

When a Class Clicks

Want more teaching tips? [Browse the Pedagogy Unbound archives](#) or start a thread in our [teaching group](#).

I got lucky this semester. I'm teaching two undergraduate courses, and in both of them, my students have bonded in a way that makes my job easier. They start talking to each other before class begins, and are still talking as they walk out the door. They are excited to share their views on the readings and participate eagerly in class discussions. It's great.

I'm not under the illusion that I had much to do with creating that dynamic. Sometimes a group of students just clicks. But I recognize how a sense of community among students helps me — when students enjoy coming to class, when they trust each other, when they seem to genuinely like each other, they are more likely to learn more.

Real learning is a trip to an unknown destination. It involves revising your previous beliefs in ways that can be difficult, frightening, or painful. A cohesive and supportive community can ease that process for students. Even when faculty aren't as lucky as I've been this term, we should be looking for ways to build such a community — one that offers a safe environment for students to do the sort of experimentation and risk-taking that is necessary for learning to occur.

When I think about building a cohesive community in my courses, I generally have three goals:

- To help every one of my students to feel that they belong in the class.
- To create bonds between classmates that increase their motivation to learn.
- And to model a sort of future community in which the skills and content they learn will be useful and rewarding.

That doesn't mean erasing the differences between students. In my classes, I'm most concerned with those students who feel that they don't belong, that they're not ready for college, or that they have backgrounds or circumstances that set them apart from their classmates. We need to design class activities — particularly early in the semester — to help them feel at ease. Not every student comes to college equally equipped to succeed; I aim to create an environment that makes space for every student.

So how do we achieve that? Here are a few of my strategies.

Encourage students to share their individual learning goals with each other. This is a good way to respect, and even cultivate, their differences. Emphasize to students that — although you have your own goals for their learning — *their* own goals are even more important. Create a questionnaire that asks students specific questions: What are they looking to achieve in the course? Which skills do they most need to develop? What background do they have in the subject? And what do they want to do in the future with what they learn?

They may not have ready answers. Let them work in pairs to discuss the questions, and then revisit them throughout the term as students develop their goals. Let students share their responses with each other. You want them to hear each other out, get to know each other as learners with different motivations, and understand the class as a whole as a diverse site of many students chasing different targets together. By asking students to reflect on their own goals, and by having them share those goals, you encourage students to see their involvement in the course as something both personal and shared.

Make time for nonacademic conversations in class. Clearly students have interests beyond those that apply to our course material. Give them a chance to be themselves in class. My colleague [Benjamin Hassman](#) starts every class with a “**question roll:**” He asks a question — usually something unrelated to the day's topic — and his students go around the room giving their answer. Questions can range from “What's your favorite word in the English language?” to “What's the closest you've ever come to dying?”

The point is to get students to feel that your classroom is a space where they are allowed — encouraged, even

— to be themselves. You want them to see your course as something they can integrate into their lives, into their sense of themselves. College courses don't need to be isolated from and unrelated to everything else students are doing. Look for ways to show students that “your” course is theirs — a potentially meaningful and important part of their lives.

Create conditions in which students depend on each other for success in the course. Steve Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, in a [1995 essay in *College English*](#), describe a philosophy class in which one student takes notes — a sort of narrative of what happened that day — for each class period. The next day, the note-taker reads those notes out loud, reminding everyone of what happened in the previous class, before choosing another student to be the next note-taker. Students in that course quickly understood that they were members of a community who would benefit if they could rely on one another.

Group work can be designed to encourage interdependence. **Two-stage exams**, in which students take tests both on their own and in groups, are structured so that students need to listen and cooperate in order to get good grades. **Jigsaw groups** require students to contribute individually and work together to understand a topic fully.

Build community through your own actions. Learn about your students, where they're coming from, what they're good at, and then turn to them when their expertise might help the class as a whole. Let students know that they are a necessary part of the community, that it is important that they are there, that others depend on their knowledge and generosity.

I'm more and more convinced that the group dynamic in a classroom plays a big role in student learning. Students who trust each other and share a sense of belonging are more motivated to come to class, buy in to class activities, and take an active role in their own learning. Sometimes that group dynamic seems to materialize out of thin air, like in my lucky classes this term. Other times we have to make our own luck.