5. HOW CAN I FACILITATE A DYNAMIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

CREATING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

How do you demonstrate commitment to the communities in your life? By entering into relationships within the community and by contributing to its sustainability. We do this in our families, in our social circles, in our workplaces, in our places of worship, and in virtually all our interactions with one another. The learning community requires a similar kind of commitment. However, a commitment is nothing without action: at the heart of commitment is establishing, nurturing, and sharing communication to promote a shared sense of purpose and vision. The challenge is to devise and practise strategies that facilitate communicating for connection.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking there’s no room for disagreement in an effective working relationship. In fact, one could make a strong argument that the absence of disagreement is indicative of relationship dysfunction (Lencioni, 2002). You can expect disagreement in the learning community, partly because of the sheer number of constituents and partly because change is the operative word in education today. Change challenges even the healthiest relationships and often requires that we redouble our efforts to sustain community.

Creating High Levels of Trust
Trust is like a vase. Once it’s broken, though you can fix it, the vase will never be the same again.

Trust is defined as having confidence or faith in someone or something. A highly trusted individual is someone you can rely on, count on, and believe in.

As students and their teachers work through the classroom experience, they build relationships. Ideally, they learn to respect individual differences, appreciate individual contributions, and enjoy the satisfaction of learning through collaboration with each other. Together, they build an emotional space that supports learning.

To create an emotional space that supports learning, it’s important for your students to see you as trustworthy. If you’re perceived as trustworthy, your students are more likely to be receptive to your content expertise and the tasks you set before them.

Author Stephen Covey, in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, identifies six ways we can build trustworthiness:

1. **Understand the Individual**
   Really seeking to understand another person is the keystone to a functional relationship. However, since what we intend as understanding is often based on our own needs and desires—either now or when we were at a similar age or stage in life—teachers must be vigilant about really understanding what or whom they seek to understand. As one successful parent said about raising children, *Treat them all the same by treating them differently.*

2. **Attend to Seemingly Little Things**
   Little kindnesses and courtesies are critical to building and sustaining relationships in the learning community. Even the smallest discourtesy can have a lasting negative impact.

3. **Keep Your Commitments**
   A promise made is a promise that must be kept, lest all future promises be met with skepticism.

4. **Clarify Your Expectations**
   Be clear about what you expect. Assume nothing. We create many negative situations by simply assuming that our expectations are self-evident, clearly understood, and shared by other people.
5. Show Personal and Professional Integrity
Lack of integrity can undermine any other effort to create high trust. Integrity is simply this: treating everyone by the same set of principles.

6. Apologize Sincerely when Appropriate
It takes great courage to apologize quickly and sincerely. If, despite the best of intentions, you compromise your trustworthiness, take responsibility, make amends, and move on.

Remember, trust results from successful interaction. At the beginning of the school year or at the outset of a new course, students are uncertain about what lies ahead. Take the time to build trust to encourage their optimum participation. Trustworthy teachers start with low-risk activities that are unlikely to fail, such as reviewing the goals and objectives for the course and identifying course requirements, including deadlines. Other helpful low-risk activities include modeling a positive, open, two-way communication pattern and collaboratively establishing learning environment norms. These low-risk activities set the stage for more risky activities such as open dialogue in the classroom, individual presentations, and group project work.

Students need to know they can depend on their teacher for good content expertise, shared in a manner that demonstrates care for their success. As colleagues, we need to depend on and support each other to enable us to do our best. Take the time to build relationships with your students and with your peers.

Creating High Levels of Rapport
Rapport is defined as the presence of trust, harmony, and cooperation in a relationship.

It’s pretty difficult to build learning relationships if you’re the only one talking! Since knowledge doesn’t exist in a vacuum, it’s important for your content to be wrapped in context: social, political, economic, psychological, physiological, or otherwise. The brain is more receptive to content that’s wrapped in relevance than it is to purely theoretical presentations, so it makes sense for you to strive to present and/or construct relevant applications of course content. Exceptional teachers, however, understand that a shared sense of relevance and purpose enhances cooperation and learning—in other words, it’s not enough if you think it’s relevant, your students need to buy into the relevance, either because of their prior experience or because of the rapport you’ve established with them. A learning community with high levels of rapport supports learning by embracing contextual learning and experiential learning models.

To create an emotional space that supports learning, your students need to feel like they matter. Time spent mining your students and their world for relevant, engaging applications is time well spent: your students will be more likely to be receptive to your content expertise and the tasks you set before them.

The strategies you use to build trustworthiness in your learning environment also build rapport. Similarly, rapport-building strategies enhance your trustworthiness. Here are some ways to build rapport with your students:

1. Find Something in Common
People tend to relate to those who they feel are most like themselves. Your students are more likely to be receptive to building a learning-condusive relationship with you if they perceive that you aren’t all that different from them.

2. Encourage Students to Talk about Themselves
While you probably have lots of industry stories to share with your students, remember that your students have stories, too. Provide your students with the opportunity to share curriculum-related experiences.

3. Incorporate Your Students’ World
Talk about what your students are interested in, innovatively incorporate digital technology, and draw their attention to current contexts they might not be aware of.
4. **Build in Diversity and Integration**
Like you, your students live in a world that too often only pays lip service to celebrating diversity and to authentic integration. Make every member of the learning community a priority.

5. **Design Clear Feedback Loops**
There’s no learning community without your students. Regularly evaluate course design and delivery with them. Discuss what emerges from the evaluations and adapt accordingly.

6. **Maintain a Positive Learning Environment**
Keep a positive attitude, have high expectations, be consistent, be fair, and laugh often.

**REFERENCE**