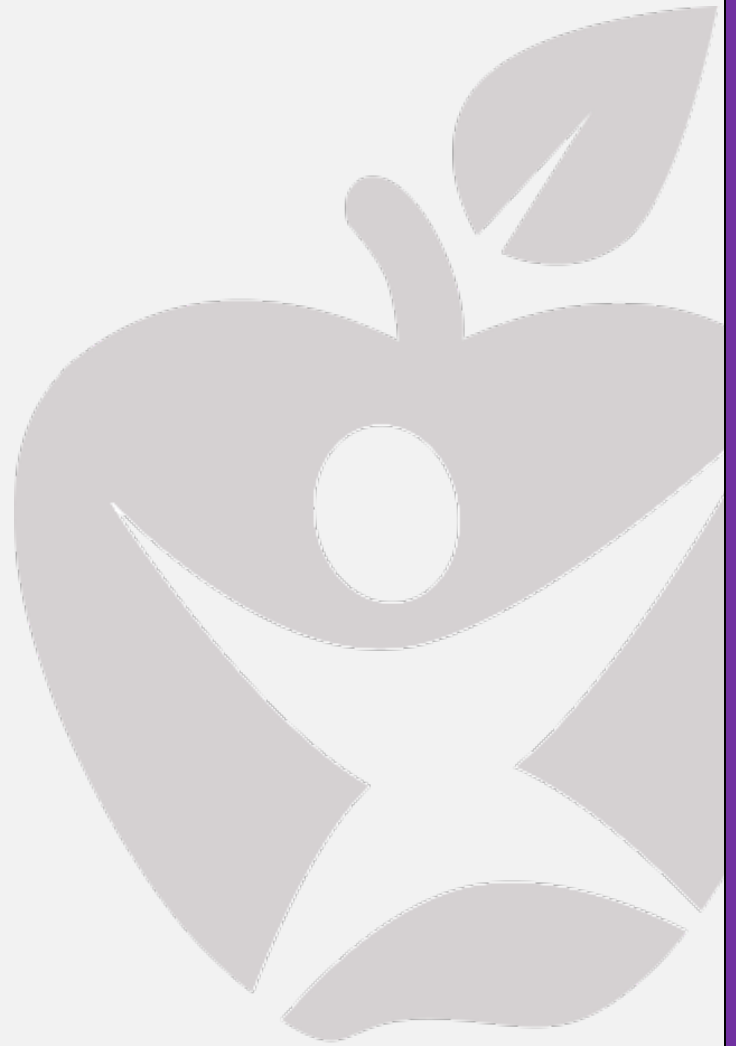


# **Building Community in the Classroom**

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## Building Community in the Classroom

*With deliberate pedagogical decisions, teachers can turn their classrooms into warm, welcoming, vibrant shared communities. Through collaborative practices and activities, teachers and students are equal participants in a shared learning experience. Develop a sense of belonging in all participants through shared experience, interests, and goals.*

**T**he definition for community is a supportive social group where members have shared interests, experiences, and goals. They engage in collaborative inquiry and provide each other social support. This is especially true in learning communities where members also provide each other academic support (Rovai, 2003). In many communities, leadership roles are informal, and members easily blend into equal roles in participation and responsibility. In classroom settings, there needs to be intentional effort by the formal leader, the instructor, to put measures in place to value all students as contributing members rather than being reduced to receiving participants.

## Barriers to Building Community in Adult General Education (AGE)

Building community in the classroom is not intuitive for most teachers, and is compounded even further for AGE instructors. Traditional pedagogical strategy relies on the teacher to design and deliver the learning, providing the important and key facts for students to remember, and singularly decide the direction the curriculum will take the class. Students in this structure are the receivers of information and will largely depend on the teacher for learning. This traditional structure has resulted in much student learning throughout the years, but there is a shift occurring leading to more student-centered learning environments. This shift is occurring in primary, and secondary settings, and has been in place for some time under the principles of andragogy (teaching of adults). The instructional design elements in a student-centered classroom will also contribute to building a strong collaborative and shared community.

This is easier said than done, especially in adult education settings. There are many factors that will create additional barriers to building community in your AGE class, including those listed below.

- Open enrollment – Creating social connections between students is more difficult when there is not a singular starting point. Usually, ice breakers that allow learning community members and the teacher an opportunity to get to know each other usually start at the beginning of a class or term. If students are continuously entering and leaving the class, this creates a barrier to establishing deeper connections.
- Transient student populations – student persistence may lag in adult general education. Along with life circumstances that at times create obstacles for continued student enrollment. As above, class member turnover takes away from an institution's and a teacher's ability to build a community
- Attendance – As adults, students have barriers to attending class every day. These can include lack of reliable transportation, childcare, and work responsibilities. Inconsistent attendance takes away from ability to establish connections with others, and to authentically participate in collaborative assignments.
- Teacher-centered classroom – Teacher dominated instruction, ownership of the learning, and a lack of reflective group activities will

lead to less learner engagement and student empowerment to become part of a shared community.

- Lack of student motivation – When a community, and the practices that lead to building a community, do not exist, learners will lose motivation. For some, a teacher-centered classroom environment fits their needs. However, honoring every student’s unique background knowledge, skillset, strengths, learning needs, and ability to support each other can only be done through differentiation and inclusive techniques. Students must be empowered to share their knowledge, and to think deeper and more critically about the content, rather than becoming receivers of the information
- Teacher assumptions – At times, if educational institutions are not careful, they can become the barriers to building communities. Students can lose motivation, and have lesser attendance, because the instruction in the classroom is not meeting their needs. Worse, if a teacher is no longer making an effort to value each and every student’s differences because of a high turnover rate, those students will begin to feel like they do not matter within the class. They make the assumption that class will go on, and the teacher will continue with lessons and lectures, whether they attend or not. At first, this leads to poor attendance, but eventually can lead to discontinuing the educational journey. At this point, teachers and institutions must be careful to not blame the students and/or their commitment. Rather, a self-reflection of the practices in place and how they may be contributing to the barriers becomes necessary. Attention to the practices and protocols to be discussed later in this handbook can strengthen community in the classroom and reduce the impact of barriers that exist. You will be surprised to see that students suddenly find ways to attend more frequently, and persist towards their goals longer when they feel valued and a part of a shared experience with collective goals.

## Community of Inquiry Framework

The *Community of Inquiry* framework (Garrison et al., 2010) suggests there are at least three essential components that must be in place to build a community of actively engaged participants. In the educational field, there will be overlap between the components when the instructional design is intentional about building in each of these components. What that means is some of the protocols suggested later in this handbook will cover the needs and purpose of each component when implemented with fidelity.

1. Social Presence – Students matter. They are not a number in enrollment, or a name on a roster, but their background experiences, knowledge, skills, strengths, and areas for development are sought and valued. We must put practices in places to allow the community to learn these things about each other, and activities for these unique characteristics to be of use. The more we are able to differentiate instruction and value the unique differences of each student, and teach them to honor these differences, the more valuable each individual becomes. To contrast, if teachers approach instruction in the manner that they need to cover, and teach, every standard in the framework from cover to cover, student identity is lost and their ability to contribute to the collective goal diminished.
2. Cognitive Presence – Students are engaged in thinking and reasoning activities. This goes beyond the rote memorization of “what is important” to remember and gives opportunity to develop critical thinking, reasoning, and application. To go a step further, and towards the efforts of community, doing so collaboratively. For teachers to apply this component of the framework, they must focus on how to help students with application of the learning, feedback, and multiple opportunities to demonstrate success. One way to look at this is to ensure the lessons work towards and linger in the “you do” phase of the gradual release model. With intentional planning, there are many activity protocols that will allow the first two components to occur simultaneously and seamlessly.
3. Teaching Presence – The ability for the teacher to not only plan and deliver effective lessons, but also to create practices and activities that build opportunities to strengthen the first two. The initial planning will address “the what.” The teacher identifies the critical content that students need to understand and be able to apply.

Next, the teacher must be able to devise “the how.” Teaching from cover to cover, or giving students lists of information or formulas to remember, might result in student learning. However, one must question if they do so effectively, with deeper understanding, and in a manner that contributes to the building of a classroom community. There are many protocols shared later in the handbook that will allow exploration of the critical content, through activities that allow students self-actualization, and require metacognition and critical application of the learning targets.

## Community of Inquiry

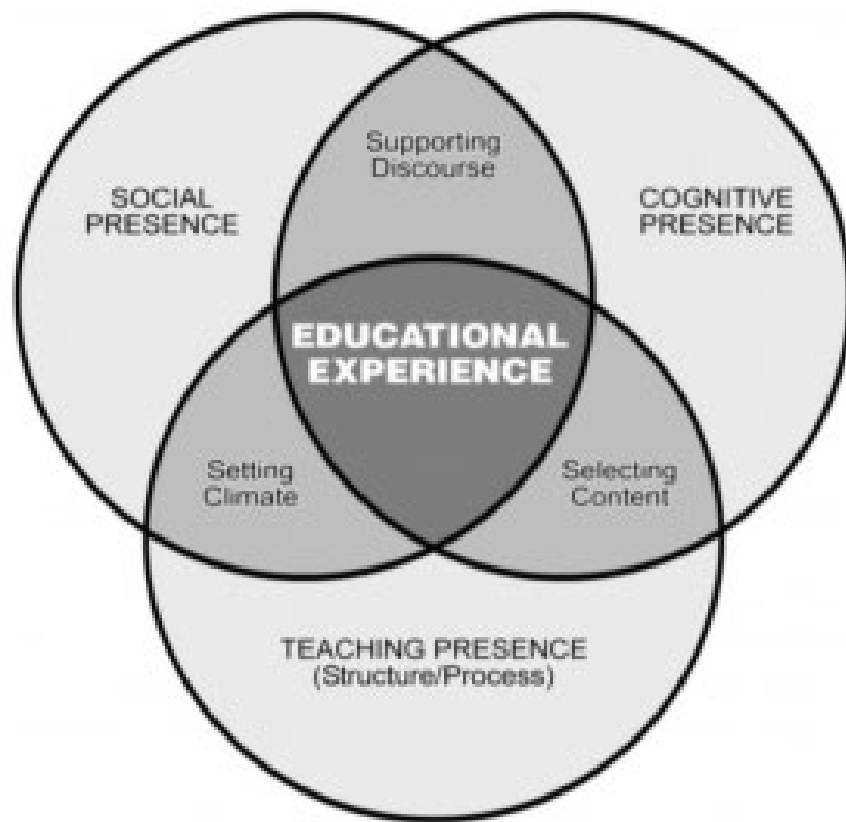


FIGURE 1 The three pillars of the *Community of Inquiry* framework. (Garrison et al., 2010).

Ancillary objectives that one must consider will help keep social, cognitive, and teaching presence in focus with clues of how to properly implement for the most effective community building practices. Keeping these in mind during planning will help prevent misguided approaches to the three pillars of the framework.



1. Supporting discourse – With attention to learning experiences that will support social and cognitive presence, a teacher will devise lessons that support discourse through the learning targets. This can be done through a variety of activities that include working in pairs, small groups, and whole group. There are times when independent work will be necessary, but if building community is a primary objective, the independent work should culminate in an activity where students come together to reflect and share their learning.
2. Selecting content – In the *Community of Inquiry* framework, selecting content is not just a simple review of the standards and frameworks, but a careful planning designed to deepen the learning towards the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy and the Depths of Knowledge. This will start with the learning targets, but part of the content selection will include the activities and protocols that will be used to deliver, practice, and assess learning. Collateral learning opportunities for consideration in content selection include:
  - a. Allow opportunities to work together and get to know each other.
  - b. Utilize student strengths to allow opportunities for them to add value to learning rather than be bored by previously mastered material.
  - c. Allow multiple interactions with the content in order to gauge one’s understanding with others for reflection, critical thinking, and application.
3. Setting climate – The practices we put in place will determine the climate and culture of the classroom, and ultimately the program. It is not enough to say you value each student for their unique individuality. One must support that statement by implementing learning that addresses unique student needs. Further, to work towards a culture of community, one must allow frequent opportunities for students to work with and learn from one another.










## Student-Centered Protocols

The essential key to creating community in the classroom is to create a consistent daily routine of students doing all of the work. The students should be creating, researching, collaborating, presenting, and talking. In almost all cases, those doing the work and speaking the most will also be learning the most. The protocols listed below include check marks if they attend to the social, cognitive, and content presence needed to create a robust community in the classroom.

Protocol	Description	Social	Cognitive	Content
<b>Community Agreements</b>	These will be the expectations for participation. New students will be reluctant participants. There can be some parameters for easing them into the structure, but what are the rules for participation, sharing, paying attention, etc. You will see how eager students are to belong to a community because they will help explain and enforce these agreements without prompting.	✓		
<b>Think, Pair and Share</b>	Requires students to think individually, or complete an assignment on their own. Then they come together to compare answers and collaboratively agree.	✓	✓	✓

<b>Interviews</b>	Students take turns asking each other a small group of questions. This can result in a report out to the whole group, or teacher can call on just a few to save time.	✓	✓	✓
<b>Icebreakers</b>	Social exchanges that allow students to learn more about each other. There are innumerable ways to approach this topic. Often teachers only do these to start a new year or term, however, if you have open enrollment these must be done more frequently.	✓		
<b>Connections</b>	Have students work in small groups to list as many things that they have in common. Afterwards share with the whole group. This can revolve around topics or be freeform.	✓		
<b>Affinity Map</b>	Students shall be given sticky notes to record answers about a question or topic. All sticky notes go on the board. Ask students to group all sticky notes into natural categories. When finished ask them what they observed, anything missing, any surprises, etc.	✓	✓	✓
<b>Artifacts</b>	Show and tell for adults. You set the parameters as the teacher, so you can make it more content related, or more social related. Either way, you and your students will learn more about each other. Practice public speaking by adding	✓		✓

	a rubric and time limit.			
<b>World Café</b>	Students are placed in 4 to 5 small groups. Each group will begin to create a poster based on a given reading, topic, or assignment. After a prescribed amount of time, participants will rotate to the next poster to continue what the prior group started. One member from each group stays behind to “host” the other group members and explain what the previous groups began to illustrate. At the end, the hosts share and explain the posters.	✓	✓	✓
<b>Gallery Walk</b>	Students will be placed into small groups to create a poster on a given topic, assignment, or reading. Once the posters are created, students are given sticky notes and walk around to the other group posters. They will leave feedback on the sticky notes as instructed by the teacher, which can include agreement points, note omissions, things to contemplate, critical feedback, etc.	✓	✓	✓
<b>Shared File Creation</b>	This could be anything from a shared bulletin or jamboard, to a group PowerPoint creation. The process of coming together to create, agree on the content, and troubleshoot the digital aspects of the learning will allow community building in the classroom.	✓	✓	✓

<b>Jigsaw</b>	Students are assigned different portions of a reading or assignment. Each individual student will need to learn their portion, and then be responsible for teaching their small group what they learned. Collectively, they are responsible for all the content through depending on each other. To switch it up, you can have expert groups first, where students are paired with others assigned the same portion. This allows them a chance to reflect and compare their takeaways before bringing them back to their original small group.			
<b>Muddy Point</b>	Have students write down one part of a reading or lecture that they still have questions on. Group students so that they can collaborate to make sense of all of the confusion. Usually, students will have different muddy points and can help each other.			
<b>Problem-Based Learning</b>	Students are grouped and presented with a problem. They must research the problem, suggest a solution, and devise a presentation to educate their classmates. Keep the guidelines open so that they can use their creativity when deciding how to teach their classmates.			
<b>Compile and</b>	Students are placed into groups to			



<b>Consolidate</b>	research a topic and create a collaborative list of the most important facts or takeaways. Once this group reaches consensus, team them with another group to consolidate both lists into a new reduced list. This works well with many topics, especially if used when creating the community agreements.			
<b>Concept Mapping</b>	Place students in small groups and ask them to design a concept map connecting multiple content ideas. This is a great way to prompt them to identify themes, draw conclusions, and synthesize information.	✓	✓	✓
<b>Socratic Seminar</b>	This is a roundtable discussion that leads with a teacher prompted question. Responses must be based on the reading or learning. Each successive student answer must build upon the prior answer, and include not only the point, but the source of supporting evidence for the point being made. This can be given by page and paragraph number in an assigned reading, or by citing one's notes or project.	✓	✓	✓

There are countless other activities, and the list you can make likely dwarfs the one in this handbook. The intention is to share a few, and that hopefully you learn some you did not know before. The main takeaway is that to build community in the classroom, students must be organized to work together, build trust through social and/or content driven assignments, designed to deepen their learning and understanding. You will notice that it is okay to deviate from learning targets for the sake of building rapport and shared experience. However, this same tenant does not hold true for teacher lecture and teacher-centered instruction. This must absolutely be kept at a minimum to build true, authentic communities that drive students to be committed to attendance and each other. Pay attention to the shared documents, whiteboards, electronic polls, and quiz apps for online students. It is even easier to fall into a pattern of teacher-driven instruction when

students aren't sharing the same workspace. With intentional and deliberate planning, even students connected remotely can form a strong and vibrant learning community.

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