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Classrooms that Put People First

John Hayward

Try these teacher-tested and trusted strategies to create a happy, safe atmosphere for learning.

Sorry, Dad, I smiled before Christmas. I broke the etiquette that your 1940s-era teachers learned, which you then employed in your 1970s classroom. Students in my classes don't receive a syllabus on the first day, but they *will* see me smile.

Why don't I start with the syllabus? Certainly the course content is important, and I tell students, "You can have one today if you really want one." But we won't advance very far academically without first establishing community. Putting people first works. That's why I've used the following strategies for the last 20 years, whether I'm teaching high school freshmen, seniors, or adults at a community college. I'm happy and safe in my classroom, and students should feel the same.

Humanities teacher Joshua Block (2015) echoed my feeling about classrooms as communities in a recent blog post:

> The sad truth is that there's very little about the traditional structure of school that encourages people to build communities that love, serve, and create. Most of us spend our school days racing from one task to another, preparing for the next class, trying to grade and return work to students in a reasonable amount of time, and dealing with the many ... unexpected situations that develop during the course of any normal school day. It's exhilarating and stimulating, but doesn't promote connection or community.

Building the structure that Block suggests begins before students arrive but reaches its peak when students first walk in your classroom door. As Harry and Rosemary Wong (1998) emphasize, "What you do on the first day may determine how much respect and success you will have for the rest of the school year." As you plan for many first days ahead, consider these community-building ideas.

Try the Two-Way Interview

Building community requires people to know and trust one another. If we demand transparency from students, we need to model some ourselves. On the first day of every class, I have students complete a
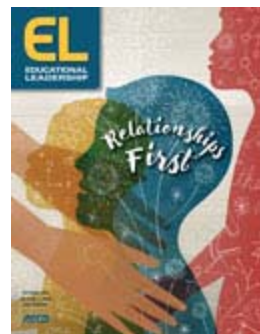
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survey made up of personal-preference questions like those in Figure 1 (p. 73). Meanwhile, I take attendance.

Attendance taking itself gives me a chance to show that I value flexibility. I start from the bottom of the roster and work my way up (seriously, it's OK for the A child to wait and the Z child to go first). I ask about name pronunciation and what students *prefer* to be called. I will not honor "Sparky" or "Stud Muffin" as monikers, but if a student goes by RJ or Madi instead of the full name on my computer printout, we let everyone know this right away.

After I clarify each person's name, I prompt that student to answer one of 30 bizarre icebreaker questions I've provided, everything from "What kind of ice cream best describes your personality?" to "What's the worst-smelling place you've been to?" to "What's your favorite article of clothing?"

Then I turn the tables and let that student ask me a question from the list—"What's the hardest thing for you to throw away?" or "What's the coolest thing you've ever found?" or anything else they want to know. Off we go, students addressing their curiosity about me instead of my running through some canned yarn about my past. Pets, children, college—all are eligible (within reason) as I risk letting students get to know me so they can learn to trust me. With the invitation to ask their teacher anything, students begin to lean in and listen closely—important for working together.

This opening activity can, and should, take the entire class period. Everyone gets to learn about and listen to one another from the start. Hearing individual voices in the room is exciting, and this activity fulfills two important conditions for community: giving students opportunities to share their lives and making time for student-to-student interaction.

Avoid "Calling Out" Students

As I deal with kids who act out and also try to preserve a classroom community, I've discovered that publicly correcting (calling out) a student doesn't ever work. When I ask students, on the first day, to suggest a workable system of intervention, they agree that public shaming isn't it.

Good rapport, founded on truly knowing the student and possibly the motivating causes of behavior, provides the best foundation for teacher action. Most teachers have cultivated a corrective glare or stance that can curb most disturbances without having to disrupt the flow of instruction. Beyond this first level, the temptation to admonish someone grows stronger. Don't do it! Your self-control in this moment is key because it communicates a hard-earned level of respect for students that you want to maintain.

Julie Baron (2015), drawing on her experience counseling adolescents, points out, "When we can reflect back to teens something of value that we see in them, they will absorb it and feel respected." This applies to the critical moment of intervention.

Instead of admonishment, use proximity to your advantage. Work your way over to the student and address quietly how his or her *behavior* is disrupting the learning environment. Because you've put time into knowing what could be prompting the disruption (sleeping, for example, could be a characteristic of a rapidly growing teenage boy, not a commentary on your course content), you avoid the shaming that comes from blaming the individual. Support the person; correct the behavior. ("I see you're fading, Ken, but I need you to sit up now.")

Baron also suggests that a curious tone ("Why did you skip the last four problems, Nora?") will engage a teen and direct her back to learning, while making her feel understood. Questioning like this provides an opportunity to model thoughtful problem solving.

One last intervention to try before a referral, parent contact, or principal's office visit is to invite the student to take a two-minute walk in the hallway. This does wonders to diffuse problems and reset everyone's priorities. If a co-teaching partner or aide is available, join the student on the walk and

encourage conversation. By giving the kid a short break but not a punishment or a ticket out of class, you validate the sanctity of the learning community and the role this student should strive to play within it. Establish this as a possible strategy at the beginning of the school year. Before reactionary, try revolutionary.

Observe Carefully, Avoid Assumptions

You're very careful on opening day about what you wear and how you present yourself. Observe and record your impressions of what individual kids are saying about themselves as they do the same—but allow time for the truer picture of each student to develop.

One year, several teachers warned me about a student on my roster whose reputation had become the stuff of legend (and rumor). On the first day, I met that student at the door and shared with him how others had tried to influence my understanding of him before we even met. "How do you want me to know you?" I asked. "Be the person you want others to know. That's what I'll believe." For the rest of the term, he was a model student whose previous behaviors never surfaced.

Observe your students in every academic context possible. How does each student read best? What struggles does each student exhibit when tackling an essay prompt or presenting to the class? These mental notes help compile a more honest profile of who each student is beyond any notes you or other teachers make after negative or confrontational situations.

What can you learn about students by listening? Their favorite song? What movie Donna just saw? Why what just happened in the cafeteria is more exciting than what's on your agenda? You know they are watching *you* all the time; what do you learn when you watch them interact, struggle, and thrive in school?

Show Your Philosophies

I have several basic teaching philosophies that drive everything about how I approach students. At the beginning of the year, I strive to communicate to students—by saying it directly or showing it in my actions—that I abide by these ideas:

> I'm not out to get you. I don't live in a laboratory plotting ways to make students miserable.
>
> When a student fails, I've failed, too.
>
> There is more than one way to do many academic tasks. I want to hear what ways *you* would like to try.

For example, I might say during the planning stages of an upcoming unit, "Here are the learning goals we hope to achieve and some activities we could conduct along the way. What other learning opportunities would best indicate your mastery of these skills?" With an invitation to collaborate on decision making, students have increased ownership and motivation to participate. Many times, their ideas are more rigorous and diverse than what I had planned.

Identify your own philosophy statements and live them consistently, making them part of classroom culture. Discover how your views and students' developing views can mesh to create a productive environment of learning, challenge, and change.

On the First Day—and Always

One of the steps that Block (2015) lists for creating a classroom community is relevant as you set the

atmosphere for your class on the first day, week, and month: "Be the host and set a tone that is welcoming and kind." Speaking and acting with respect and kindness is crucial for a successful classroom. If you value the people and the special mission you have before you, students will know it immediately.

From day one, I guide each learner to respect and abide by a pact they make with me: we are in this learning effort together. Students and I have definite boundaries—I don't need any 15-year-old friends. Although I try to catch students doing what's right and point out what that positive action might develop into as they enter adulthood ("Dale, do you realize how your focused effort on these revisions will help you improve *any* piece of future writing?"), I do the same for students who do wrong ("Jerica, if you wouldn't use that tone in a job interview, practice a kinder tone here"). Students and I talk. We grow to understand one another, because I'm human and make mistakes, too.

FIGURE 1. Sample Get-to-Know-You Questions for the First Day

What is your favorite snack food?
What are your academic strengths and weaknesses?
What do you want me to know about you?
Please don't do this, Mr. Hayward: _____
What activities are you involved in outside of school?
Name one goal you'd like to set right now.

On the last day of every course, I tell students I will be available in the future if they need help. Recently, three former students contacted me to ask for help with writing. Although they each graduated more than seven years ago, they still trust that I value them as individuals and will do whatever I can to further their progress.

In a strong community, a teacher's role in students' lives never diminishes. Mutual respect doesn't expire. Keep that smile. As it was on the first day, so it will always be.

EL Online

For more on forging positive, life-changing connections with students, see the online articles "Tokens of Connection" by Theresa Crowley and "Take a Tip from the Cubs" by James Fornaciari.

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John Hayward is an English teacher and librarian at Naperville Central High School in Naperville, Illinois. Follow him on Twitter.

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