What Does Community Mean in the Classroom? Sharing Stories, Swift Trust, and a Sense of Togetherness

SPEAKERS
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Tierney King 00:01
This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor Annual Conference. This year, join us in New Orleans from June 9th through the 11th and attend a conference where you'll network, learn, and refocus on why you got into teaching in the first place. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Today, we're going to talk about community, swift trust, and storytelling. Whether you teach an online or in-person class, you want your students to feel as if they're entering a community where they feel welcome, safe, and can share ideas among each other. You want to establish common interest and a sense of togetherness, because they're going to be solving problems together; they'll be investigating and exploring topics; they'll share knowledge and maybe even challenge each other respectfully. So today, we'll talk about ideas to foster a sense of community, how swift trust can be applied in an educational setting, and finally, how a storytelling activity with a sticky note or a penny can inspire students to share their own stories. To start, Brian Udermann will talk about how you can build opportunities for students to share their knowledge and experiences to build community within your course.

Brian Udermann 01:20
For preparing for this seminar, I looked at a number of definitions in regards to community. And these are three things that frequently came up in many of the definitions kind of that I was looking at. So there's some type of common interest or students are feeling like they're doing something together, or that they have a sense of belonging. So you might have some common interests or goals related to the class might be students in a particular program. But also, as an instructor goes on, you know, if they have this sense of community, there's a feeling of belonging or togetherness. And then also, you know, one thing that came up pretty frequently is that third point there, this idea of students interacting with each other and sharing with each other and maybe challenging each other, you know, this idea of sharing knowledge and inquiry. Even students solving some problems, or students investigating something or exploring something together. Another idea is to serve student interests. So a student interest survey or a student inventory survey, these tend to be used a little bit more, I think, in higher education in face-to-face courses than they do in online courses. But I'm starting to see more instructors at my institution and other institutions actually use these student inventories. And I think if you use something like this, it provides you, the instructor, with a little bit of information about your students, and it can help you get a sense of who your students are, maybe what their goals are, what

their past experiences have been, and it can even potentially inform your teaching. And it might be questions like, you know, what past experiences do you have with the class? What types of things might you want to see covered in the class? And so by saying that it can inform your teaching, certainly, if students have a lot of experience in a certain area, or many students want to potentially dive into something that you weren't planning on covering or covering very little in your class, you might tweak and revise your course a little bit. The next strategy is to build on opportunities for students to share their knowledge and experience. And I do think this is an area where many instructors in higher education kind of fall short, like utilizing the things that your students bring with them to your class. So I think face-to-face, blended online, you know, we don't do a good enough job of pulling out our students past experiences. And I do think that many instructors are missing out on a good opportunity to better engage their students and improve their course. So what types of experiences are things that you could get from your students? You know, it might be things related to their family, background or upbringing, past careers or jobs that they may have many students, and in online courses, like a pretty high percentage are actually students are going back to school to get a second job or move into a second career. So there might be students in your class that have military experiences that could be pertinent to your course, other educational variances that they have hobbies potentially related to, you know, the content that you're covering in class. But again, I don't think we fully, as instructors, appreciate, especially when we first start teaching, kind of the variety and the depth of experiences that our students bring with them into the classroom. And, you know, how could this be used in your class? I think that this can help with the desire that many online instructors have to go beyond just being the person who dumps content on students. So kind of that sage on the stage and being more of a facilitator and having students take more responsibility for their learning. And if you know, someone has, previous experiences in an area, or has some expertise in an area that you might be covering in your class, it might not happen in all courses, but potentially...there is this example just popped into my brain. I was teaching an online health and wellness course about 10 years ago, and there was a young lady in the class who was from Wisconsin, and she was going to participate in a national powerlifting championship competition in Florida, during the class. So you know, this came up during one of these student interest surveys. And I thought, wow, that's really neat. And somehow, you know, she shared it with other students that she's going to be traveling, she's going to be participating in this powerlifting championship, and she actually won. So you know, it was during the class, all the students were excited, she was the national champion. And the following week, after she won the national championship, we were covering a unit on muscular strength and fitness and resistance training and things like that. So I asked her if she would jump in and share her knowledge and expertise, because she had tons of it during that next module, and she stepped up and was super excited to do that. I wouldn't have, you know, made her do that if she didn't want to, but the students benefited from her expertise, which is probably at least at the level of mine, or probably greater. So there's lots of ways that pulling these past experiences from your students could be utilized in your class. Alright, couple more strategies. One is to create social opportunities for students. Again, sounds kind of basic and simplistic, but I think it can be very, very useful. And it's something that many online instructors in my experience, again, revealing these online courses don't necessarily do. So, one idea is to create something like, you know, a place where students can go and interact socially, where they don't necessarily have to talk about the class. So like a student lounge, or a student cafe or a water cooler. It just gives students a place to go interact. So it might be related to Hey, did you see this latest movie that's out or the big game last night? Or what about the weather? I mean, I live in Wisconsin, and we've

had three months now being in record flood stage. It's just been terrible. But you know, students can talk about things not necessarily related to the class. We have instructors that use lots of these. And the instructors who have success with them generally say that they encourage their students to use them. Maybe they even you know, kickoff with a question or they share something to kind of get students interacting in this social, you know, whatever it is discussion forum. But instructors say if it's just out there, and they leave it alone, then many times there's not much activity.

Tierney King 08:59
As you start to see ways that you can build community in your courses, you may also want to consider the idea of swift trust, where people who don't know one another start to form connections, and see who they can rely and depend on. Wren Mills explains an interesting phenomenon that happens with swift trust where when somebody gives their trust to somebody else, it's usually reciprocated, which is important for learning communities.

Wren Mills 09:23
So what is swift trust? Meyerson came up with the term and he applied it to groups and teams within a business setting. But as I said before, it can easily be applied to education as well. What happens when we get a group of people together who don't know one another as they start to form connections and see who they can rely upon? And who they can depend upon to complete tasks in an orderly fashion? And this can be applied to online classes too. Who do they know they can work within a group? Who do they know that they can respond to any discussion and get some good interaction with? There's an interesting phenomenon that happens with it that when somebody gives that trust to somebody else, it's usually reciprocated as well. And this can be important for one mean communities and building presents within online classes, which also leads to better retention. There's some very practical things that we can do that are easy to do within our online courses within the first couple of weeks to help establish trust between us and our students and between our students to to help build a learning community and help keep everybody involved in progressing within the class. Primarily, we need to make sure though, that we lead by example, and everything that we do, the way that we interact with students and emails should reflect how we want them to interact with us in emails. The ways that we interact with students on discussion boards, or in the feedback that we give the students should reflect how it is that we want them to talk to each other and post to one another on discussion boards. And how it is that we want them to give feedback in peer review sessions, if we're going to be having those in our class? It's also a good idea to provide examples of papers or ways that you'd like things formatted and give expectations of how you'll be grading their work. So giving these examples to students can help them to trust you and to trust each other and lead to a better learning environment within your classes. We can actually start building this trust before the class actually begins. So maybe at the end of the semester prior to when it is that you're going to have the class, send them an email, letting them know how glad you are to have them in class and assert your confidence in them as a group and knowing that they'll work well together to have a good learning environment in the class. Emphasize that this is a journey as a group, that it's a group learning experience that is not just them on their own, or even just you and them one-on-one, student to teacher. Also encourage questions before class starts and be sure to answer them, even if it's over the winter break or summer term. We all check our email a little bit during those times and getting back to the students helps them know that they can rely on us to get back to them when they have questions when class is actually in session.

The way that we get a class started with introducing themselves to one another can help them build trust between one another as well. And I think something that we can do to add a little twist to that standard introduction that they do is to ask them to share something like their hopes and their fears about the class that they're about to take. And sometimes these just end up being things like, Oh, I hope I get an A, or I hope I do well on that project, or I hope I learn about this topic. The fears can usually be centered around something that has to do with the technology in the course, such as, I've never taken an online class before. I'm worried I'm gonna forget deadlines. What if the teacher doesn't respond to me? And the important thing is, is to ask students to respond to those hopes and fears. How can they help people to achieve their hopes? How can they help soothe the fears of one another? Doing this helps them to build trust between one another because they start seeing they can rely on people in the class to be their learning partners. And then when you go in and respond to their introduction to you address those hopes and fears as well, so that they see if their fear is that the teacher won't be responding to them or interacting with them. Well, there you are, you're responding and you're interacting, and so they don't need to worry about that anymore.

Tierney King 12:43
Lastly, Chris Hamstra explains how sharing stories is a powerful tool for building connection in the classroom. He offers two activities, one with a penny and one with a sticky note, that you can utilize in your own courses. If you want to participate, don't hesitate to go find yourself a penny or sticky note so you can join in.

Chris Hamstra 13:02
And so storytelling has a wonderful ability to connect information and connect individuals and connect to ourselves through the wonderful process of the learning environment. So I'd like you to go back to the sticky note or the scratch piece of paper that you have here or the penny. Because I have a couple of examples that I'd like you to try out in your learning environment, wherever you're at, whether it's in-person or online. I think these examples are pretty good. And let's start off with a penny. Right away from the very beginning of class, I briefly introduce myself, share a little bit of my background and what got me into the learning environment. But more importantly, through a very quick couple of exercises and something as simple as a penny, I try to get people to start sharing a story. And so every penny has a date on it. And one of the questions in there is the most important one for me, tell me a story of what happened to you from that year. And I know this is kind of awkward for the introverts and for the people that don't like to talk too much. But we get to experience the story of the people that we're in the learning environment with. And through something as simple as a penny, we can bring people together. One of the other activities that I use is with a sticky note, and there are a couple of different things that you can do with the sticky note here, one of the first ones that I do is have people draw a line, a horizontal line with an arrow at the end. And I ask people to think about an important date or time in their life. And I ask them to just put that date on the sticky note and first off, identify what happened. But then second off, consider why that was important. And what does that mean in our life? Again, we're not so much concerned about pulling data from one story. But one story can certainly get us to reflect and think about a little bit of our lives. And one of the big ones for me is the 1984 when I was diagnosed with type one diabetes. This is actually a story that I tell in my classes. My institution focuses on business, technology, and health. And when I'm able to share my 30 plus year journey as a type one diabetic with folks, I'm able to connect with the nurses and biological lab folks and the people that are

medical assistants and CNAs. And I'm able to share a little bit on a different level with them about what is very important to me in my life. And so I want you to think about what are some of your stories. And so what I'd like you to do right now, is just take 30 seconds, maybe on another scrap of paper, I'd like you to write down the name of somebody who inspired you. Was there a teacher or a sports star that inspired you? Is there maybe somebody in your field, a brilliant scientist, or a great discovery on the periodic table of elements that you are so excited about that you want to share? Maybe that sticky note is an opportunity for you to put one of those ideas down. So after you put those ideas down, I'd like you to start putting down some of your thoughts. Any good story starts with an introduction, has some main points and finishes with a very strong conclusion. As a communicator, I try to focus in on the middle and the main points first, and figure out and be intentional. A story isn't just off the top of our head, especially in the learning environment if we're teaching something. I think we need to be very intentional about the learning that we experience through that moment. But I have a penny here and the penny has 2020. Twenty-twenty, that's when COVID really hit in the United States on the global side of things. And if I'm thinking about as a communicator, in the field of communication or leadership, how can I focus in on one event, or one moment or one leader, as they were guiding different cultures and different companies in different communities through COVID. And so I'd like to encourage you either through a penny or through a sticky note like this to put down a name of a person and consider what makes them so interesting to you. How can you include these ideas in your particular class? And I would argue as some tips and tricks whenever we're telling a story to keep it true. I do think that we can think about our stories as kind of true and out there a little bit. But I would argue that a good storyteller and best connection to our learners in the classroom is when we tell a true story.

Tierney King 18:07
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