

Teaching Tips

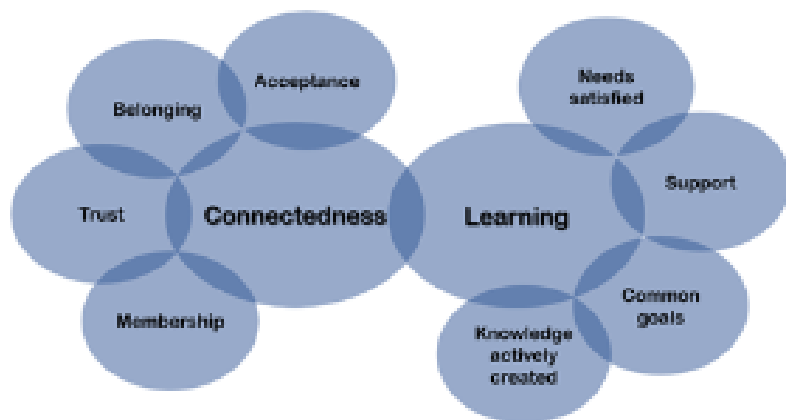
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A forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

Welcome to the New Semester

Welcome to this new semester. It is good to be alive and to get yet another opportunity to influence young minds and perhaps a few older persons too. We at the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at UWI, Mona wish for all our faculty a great semester, filled with new learning and meaningful experiences with the potential for advancing our lives and the lives of our students in wonderful ways.

Building Community in our Classrooms to Advance Learning



What do we mean by building community?

Our focus now turns to building community. Community in the classroom is about creating relationships that will engender a learning space that is more conducive to learning. From psychology we are reminded that important elements of a community are membership, connection, influence, and needs fulfilment (McMillan, 1986). With respect to a learning community, especially in higher education, Rovai (2002) has identified two key elements: learning and connectedness and these are the foundations upon which a strong community will develop.

Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CELT) at the UWI, Mona.
- The newsletter is published three times during each semester and once during the summer. It provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education and is available online on the CELT page at <http://mona.uwi.edu/cefl> as well as in the office of the CELT.
- If you need additional teaching tips on specific classroom practices, please contact us at cefl@uwimona.edu.jm.

Building community in a class and a course plays an essential role in the effectiveness of the course in producing learning. Therefore, we must be intentional about building community in our classrooms this semester. This is a valuable way to advance learning. It is also important in enhancing the climate of our classrooms and the learning and experiences of our students. Regardless of the size and mode of our classes, large, medium, small, blended, or fully online, there is an opportunity to foster community and benefit from an engaged learning space.



Why is community important?

In seeking to build community in the classroom, we need to understand that this is more than creating a warm fuzzy feeling. We want to create a learning environment of inclusion, openness, acceptance, shared values and determination. It is a learning environment that must be designed to impact learning in a huge way. At the heart of our thinking is how this learning environment is constructed so as to cause my students to be successful.

As you seek to build community in the classroom, you are in fact developing a learning community. In this learning community each student brings his or her talents to the team. Diverse skill levels, backgrounds, experiences, and outlooks can enrich the group. Each member of the group is responsible to not only contribute his/her strengths, but also to assist colleagues understand the source of their strengths. Learning is positively influenced with diversity of perspectives and experiences, increasing options for problem solving and expansion in the range of details to consider. Make sure you utilise this diverse learning environment well.

"The learning experience of every student and the effectiveness of every teacher is influenced by what goes on among and between people who populate the classroom" (Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998, p.5).

University teachers/faculty must promote a positive class room environment. This might be achieved in the following ways:

Modelling: demonstrate to students the action and attitudes you want to see in your class. Show your enthusiasm for the course, respect your students and always embrace civility towards all.

Share some power: This is a sticky one but it is possible to share some power in the classroom. This might be accomplished by facilitating class discussions to identify acceptable behaviours in the classroom that will allow students to feel safe, respected, valued and accepted. The whole process will have to be a session when both students and the teacher co-create these expectations and sign off on them.

Create opportunities for engagement /interactions

- Ensure that you are personable and approachable and communicate the various ways by which students can contact you. Let them know that you care and will do your best to help them to success in your course.
- Do your best to learn your students names and use them. This might be problematic in large classes but an attempt must be made.
- Create opportunities for students to get to know each other, for instance, ice breakers.

- Learning activities should be designed with the objective of building interactivity into them, for instance, allow students to work collaboratively, in groups/teams or engage in collaborative research. With respect to group work or working in teams, this should be well defined and work appropriately developed. One of the things we have learned about group activities, is that they must be well constructed, allowing for each individual to have a particular role and feel a sense of contributing to a larger endeavour. Group or team activities begin with training in, and understanding group processes
- Collaborations can also be built into assessment tasks, for instance, guided peer feedback. There can also be assigned work for students to work together on group presentations etc.

References

Ehrman, M.E. & Dornyei, Z. (1998). *Interpersonal dynamics in second language education: The visible and invisible classroom.* Sage Publications.

McMillan, D.W., & Chavis, D.M. (1986). *Sense of community: A definition and theory.* *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14, 6-23.

Rovai, A. P. (2002). *Sense of community, perceived cognitive learning, and persistence in asynchronous learning networks.* *Internet and Higher Education*, 5, 319-332.

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