
Classrooms as Learning Communities

What does this mean?

A *learning community* is a collective which learns together, including about its collective process of learning. Thus the adjective “learning” is used in a strong sense: learning community is not merely a synonym for school.

Another term, “community of learners”, usually describes a classroom in which the process of learning is mainly viewed in individual terms. Although learners may act collaboratively at times they do not learn about collaboration.

If you enquire of teachers and pupils how they want classroom life to be, they will tell you about aspects of community. Yet classrooms rarely operate as a learning collective.

How does it happen?

In a learning community the goal is to advance the collective knowledge and, in that way, to support the growth of individual knowledge. Members aim to enhance individual learning that is both a contribution to their own learning and to the group's learning. They do this through supporting individual contributions to a communal effort. Learning communities often publish the fruits of their new knowledge, for each other and for others outside.

Classroom Practices include:

1. Community forming
 - getting to know each other
 - telling the story we bring, appreciatively
2. Community agenda
 - eliciting the questions brought to the theme
 - helping learners plan intentional learning
3. Community activities for learning
 - reciprocal teaching
 - development of dialogue
 - jigsaw tasks
 - metalearning
 - group goals for assessment
4. Community governance
 - classroom reviews
 - shared control
 - “the classroom we want”
5. Community climate
 - pro-social behaviour, development of trust
 - helping each other to learn
 - affiliation; not bonding but bridging

Classroom activities are designed to enhance knowledge, promote reflection and develop interdependence.¹

¹ Watkins C (2005), *Classrooms as Learning Communities: what's in it for schools*, London, Routledge. 0-415-32780-6 paperback <http://chriswatkins.net/download/112/>

What's the effect?

A recent review of the research in this field² found evidence under the following headings:

- 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.

What might we see?

(This question is regularly asked, and although at worst it focuses on teachers being looked at, at best it reminds us that we may need to look for something other than the dominant model of teacher-centred classrooms)

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

Which of these questions and answers makes sense for you?

How could you best explain your understanding to a colleague?

Do your best experiences of classrooms add to the answers offered here?

What new questions emerge for you?

² Watkins C (2004), *Classrooms as Learning Communities (Research Matters series No. 24)*, London: University of London Institute of Education: National School Improvement Network, see also Watkins C (2005), “Classrooms as learning communities: a review of research”, *London Review of Education*: 3(1). 47-64