
Talking about classrooms as learning communities

What do we mean?

The phrase “learning community” is increasingly used and often empty. Sometimes it’s used as a simple synonym for school. If we use both of the words in a strong sense, then a *learning community* is a collective which learns together, including about its collective process of learning. A classroom is necessarily a collection, but is it operated as a collective? If you enquire of teachers and pupils how they want classroom life to be, they will tell you about aspects of community.

What might we see in the classroom?¹

In a classroom operating as a learning community we might see:

Students operating together to improve knowledge
Students helping each other learn through dialogue
Learning goals emerging and developing during enquiry
Students create products for each other and for others
Students accessing resources outside the class community
Students reviewing how best the community supports learning
Students showing understanding of how group processes promote their learning
The classroom social structures promoting interdependence
Students displaying communal responsibility including in the governance of the classroom
Assessment tasks being community products which demonstrate increased complexity and a rich web of ideas

What are the effects?²

A. In Classrooms which operate as Communities

Students are crew, not passengers
People feel part of a larger whole
The language shifts to “We” rather than “you and me”
Diverse contributions are embraced

B. In Classrooms which operate as Communities of Learners

Engaged enquiry emerges
Students help each other learn
There is productive engagement and orientation to learn
Students show better knowledge, understanding, application and transfer

C. In Classrooms which operate as Learning Communities

Discourse characteristic of the discipline (subject) develops
We share what is known and what needs to be known
Lone learning is not enough
We understand our learning together

In short, better learning (and performance), better behaviour, better social development.

¹ Watkins C (2005), *Classrooms as Learning Communities: what's in it for schools*, London, Routledge
<http://chriswatkins.net/download/112/>

² Watkins C (2004), *Classrooms as Learning Communities (Research Matters series No. 24)*, London: University of London Institute of Education: National School Improvement Network
<http://chriswatkins.net/download/110/>