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# Community Building Through Classroom Routine: A Language Arts Class Opener

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In this time of pandemic teaching, we've all had to examine our classes and our practices to keep only what works. Our time and efforts are a finite resource; there isn't room for anything but the most effective choices. I teach a 6-credit reading, language arts, writing and literature methods class in my small regional public university's Elementary Education program. Building classroom community is both an early and ongoing goal in my class—and something I want my students to know how to do themselves since they're all likely to be teachers in their own classrooms within the year. As a professor who teaches students who are going to be teachers, not only do I teach content in my classes, but I also try to model pedagogy and classroom practices that my students can use with their own students. One example of this modeling is opening my three-hour class with the same routine regardless of that day's content or activities. I use this class routine to settle students, and I use the activities within the routine to build class both knowledge and community.

## **Community Through Routine**

Even though Scully and Howell weren't writing about post-pandemic higher education, they were absolutely correct in saying that “in our era of rapid change and persistent uncertainty, traditions can provide stability and a sense of togetherness” (2008). Our routine, our class traditions help to create this. After the normal beginning of class (e.g., chatting with students, taking roll), we always begin with these three activities: the Word of the Day, the Joke of

the Day, and the Poem of the Day.

All three are assigned on the first day of class, and students sign up for their multiple due dates (different dates for each of the three assignments). I not only participate; I go first—both to model and to be brave. At the beginning of our second class meeting, I tell my joke, teach my word, and recite my poem. I'll be honest and say that it's a little nerve-racking. Even though I'm very comfortable speaking in front of a class, at this point in the semester, I barely know the students and telling a joke and reciting a poem make me feel strangely vulnerable—in a way that lecturing or leading a discussion never would. However, that's a good deal of the point.

## **Word of the Day**

Many of my students are voracious readers with significantly large vocabularies; others are not. Since “knowing more words usually leads to better success in school” (Overturf, 2015), I want all students to have large vocabularies and to help their own students have the same. The Word of the Day presentation requires students to share a word with the class that they find interesting and useful. The “presentation” involves coming to the front of the classroom, writing or projecting the word on the whiteboard, demonstrating the pronunciation, explaining a definition, using the word in a sentence, and making a suggestion about how the class might remember the definition—all pretty standard. Class members keep track of these words.

Research tells us that a single exposure to a new word is unlikely to have much

impact on learners, so to both model a practice that my students might use and to increase the likelihood that they might internalize the Words of the Day, there are two semester-long follow-ups. First, for each class meeting, students write a response to a reading (generally a book chapter or scholarly article). They are required to include a Word of the Day in each response. Using these words in their own writing helps to cement the words as part of their vocabulary. Since students may choose whichever word is most useful, they won't likely get to each of the words on our class list. However, every few weeks, I create a Kahoot<sup>1</sup> "quiz" using our words. Kahoots can be played by individuals or teams. We generally play in teams of two or three. Each Kahoot contains all of the Words of the Day from the beginning of the semester. It's quite stunning to see how using the Kahoot format turns a vocabulary quiz into a cutthroat yet good-natured competition for bragging rights.

Students frequently mention seeing our words out in the world, which I love. Even though students have only been exposed to 26 words through this activity, I hope to encourage their general interest in new and fascinating words and vocabulary study. I am convinced that being intrigued by words will have a very positive impact on their vocabulary and will also have a positive impact on their future teaching.

### **Joke of the Day**

There's a surprising amount of research on the use of humor in the classroom, much of which addresses whether students enjoy it (they mostly do) and whether it affects learning (the jury's still out). My activity falls somewhere in between. Students are assigned to tell a joke. It can be something that would appeal to a younger or adult

audience (although it cannot be R rated or based on any kind of racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. material).

The students are directed to find or compose a joke. My directions include practicing the joke with other audiences, for two main reasons: first, so that students become more comfortable and fluent in their performance, and second, to ensure that the joke is actually funny. On the day of their joke, students come to the front of the class and perform without notes. The audience is always generous. If the performer is nervous or flubs their joke, everyone is gracious, understanding, and encouraging. Students often volunteer to tell extra jokes! They receive special accolades if their joke is grammar, writing, language, or literature related.

Some jokes are genuinely hilarious; others require more performance from the audience than the presenter. A pervasive feeling of "we're all in this together" is clear. Not only is my purpose to build relationships and classroom community, but also to help my students shed their inhibitions since teaching is, at least in part, performance.

### **Poem of the Day**

Fully cementing my quasi-dinosaur status, I require students to memorize a short poem (or an excerpt of a poem) of their choice and recite it for the class. Generally, my students are too polite for open revolt, but they're clearly comfortable with a bit of grumbling about this assignment. Even though "much is written in educational literature pertaining to memorization...being outdated and basically evil" (Ediger, 1997), we talk briefly about the tradition of poetry memorization in school (for example, when I was in kindergarten, I had to memorize Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit From St.

as a group online.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.kahoot.com](http://www.kahoot.com) is a free website that allows anyone to make a quiz—really a game—that's played

Nicholas,” and in 7th grade I had to memorize the Preamble to the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, and others). The assignment specifies that students should choose a poem or excerpt in the neighborhood of 50–75 words, although they always have the option to choose something larger. One semester, a particularly ambitious student enthralled the group by reciting the not-particularly-short Alfred Noyes’ poem, “The Highwayman.”

Each summer, I choose a poem to memorize to recite (I’m currently tackling Tennyson’s “Ulysses”). My students will be teachers of young, or youngish, children, but I don’t allow them to choose children’s poetry for this assignment. I want them to explore poetry and find something personally meaningful because hopefully the poem will be with them indefinitely. When we learn something “by heart” (an intriguing and charming phrase far better than “by rote”), it becomes our own. My students are often quite nervous about this assignment—most have never had to recite anything. They often work together to choose poems and practice memorizing. During the recitation, if a student freezes or stumbles, they’re supported and encouraged by the rest of the class. After each daily performance, there’s a sincere round of applause. Despite this being a fairly minor assignment, students seem to view it as something of a rite of passage that bonds the group.<sup>2</sup>

I regularly invite other faculty members and administrators to recite poetry or tell jokes as part of our class routine. Students are always fascinated that people already have poems memorized, since I never ask my colleagues to learn a poem to recite. Ours is a small university, so most of my students either have had or will have classes with these professors. This serves to expand

our relationships outside of our class community.

### **Benefits**

Each of these three brief assignments carries its own intrinsic benefits. Teaching a word helps expand everyone’s vocabulary. The subsequent use of the words in both written responses and in team-based games deepens the learning. Telling a joke helps students become comfortable with the performative aspect of teaching. Reciting a poem puts students in touch with poetry in a way that most have not yet experienced. Students have significant ownership of the content of their performance in that, even though I assign a word, a joke, and a poem, they choose everything else. This allows a more personal connection to their material. These semester-long assignments keep new words, jokes, and poetry in the forefront of students’ minds. I would argue, though, that the main benefit is cumulative. Each of these assignments get students to the front of the classroom, teaching and performing for their peers, and help them to form strong bonds and friendly relationships. When students are comfortable in class, they’re more likely to “engage productively” (Boyd, et al., 2018).

As students participate as part of the audience (especially for the joke and the poem), they encourage each other and build community. Since “established social rituals make explicit core social values” (Boyd, et al., 2018) students can begin to see the group as a community. These practices and ideas are hardly groundbreaking. However, they serve to significantly develop relationships and community. Additionally, each day, we start class on a positive, interactive, and entertaining note that affirms our group. I wholeheartedly advise

competition for children and teens. Many videos of students of all ages performing memorized poetry are available on the site.

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<sup>2</sup> Poetry by Heart (<https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/>) is a delightful British website that not only suggests poems for memorization, but also runs a poetry recitation

everyone to create your own rituals and traditions based on your students, your class, and your discipline. They work.

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