

Ep. 008: A Community of Learners

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How do you create a “community of learners?” You’ve probably heard that phrase before, but what does it really mean, and how do you achieve it? This week, we explore those questions with CTLT’s Dana Karraker. Discover the philosophy behind this important concept, techniques to apply to your teaching, and signs that show when it’s actually working.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

DANA: I'm Dana.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee, and joining me today is Dana Karraker. She's a coordinator here at CTLT. Who does faculty development. Hi, Dana.

DANA: Hello.

JIM: Thank you for joining us today. Today, we're going to talk about a term that has been used a couple times on this podcast already. And it's one that it's not that easy to unpack, but we're going to try today. And it's this phrase community of learners. What do we mean when we say, we want our classroom to be a community of learners?

DANA: Well, it's really an approach to how you're going to set up your classroom, and how you're going to interact with your students, and even more, so how your students are going to interact with each other. So, it positions the instructor in a particular way, and it positions the students in a particular way. And the idea of community of learners. Really kind of redefines how people are learning in your classroom, as opposed to teach your students Professor student.

JIM: So, in other words, you know, if you work towards this, you're kind of is it fair to say breaking down some of the barriers that exist between you know, I'm, I'm the teacher in charge? I'm the professor, I have the power and you are the you are the student?

DANA: Yes, it redefines how learning is going to be taking place in your classroom. So, this idea has grown out and I brought props,

JIM: Oh, that's excellent.

DANA: Grows out of the work of Paulo Freire, who talks about this notion of the banking concept, and how sometimes learning is seen as a place where the teacher is depositing knowledge into

JIM: Oh, yeah...

DANA: The students. And so that really sends a message about how learning happens when you set up your classroom and that that particular way that you are the expert, that the student is this empty vessel to be filled with with you with your knowledge. So, the community of learners kind of changes that. And that it honors what students bring into the classroom, they're not empty vessels, they come with a lot of experiences a lot of knowledge that can really be harnessed and used in the learning experience. The other thing that it does is help students make connections with the relationship piece is really important, okay? We all know that we learn better when we're comfortable when we feel connected. So, it's that effective piece of your classroom as well. So, your students come in one very important pieces, the instructors to make to develop relationships with your students, you know, they're not just coming in for the, the hour that they're with you. And then leaving, learning happens better when we're connected with each other, and learning with and from each other, which is that whole idea of community of learners. So, this is all based on the work of Dewey and Vygotsky, and social learning, theory, social constructivist theory. So, anybody who cares about that kind of thing. That's where it came from?

Jim Well, so when we're talking about students, putting students into this mindset is really a mindset and your modeling practices as the teacher reinforced that, because I would say that we probably default I think a lot of us still probably default more to this banking model. Because we're experts in our field, and then we come in and we teach in this. I mean, obviously, that's why you're here to hear me talk, you know, and all of that, to profess to profess, yes, it's in the title isn't it? To to profess, but in order to shift to more of that community of learners idea, what are some of the steps that as a teacher you could take?

DANA: It starts on that first day, creating that welcoming environment, bringing your students in, and Claire's earlier podcast referred to the syllabus. And, and so the syllabus is one key in creating that community of learners where you're having that conversation with your students about how you're going to learn together, and how you're going to interact with each other so that this is a quality learning experience for everyone. So, the the things that Claire said in her, her in her podcast about the syllabus really sets the stage for what's going to happen in your classroom. So, that's one place to start. And then that first day you're you do a lot of the community building pieces. And we have used a phrase around here when we're working with faculty in our workshops or on the one on one Just start as you mean to continue.

JIM: Oh, okay.

DANA: Oh, whatever you're going to do on that first day of class, give students some kind of insight as to what the rest of the semester is going to be like.

JIM: I think Claire called it she used two different phrases. One was modeling policies and procedures.

DANA: Yes.

JIM: So, that if you do if you expect them to do something at the beginning of class everyday do that on the first day. And then she also talked about previewing some of

the content and and show them some of the accomplishments that they're going to make through the rest of the semester, first day.

DANA: So, that trajectory piece is important. So, this is why we're here. This is where we're going to go. And as a community of learners, we're going to go there together. And so you set that up on that first day, in your syllabus, the language you use in the syllabus, and how you approach the syllabus, can be a step toward that. The other thing, that's kind of a risky thing to do, I haven't done it. But I know people that have constructing that syllabus together and talking about with your students how you're going to work together and and some of the goals you have that

JIM: That's interesting. And you know, I I actually do a little bit of that one tiny little piece talking about the use of mobile technology in the classroom. So, you know, I do I facilitate a workshop here at CTLT, called your your classroom technology policy. And the idea is that you develop some sort of a process, depending on the size of the class, and how much control you want to give up, really, and have a conversation with students about how they think smartphones and laptops and tablets and all that should be used and what to do you know, and what kind of behavior is should be encouraged? And what kind of behavior should be discouraged. And I found it to be a very interesting, very interesting process. I never actually thought about extrapolating that out, though, to the whole darn thing. Would you still have to have a structure for assessments? Because you're not going to write write tests and stuff like that?

DANA: Well, well, or or perhaps, or you do have your learning outcomes? And you can, there are professors who have held heads, students develop their own assessments. You know, here's how I want to show you how I've learned this. So, again, that's not something I've done, but I know it's been done. I did I did do that in a graduate course. Yeah. Where we proposed what we'd want to do. And you know, people do do it with undergrads as well.

JIM: That's interesting.

DANA: The other thing that you can do in the beginning, is make some arrangements with each other have discussion about how you're going to work together. And what I did in, in the beginning of my class was I had them brainstorm what's the best kind of learning experience you've ever had? What's the worst kind of learning experiences you've ever had? And they just took a few minutes and jotted those down. And I had a small class, so I could just go around, I said, everybody's gonna just give their one thing. I said, please tell us a bit your best or your worst. So, we know. And so we just kind of went around and everybody shared and listened to each other. And then they started, you know, piggybacking off each other, and like, oh, that reminded me of that, you know, so we had that conversation first. And they shared the things that made that work for them as learners and things that didn't work for them as learners. And then we made a chart an agreement of, alright, here's what we will do with students. And here's what she will do as an instructor. So, that really sent the message that I valued, what worked for them as learners, and wanted to know that and was willing to consider it. And so there was that piece. And then that also sent the message that we were in this together, this this class was going to work because we were all responsible

for making it work. I had my roles and responsibilities, and they had their roles and responsibilities. So, really, it kind of shifts the, the responsibility. So, for them for taking more responsibility about how this class was going to work, it wasn't just up to the instructor,

JIM: And they were just they weren't just following the rules playing the game. And they had to actually do a little cognitive heavy lifting about...

DANA: Yeah.

JIM: ...about how they're gonna make that work. I think it's great.

DANA: Yeah. And there's this idea too, that the teacher shouldn't work harder than her students. So, yeah, they're the ones Yeah, right. Oh, this stuff.

JIM: Yeah. Or, or, or these students should work just as hard as the teacher.

DANA: Right.

JIM: You know, I'm sure there are some faculty members who would flip it around.

DANA: Yeah, yeah.

JIM: So, what So, what else do you do when you're trying to foster this, this idea of a community of learners?

DANA: So, that that's the one piece and then I get them to connect with each other? That's an important piece as well. I think there's a lot of effort made for teachers to connect with, with students and, and that type of thing and kind of going back relates to Educating Illinois that, you know, in our mission statement, we kind of pride ourselves at ISU, About having that large university experience with a small, right, a small university feel. So, where we are connected with our students, and that's important. So, in the beginnings to getting them to know each other, and I think it's really important. You know, sometimes we we find these icebreakers. And they're kind of goofy, where you know, like, okay, find your partner, and you have like Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse, or, you know, Cinderella, and Prince Charming and all that. So, you know, those, and people hate those.

JIM: Yeah, but they do, don't. I mean, I mean, I've gotten, I've gotten some pretty significant rolling, among other things, in recent semesters, in my own teaching, why do you think that is?

DANA: Well, they're, they're kind of silly. So, the key is to take those types of activities and connect them to your content. So, then that that start, as you mean to continue thing, you know, you're really emphasizing that this is the, the, the stuff we're going to learn in this class. So, if you can do that, then it doesn't seem like a silly exercise, right? It has more meat to it, it's more important. You know, it's connected to what you're going to be doing together. And it kind of previews what, what there's going to be what's going

to be going on to the other thing that it does is helps you as the instructor, do a formative assessment. So...

JIM: Now, you probably should define what is a formative assessment? Because I have a hard time doing it

DANA: Right, right. Formative assessments or any of those things that you do in the process of learning. In the beginning, the formative assessment, just gauges where your students are, what experiences do they have with the content that you're teaching? What do they already know about it? What are some of their misunderstandings, because you have to clear those up. So, a formative assessment is just any type of assessment that you do. That is going to help you as the instructor know where the students are in their learning at this point, and then also inform students about their own learning as well. That's another important piece of formative assessment. So, there, again, it using a formative assessment, and having students involved in that process is also a big piece of that community of learners. as well.

JIM: We should probably do a podcast just on formative assessment and the difference between am I going to say this correctly, summative, formative, and summative, summative assessment, which is what most of us do most of the time, I think, is the more traditional assessment of just okay, how what, where are they out on the knowledge meter?

DANA: Yeah.

JIM: You know, how much knowledge have we managed to pour into their heads? Have I managed to bank in them? And whatnot. As as we kind of, as we kind of get towards the end here, I wanted to ask you. Well, first of all, what is there? Are there any other key pieces that you want to address? When we're talking about building that community of learners? Perhaps as the semester goes along?

DANA: I think the roles. Yeah, the, you know, what is the role of the instructor? What is the role of the learner in the classroom? Well, and also it's, we're all learners, so I'm always learning from them. So, even using spaces on ReggieNet, where students are contributing content to the class, or, you know, we're talking about this, and oh, my goodness, this just happened, I just read this in the New York Times, it's related to what's happening in classroom, let me post that article and ReggieNet and share it with all all my other classmates. So, the instructor again, isn't the only and holder of all knowledge, it really encourages students to make the connections of class with outside and there and then we always know that when those connections are made, yeah, learning really is enhanced. Students need to be reflective and reflexive. And that is the biggest part of learning. So

JIM: Do you want to define the difference between reflection and reflexivity? Or should we just...

DANA: be another podcast?

JIM: Yeah, well, let me let me let me try and you can write it out. So, reflection is is just examining your own actions and motivations. And why not? reflexivity seems to be more of examining your own actions and motivations in the context of the bigger I would say systems that work that you work within or the greater context,

DANA: It's more about yourself.

JIM: Okay.

DANA: So, how was my work in this process? How did it influence the outcomes? I see. So, how, how is my part working? And so being reflexive is, you know, what did what did I do that helped this learning happen? When you're reflecting on it, you're like, Okay, this learning happened, and this is why it happened. But this is more what did I do? So, in that community of learners, as I said, it kind of shifts the roles. It gives the student more agency so they recognize that just call them students, the learner. They are students they...

JIM: They are students too but, but they are in the role of learners.

DANA: Right. At this point, so that they do have a big part in this and, and you value what they bring in. And then the beauty of this is the student, they're all co-constructing knowledge. So, somebody brings this piece in, and then somebody else brings this in when they come together, then that's when you have a greater understanding of what's happening, or you know, what the content that you're you're teaching.

JIM: And and we'll tease out in later episodes, some of the actual exercises that you may you may do or activities you may do in class, but for today, I would imagine you probably get a little bit of reluctance at first, especially from students or learners to do their well. Let me put it this way, you students are sometimes reluctant to see themselves as learners, as we're defining it here today, because they've never experienced this before they've been stuck, if you will, in the banking model for their entire academic life. Right, right. So, what are some of the little things because you're so good at working with? Well, no, you really are. You're good, you're good at working with people in groups. And because you're working with aspiring educators, I think you have an interesting perspective on this. So, what are some of the little things that you do or say, to kind of encourage and tease him along? And I'm, I'm asking selfishly, because I'm teaching a course this semester. And I need some help with this.

DANA: Well, I don't always position myself as the expert in the room. Okay. They've all been through school they've had by the time I have them, they've also had other education courses. So, one thing that I do, it's hard, I'm not going to tell you it's easy, right? But if someone poses a question, instead of just immediately answer it, I look around the room and say, Who else has something they want to answer, you know, to contribute to this? Or, you know, so I do that. And then I also need to set up my room in a way that is not that initiation, response, evaluation. So, where they're not all facing me, and I'm kind of up on a higher level. That you know, I don't say something, they answer the question that questions coming directly back back to me and I, so I need to rearrange my rooms, because many of our rooms on campus. Yeah, they're structured here...

JIM: Yeah, straight. Yep. Up front rows of seats.

DANA: So, I rearranged so that they can look at each other. And that way, when I do throw that out there, you know, somebody poses a question or has a comment. And I do then they can turn and looked at each other. So, it changes the direction of the conversation. So, it's not, I'm doing this with my hands. Two way that two way conversation between one student and the instructor. It's a conversation among everyone in the room.

JIM: So, final question, you make a conscious effort to reframe how you are presenting yourself and how students are, are presented in the class? How do you know it's working? What if some of the little what are some of the little clues what are some of the little, the little things that you hear maybe maybe at the end of the semester, maybe during the semester, that's that you go at this work.

DANA: And it's not just the during the semester, at the end, it's even after they leave us though, so several things will happen that show you that it's working. And these are the things that were like, Oh, my gosh, I love my job. This is why I'm doing it, we're talking about something in class. And it used to be that somebody would email me a link and say, Oh, my gosh, I just read this, and about what we talked about in class. But now I have the space where they can go and post it and share it with everybody. So,

JIM: Okay.

DANA: So, you know that in our online learning space, they can can share that with everybody. So, I love that I'd love it when I see them, seeing what we're talking about in class, and then making that connection to the real world. So, that that those are those moments. And they helped me as an instructor, because they're like, cool, now I have something else to use. So, now I'm not the only person contributing to this knowledge base. So, that's one thing. And then after they leave, I get the emails back and say, Hey, I just got one the other day, we had done this, this, I teach literacy methods. So, we had done this writing this writing activity in class and one of my former students is now student teaching in first grade, and she sent me pictures of her first graders work that, you know, hey, we did this and so hearing their stories after they go and how they're using the the content. So, that's how you know it's working. That's how, you know you've developed those relationships. And then when they when you see them, interacting with each other to and, you know, one of the things that we've learned from student services as far as as retention goes, or persistence to graduation, a student often stays, and it can be due to one person. Often you'll, you'll hear, I bet everybody can say, Oh, I had this one classroom experience. And that's why I stayed or that's why I went into a particular field because of what happened in that classroom. So, that's how you know it's working.

JIM: Excellent. Dana, thank you so much for being with us today. And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about the podcast and about all the services we offer here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology by going to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Click the podcast link at the top of the page, and you can see our latest episodes and find out how to subscribe

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