and creating a visual that illustrated the connections and themes they found across the group. As the students identified themes and looked for connections, they began to create contexts within which they could situate their classmates. Suzanne's approach to developing community through introductory activities created norms of friendship and brotherhood (Taulbert, 1997). Each student was asked to seek connections and to take baby steps toward developing relationships with other students as they learned about each other. The students realized that while they were both alike and different, they all had valuable contributions to bring to the group.

Growing the Community

Following initial efforts to develop a climate of community, teachers continued to model and teach the community norms in a variety of ways. Teachers in both FTF and online classes used the content as the medium that anchors students to a common purpose. Open-ended assignments provided students with opportunities to shape both curriculum and assessments in ways that interest them and draw upon their unique skills. To support students in both FTF and online classes, teachers provided clear directions and developed assessment instruments that set standards for learning while allowing students freedom to decide how they will meet these standards. Clear directions and assessment criteria supported students as they tackle open-ended tasks. Teachers provided necessary information and strategies, asked questions that nudge students' thinking to higher levels, created scaffolds to support student success, and celebrated learning in ways that invite students to continue learning and sharing.

However, unlike FTF classes, these interactions happen in asynchronous time. This presents another challenge for teachers as they work to create community. In a FTF course, teacher feedback and peer responses occur on the spot

so that students feel that they have been heard and that their contributions have been considered. In an online course, acknowledgement and response are often delayed. This lack of immediate response can make it harder for students to feel that their thoughts are valued and make it more difficult for both teacher and peers to build on each other's ideas. As a consequence, ideas may become isolated and fail to become part of the collective wisdom in the community. On the other hand, when responses do occur, they often exhibit more depth and thought because respondents have had time to think and craft their ideas rather than offering their immediate thoughts.

To meet the challenges of delayed responses and to capitalize on the power of well-crafted responses, Suzanne created small study groups so that reading and responding were more manageable for the students. Responses were required to assigned student postings within 48 hours of the posting due time. Frameworks for responses to postings and presentations were often provided. For example, in response to presentations on professional books read by small groups, students were asked to respond in the following way:

Provide a 2-3 paragraph written reply to each group with the following information:
Two things I learned from your presentation
One thing I plan to use with my students
One question I still have about the ideas in your book.

Carefully structuring the directions and requirements for student responses helped to create a culture in which it was expected that students would respond to each other's thoughts within a reasonable time and with thought and effort. In successful classroom communities, students demonstrated a nurturing attitude as they provided supportive, affirming comments, dependability when they put thought and effort into their responses, responsibility as they provide timely responses, and high expectations as they both posted high quality presentations and responded with the

expectation that what they learned from the presentations was worthwhile (Taulbert, 1997).

The types of assignments that students created were significant in the formation of community and were particularly important in online courses. Assignments needed to merge content-related insights with personal interests and experiences. Merging the professional and the personal enabled students to know each other in deeper ways. The assignments become contexts within which students made connections with the content, situated each other, and connected with peers.

Suzanne shared a variety of open-ended assignments that students chose to complete in small groups. Each assignment was intended to deepen students' comprehension of a common text through connections to their own lives. In the online course, these assignments were shared in written and/or visual forms within small literature circles (Daniels, 2002) to both enrich the comprehension of the text and to strengthen connections made among the students. For example, in a recent online course, students read Sharon Draper's multi-genre young adult novel *Tears of a Tiger* (1994) in literature circles. Examples of assignments that student shared within their groups included:

Describing two items (one black; one white) to symbolize a major theme(s) from the book. Posting a digital picture of the items and explanations of the themes they symbolized.

Creating a quilt square using drawing tools, pictures, and/or clipart with a line quoted from the book and a visual symbolization of a deeper meaning in this quote.

Completing a *quick write* on an experience with teenage issues and/or prejudice.

As students shared their responses, they also shared themselves. Group members read, viewed, and responded to each posting, deepening their connections within the community.

Sandy noticed that assignments in her literature course also served as contexts within which students built meaning and formed

relationships. Students self-selected their groups for literature discussions based on their choice from among four novels. At another point in the course, students self-selected groups to study international literature by choosing texts from a particular region. In FTF classes, when given the opportunity to self-select group membership, we noticed that students would often choose a group based on who was in that group. When forming online groups, group selection appeared to be based on students' interests rather than working with friends/peer relationships. We have all felt the discomfort of students in FTF classes who are the last to be selected when groups are formed. Although it is possible for a person in an online class to not be chosen as a group member, it is less likely that this person would feel ignored or slighted.

Informal Knowing

As we considered how informal social interactions contribute to the formation of classroom community, we asked ourselves how this happens in online courses. The teacher has more challenges in getting to know his/her students' potential when there are fewer opportunities for informal chatting with students. However, it is equally difficult to come to know quiet or shy students in FTF classes. We examined ways in which we come to know our students in online courses and how those ways compare to what instructors do in FTF courses.

We began to notice that in online courses it is possible to develop strong relationships among individuals and small groups through discussion groups and small group projects. However, it seemed more challenging to form whole class learning communities online. This may have been due to the lack of synchronous time experiences when the whole group shared stories, asked questions, laughed, and expressed sorrow within a physical place. Communities develop around central purposes and experiences in any classroom. FTF courses provide many opportunities for the whole class to share common experiences and to bond as a

result of those experiences, though similar whole class activities are more difficult to construct online.

During online courses, students bond by sharing experiences, ideas, and life challenges during discussions and as they complete assignments. In our experience this happens more often in smaller subgroups than in the whole class. For example, during one of Suzanne's classes a student's best friend was killed in a tragic accident. This happened just as the study groups began a major group project. The student communicated the tragedy and explained that she felt unable to pull her weight for a few weeks as the project unfolded. The group members each expressed their concern, demonstrated a nurturing attitude, and picked up her duties over the following several weeks until she was able to effectively join the group again, demonstrating dependability and responsibility (Taulbert, 1997). This was not an isolated example of community support during Suzanne's online teaching experiences. In fact, many students enroll in online courses despite impending surgeries, near-term pregnancies, and long-planned trips. The opportunity to take courses that fit into hectic life schedules has required flexibility on the part of students and has established the norms of care and support that may be greater than in FTF classes. However, due to Suzanne's use small study groups, these bonding experiences were usually contained within the small groups rather than affecting the entire class.

Derek experimented with various group arrangements and found success with frequent regrouping of students. Much like a FTF class where students tend to sit at the same table and collaborate with the same classmates on projects, in online courses students often work with those they know, either from FTF interactions or from previous online courses. Derek began to place his students in different groups for each of the six to eight units per course; by the end of the course, each student had worked with every other student at least once. His final course evaluations included

numerous comments from students describing their pleasure in meeting so many people and learning from each other. For example, one student stated, "I didn't think I would like taking an online course because I am such a people person, but in this course I got to meet so many wonderful people and really get to know them. We had a little online community." Particularly noteworthy were the comments several of Derek's students made regarding new friends made within the online community. For example, students made comments such as this: "I added almost everyone in this class as my Facebook friends."

Suzanne encouraged informal chat times using discussion board threads that had been set up for these communications, "informal group discussions," and the required use of chat rooms involving synchronous temporal communications for book discussions. The discussion board postings mostly contained logistical information such as reading schedules, assignment of leadership roles, and questions about completing projects. Chat room discussions focused on the content of the books read, but it also provided space for humorous responses and sidetracked conversations. The chat rooms seemed to be the closest to "hallway talk" that Suzanne found in her online courses.

Sandy was able to gain some long range perspective as to the effectiveness of the community building that occurred in her online class. Students were required to choose one of the course objectives as their topic for their final exam. For example, students could choose to write on the following topic and describe the ways in which they had achieved the objective: *Work with colleagues to observe, evaluate, and provide feedback on each other's practice and respond critically to research related to the field of children's literature.* Although the objective was not designed to evaluate the impact of online community building, the essays revealed insights into student perceptions of themselves as members of the online community. One student described the outcome of her interaction with others as a

significant event that had enabled her to assume a leadership role while working with other professionals in her own school. Another student commented that “working with others is one of the most powerful ways there are for self improvement.” This student clearly felt personally connected to classmates as a member of a community of learners.

Conclusion

Above all else, we sought to be more effective teachers - whether teaching FTF or online. As our self-study progressed, each of us found that we were indeed doing many of the same types of things in both FTF and online courses; yet, we realized that the role we played in creating climate was even more critical in our online courses. We examined why we felt that community was so important, how we were each doing so in our online courses, and how that process differed from developing community in FTF classes.

Perhaps most importantly, we learned how to improve our online community-building. Beyond our heightened awareness of the ways that fostering classroom community presented distinct challenges in online courses, we sought, ultimately, to use our new understanding to make our teaching more effective. By extending ourselves beyond our initial insights, we were able to derive applicable knowledge from and for our practice (Loughran, 2004).

We recognized the importance of fostering social contexts for learning in which students could connect personal experiences to new material via online discussions. Though we had used online discussions extensively in the past, through this self-study we began to understand ways to structure those discussions to enhance student participation and persistence (Rovai, 2007). For example, we learned that our presence in the discussions was vital (Garrison & Anderson, 2003); however, it is imperative to clarify that we were not the focus of attention. Our role was not to answer questions and validate students’ comments. Instead, we were

worked to foster constructivist learning online by providing encouragement and asking probing questions (Rovai, 2007). Nonetheless, it is important to remember that instructors possess content knowledge vital to maximizing students’ learning of course objectives. This is more important during content-oriented discussions than during task-oriented discussions (MacKnight, 2000).

We learned that online classroom communities were fostered through the quality of interactions and not the necessarily the quantity of interactions (MacKnight, 2000; Rovai, 2007). Additionally, effective online communities had clear expectations that promoted active participation and helped students to anticipate group members’ behaviors so they could engage in learning cooperatively, not competitively (Rovai, 2007). Finally, we learned that we should vary our learning activities to increase discourse, promote learner satisfaction, and strengthen a sense of community (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). By varying the types of learning tasks as well as the size and arrangement of groups, students felt respected as individuals who contributed positively to their learning community.

Management and membership of classroom learning communities was vital to effective teaching, whether FTF or online. Likewise, reflection on our practice helped us to increase our commitment to student growth (Collins, 1990). Through our self-study, we learned about how to create and enhance classroom communities online. Our self-study helped us to improve upon our practice and to inform the practices of others. It has strengthened our desire to continue learning about the differences in our teaching and in ourselves as teachers in FTF and online contexts.

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