

Learning Communities

A learning community is a group of teachers and learners that...

1. *Allows everyone to be an active and constructive participant.*

This means everyone should have their brains “on.” Students who are passively taking notes might not satisfy this condition.

2. *Encourages participants to acknowledge and learn from mistakes.*

An unwritten norm that operates in some classrooms is “never make a mistake” or get caught not knowing the answer. This norm prevents students from asking questions when they do not understand or suggesting new ways of thinking about a topic, alternative views. Instead, we want to encourage academic risk-taking and create opportunities to make mistakes, get and give feedback, and continually revise and improve. Clearly this sort of environment is necessary if we want students to reveal their pre-existing knowledge and their private world views.

3. *Encourages participants to question assumptions in a respectful manner.*

See #2 above.

4. *Facilitates connections among members.*

We hope to create an atmosphere of intellectual camaraderie in our learning communities. We want students to help one another solve problems, and clarify confusing points for each other.

5. *Recognizes the purposes (and boundaries) of the community.*

Community members need to feel respected, and to understand what is appropriate within that learning environment. As the leader of a learning community, you have responsibility for managing your authority with sensitivity and establishing good boundaries.

See the CFT teaching guide on cooperative learning for more ideas:

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/activities/cooperative.htm

Ideas for Learning Communities

1. *Student Study Groups* – These typically consist of 4-6 students who meet 1-2 times a week. Prior to each meeting, the students independently complete as much of the week's assignment as they can. During the meeting, they share their results and work together to improve their understandings of the course material. Students tend to engage and learn more. However, they are still evaluated independently via in-class exams.
2. *Writing for Peers* – Students are given a reading assignment for the week. Three days prior to class, a few students are asked to prepare response papers to the readings. These papers are distributed to the rest of the class (perhaps through Blackboard) and become part of the reading assignment for the week. Why does this work? The student writers want to do a good job since they're in the "hot seat," writing for fellow students requires a different approach and voice, other students do the reading because they know their turn will come, hearing different voices (not just the teacher, not just the authors of the readings) inspires students.
3. *Peer Instruction* – The teacher poses a question to his or her students. The students ponder the question silently and transmit their individual answers using clickers (or some other method like flash cards). If significant numbers of students choose the wrong answer, the teacher instructs the students to discuss the question with their neighbor. After a few minutes of discussion, the students submit their answers again. This technique often (but not always!) results in more students choosing the correct answer as a result of the peer instruction phase of the activity. This is a fairly simple way to use clickers to engage a large number of students in discussions about course material. This approach can also set the stage for a class-wide discussion that more fully engages all students.
4. *Problem-Based Learning* – See <http://www.udel.edu/pbl/>.
5. *Team-Based Learning* – See <http://teambasedlearning.apsc.ubc.ca/>.
6. *STAR.Legacy Cycle* – See <http://bit.ly/dH7lw>.

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