

Strategies for Creating a Strong Sense of Community in the Classroom

1. **Sitting in a circle**—this physical arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and implies that everyone is an equally valued participant. It helps create a feeling of connection and makes it easier for folks to speak to everyone else.
2. **Using nametags**—at the beginning of class we make nametags, surrounding our names with 4 or more symbols of things that are most important to us (e.g., symbols for religion, sports, family, friends, education, money, etc.). The nametags reflect who each person is, are a good icebreaker, and facilitate the use of first names in the classroom. While some students state that they initially perceived making nametags as reminiscent of kindergarten, this simple activity often reveals very important aspects of students that would not surface otherwise.
3. **Sharing food**—once a week we will have a few people bring snacks for the entire group. There is nothing like sharing food to help create a feeling of community in a group and we have found that this practice makes a dramatic difference in the group's dynamics
4. **Modeling exploration of personal biases by instructor**—it is quite frightening for many students to discuss such emotion-laden topics as racism, sexism, homophobia and personal biases. Instructors can greatly facilitate such exploration by acknowledging that they have various biases, rather than pretending that they are above such human foibles while asking students to confront their prejudice. Such sharing should be brief but honest and heartfelt.
5. **Hearing everyone's opinion on topics**—after watching a video or listening to a speaker, we will sit in a circle and have each student share their reactions. We begin with whomever volunteers to go first, and then that person gets to choose which way the circle will go. Everyone speaks and this prevents one or two people from dominating class discussion. Everyone's opinion is heard and sometimes the quietest people say the most profound things. The rules of this activity are that we speak from the heart, that there be no questions/comments/reactions, and that we listen with respect to all statements regardless of whether we agree with them or not. Sometimes each person speaks as long as they wish, sometimes we will say one sentence each, and sometimes we say one word each, depending on time constraints. Even just one word spoken by each person really helps to create a sense of community and to allow everyone to feel heard and respected. Two specific topics which seem to greatly foster community are sharing a personal experience of being discriminated against and sharing what inspires most in our lives.

6. **Values line**—we begin by defining values and identifying controversial issues on which there are a broad range of opinions, such as capital punishment and abortion. Ask the students to imagine that there's a line running from one side of the room to the other and that each end of the line represents one end of the spectrum of opinion regarding the issue. For example, we might imagine that one end of the line represents total support for capital punishment and the other end of the line represents total opposition to it. Students are then instructed to physically stand on the point in the line which represents their views. Tell them to express their opinion in one sentence, beginning at one end of the line and continuing sequentially until everyone has spoken. We listen respectfully without asking questions or making comments to all views, however similar or different they might be from our own. After having done this with two or three controversial issues, we all take our seats in a circle and give our reactions to the activity without further discussing the issues themselves. We reflect upon what kinds of influences affect people's opinions (family, church, school, mass media, peers, etc.) and how this relates to teaching. Note: It is essential that trust be built before this activity is implemented. Typically it is conducted in the last two or three weeks of the semester.
7. **Being respectful of all views; being nonjudgmental**—as has been mentioned in a couple of the preceding items, being respectful and nonjudgmental of all views and opinions is a core value of our classes.
8. **Being authentic and self-reflective**—ground rules should include that each person is willing to express his/her honest views and feelings, be responsible for giving reflective consideration to new ideas, and be open to change.
9. Providing **project learning experiences** can help the group coalesce by developing a shared vision and common values.
10. **Incorporate activities that foster both individual and group development** – when students from different cultural and ethnic groups work on projects together, they learn about communicating through differences to achieve common goals.
11. **Appreciate diverse learning styles**—learning in community requires a lot more active participation from students than passively taking notes in a lecture. It is important to provide assignments and activities that encourage experiential learning and creative presentation of that learning.
12. Rely on **principles of adult learning theory**, one of which postulates that adults have a need to connect new learning to a foundation of life experience and knowledge they have accumulated. Similarly, when students of all ages can connect new learning to their experience and prior knowledge, it increases their desire to be actively involved in the learning process. Teachers can draw out

students' experience related to the topic at hand, thus facilitating the process of meaning making and knowledge construction.

13. Incorporate **reflective writing and journal keeping** to help students process and integrate the dynamics taking place in the group. This also helps to generate a higher level of discourse.