



The Partnership Community

News from and about the teachers, facilitators, and coaches working in CELA's Partnership for Literacy to improve students' achievement across the grades and subjects.

Establishing a Classroom Learning Community

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We often begin our work with teachers by asking them to reflect on the nature of teaching and learning and the kinds of environments that best support the acquisition of enduring knowledge and skills. And we have been privileged to support teachers in creating such environments, which we have come to call "classroom learning communities."

These are places in which every member is "minds on." Together teachers and students create dynamic webs of

thought and learning that continually expand knowledge and skills. Students and teachers read, research, discuss, and write with purpose and power. The classroom is neither confined by its walls nor defined by static chunks of content. Rather, required content is the "stepping off place" for students to dig deeper and connect with the world outside, including parents, the community, scholars in a particular field, and each other. They are alive with knowledge seeking

and learning -- a dynamic, organic process guided by the teacher but very much owned by the students.

Much as others propose building professional learning communities among teachers, we advocate that teachers develop classroom learning communities that invite students to play an active role in their own learning. In this newsletter we share some of the ways teachers create these communities.

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What Does a CLC Look, Sound Like?

Eija Rougle

When you approach Aubrey Salisbury's social studies classroom in Niskayuna's Iroquois MS, you might hear her voice getting class started; but silence sets in quickly as students take a few minutes to reflect on and write in response to the opening question they found on the smart board as they entered the room. Soon students' voices take over as they discuss their reflections in pairs or small groups. Aubrey's voice softens into the background as she moves from student to student giving individual feedback on the completed homework. Her voice dominates again briefly in order to move students to the next activity.

This could be a "town hall meeting" to debate and discuss the arguments and evidence about the topic or an "archaeological dig" to research the topic further. These or other activities may produce key questions that need further study, setting up the next assignment for student research. Or they might lead to a "newsroom" to prepare a publication or exhibit about the findings or conclusions of these aspiring social scientists as they further clarify their thinking or prepare to present to others what they have learned.

An observer's first impressions of this classroom might be that the students are in the driver's seat, as the class seems

to go where their questions take it; and to a certain extent that is true. Yet a closer look reveals that Aubrey is leading the class to a predetermined learning outcome -- the opening question establishes a destination by asking an essential question; her questions during discussion push students to synthesize, analyze, draw inferences, or make connections to prior knowledge; she requires and reinforces vocabulary particular to her subject; and she assigns writing to help students both learn the content and demonstrate what they have learned. She intentionally uses the learning community she has established as part of her instructional strategy.

Look for "Literacy across the Spectrum: A Team Approach to Promoting Critical Thinking" by a team of teachers from Iroquois Middle School in Niskayuna. Article to appear in *Educator's Voice* Volume III, spring 2010. It should appear on line at <http://www.nysut.org/> in early April.

How We Created a Classroom Learning Community

Johanna Shogan

When I was teaching, from the first days of school, my students and I worked at uncoupling the phrase, “Building a Community of Literate Learners” in order to establish our ground base. Everything would be built upon an understanding of those six words and how they could propel us into deeper understandings of all we would encounter.

“**To build.**” First, we established what “building” means. We decided it encompasses many dynamics, primary of which is that it is not finished. That concept of being “not finished” was one I wanted us to be comfortable with so that we wouldn’t feel unstrung if a class period didn’t “end” in an understanding.

What we were learning we were learning for life, and instead of lessons being finite, one day would lead to another, one question to another, etc. Every lesson was like a separate bead on a necklace, but definitely linked to what came before and what would come after. That idea was seminal to my twelve-year-old students, whose tendency was “to get this done and on to the next thing.”

The notion that intelligent people would read, reread, question and discuss what they had read and then go back and read it again would be the model for our year together.

“**Community.**” The next word “a” created some jibes. “A” is nothing—it’s an article, but in our classroom we were building a community, so what was a? It then became one, or singular, or united.

We characterized “commu-

nity” as people who work together—but a community is so much more than that. We discussed how a community feels, how you know if you have one or not. We defined it as a place where people care about one another and take some responsibility for one another and for oneself. As members of a community, we were expected to bring something of worth for others to share. We wanted to make learning important for everyone in the classroom.

I wanted to instill the idea that everyone was significant. If one day someone was not in class, we were all the poorer without that child’s contribution and ideas. I wanted to help foster an acknowledgement that “the other person is just as important as I am.” If we were forming a partnership for learning, then all of us were of equal value and worth, and in order for a democracy of ideas to flourish, we had to start with the premise that we were a community as we had defined it.

Then we looked at “of.” “It’s a preposition; it doesn’t mean anything” were the first thoughts. So, I offered some phrases, “the color OF the sweater,” “The United States OF America,” and ideas such as ownership, possession, belonging to came up. So we belonged to the community; we were a part of it.

“**Literate learners.**” At first, students thought literate meant the ability to read. Gradually we added the ability to write, and after more thought about what we were going to do in our classroom, speech was added. With speaking came listening, and the plate upon

which all the reading, writing, speaking, and listening would be served would be our own thinking.

“Learners” immediately drew the response, “all of us.” After more talk, we decided that the teacher, too, was a learner, and that we all had a responsibility to bring our open minds and open hearts to whatever was before us to make it make sense and learn from it.

Setting Expectations

Having defined then what we were about, we began working on classroom expectations. I felt that in building a community of literate learners, we needed to consider four basic expectations: Do your best; Respect; Cooperate/collaborate; Signal if you need help.

Next came almost a week’s discussion about what each of these really meant for us. One student typed our statements. From those statements came student generated lists of their responsibilities as well as how to enter and behave during a discussion (see sidebars).

Each class’s expectations then were duplicated. I signed each one, asked them to sign their copy, have their parents sign it, and return it to the classroom, as this would be our contract for the year. In addition I posted our expectations in the classroom so that all were aware these were the guidelines running our year. We always returned to Do Your Best. I probably only really needed that expectation but by including the others, we had a more thorough spelling out of the way things would work.

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Guidelines for Discussion:

Everyone comes having read the text.

Everyone needs to talk.

Listen actively to others.

Wait for quiet before you speak.

Raise your hand *after* someone has finished.

No one has a bad question.

Don’t be afraid to take a risk.

Build on others’ ideas.

Maintain eye contact.

Getting Past Hurdles

Teachers from Knickerbacker MS

Since discussion is such an important part of a learning community, teaching students to engage in high-level discussions is an essential instructional activity. In a recent meeting at Knickerbacker Middle School, Lansingburgh, teachers suggested answers to many of the common challenges and questions (in bold, below) involved in facilitating discussions to support student learning. Here are their suggestions:

Some students resist discussion, getting into arguments and having side conversations

- Have them write back and forth with a partner (written conversation)
- Be sure you are using engaging, meaningful content
- Be sure they have guidelines for appropriate discussion
- Activate prior knowledge
- Practice in small groups
- Try a fishbowl
- Have students reflect on and discuss the process of a conversation

- Build community by reinforcing positive behavior
- Model rules of discussion—refer back to guidelines

Encouraging all learners to participate

- Allow students to write their thoughts on index cards and then share them
- Students call on students
- Make content relevant to their lives
- Ask questions that students can connect to
- Pair-share or group work where they all have a task

Students are tentative, looking to you for approval

- Make them aware of your purpose – monitor thinking not answers
- Invite them to bring in their own outside experiences
- Turn-and-talk...then share
- Written conversation
- Praise OFTEN
- Have students do the majority of the talking

Getting at the important parts if student-generated

ter the Conversation. Both hung from wire strung across the classroom, visible at all times. In this way, we always had the expectation for the conversation, and the talk generated was respectful and thoughtful. Everyone was engaged. It was a delight to work with the students and their ideas in such a non-threatening and collegial atmosphere.

questions do not

- Elaborate on student questions—push their thinking
- Use Envisionment-Building Guides
- Try a Stand and Deliver before the conversation
- Focus on one specific question—give PRAISE
- Model quality questions

Preventing students from giving each other incorrect answers

- Set the expectation: “You must prove what you say”
- Walk around the room and monitor the conversations (of small groups or pairs)
- Students correct each other
- Provide quality examples to reference
- Select groups (higher level with lower level)
- Be involved in the conversation
- Provide guides for the students

When it is best to have discussions

- During classes—sustains the learning
- After covering basic content
- Before writing a full piece of writing
- During the introduction of the lesson so that you can see how much background the students have
- As an introduction or synthesis
- Periodically in curriculum; new topic
- After examples and labs, etc.
- Reflection for the end of the lesson and the learning

Ways to Enter a Conversation:

I think I agree with what you say because...

I think I disagree with what you say because...

I'm not sure I understand. Could you show me something in the text that makes you say that?

I have another idea...

I would like to piggy-back on what you just said...

Creating, cont.

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Every time we were going to have a discussion, we arranged the chairs into a circle so that students were literally knee-to-knee; we would tear into a text and try to make more understanding emerge. One of the students read the Guidelines so they were fresh in our minds, and another student also read Ways to En-

Partnership for Literacy

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The Partnership for Literacy (P4L) is a promise and plan for action for continuous teacher learning. It is a collaborative model for schools and districts that want to become (or become stronger) learning organizations with more engaged students demonstrating higher thinking and literacy achievement. Experience shows that such changes happen more effectively when someone from outside the district or school fosters discussion and works toward systematic change. Engaging teachers together in the intellectual work of reflecting on and analyzing current practice, raising questions for themselves and colleagues, and negotiating collective goals is key to bringing about the desired outcomes.

The Partnership is based on the Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) and others' long history of research and development into effective teaching, learning, and professional development. For information about CELA, the Partnership, or this newsletter, contact Janet Angelis, CELA Associate Director and newsletter editor: 518-442-5023, or jangelis@uamail.albany.edu.

Engaging Parents in the Learning Community

Imagine going to a school meeting and coming home with an original poem — one that you wrote as part of the meeting!

That is exactly what every parent and student walked away with from a recent evening meeting in Niskayuna. Invited to this “Dialogic Spell”¹ by Iroquois Middle School English teacher Kelly Millett-Wilson, 25 parents and several students, both current and former, accepted the invitation.

On February 25, with Partnership facilitator Eija Rougle, Millett-Wilson facilitated environment-building discussions similar in every way to those she

conducts in her 7th-grade classroom. In pairs or small or large groups, she asked participants to reflect on and write about a word (literacy) and then share their thinking.

Next they examined and discussed a text — in this case a photograph. Using an EB Guide, Millett-Wilson ensured they were thinking from every stance² so that everyone had a wealth of thoughts from which to write a paragraph about the text.

Then came the fun — pulling key words out of the sentences to form a free-verse poem. This is what she had

been after all along, says Millett-Wilson. As she does with her students, she wanted parents “to see the poetic voice as an instrument for kids to put down the technology and do something authentic.”

Through the process she also demonstrated how she teaches grammar, figurative language, and other knowledge and skills using discussion.

The next conversation will focus on discussions of literature and will take place on April 21. For more information, contact Ms. Millett-Wilson at kmillett-wilson@niskayschools.org.

¹ See Nystrand, *Opening Dialog* (1997, Teachers College Press) for more about dialogic spells.

² See Langer, *Envisioning Literature* (1995, Teachers College Press) for a definition of the stances.

About the Authors:

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Janet Angelis is associate director of CELA and the Partnership for Literacy.

Recommended reading

Choice Words by Peter Johnston (2004), Stenhouse Publishers, shows us how the language we use affects the kind of learning communities we establish in our classrooms.