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What about Student Learning Communities?

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are the topic of many conversations within education: the culture that is imperative for success, the goals we choose to focus on, the protocols we should follow, the structure that must be in place, and the realities that we face. There is an abundance of research I have read to support how PLCs are necessary in improving students’ learning. I myself belong to an amazing PLC (as well as many micro PLCs within my PLC). But my thoughts lately have been on how to take the characteristics of successful PLCs and apply them within the walls of the classroom for students.

How do you create a student learning community? And by that I don’t mean by way of just classroom management, nor do I mean learning time that is strategically organized by the teacher. These are just general necessities within a learning environment. I am now in search of the *next* level of a learning environment; a classroom atmosphere that will support 21st century learning. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2011) advocates for a learning environment that encompasses the [learning and innovation](#) and [life and career](#) skills demonstrated in the [Framework for 21st Century Learning](#). So I constantly ask myself, what are the essential characteristics of a student learning community that would be needed to foster these types of skills?

This Framework is frequently on my mind as my teaching partner, Ann, and I strategically implement new strategies, ideas, and content discovered through our collaborative efforts within our PLCs. As Ann and I heavily value personalized learning and individual learning goals for our students, we send the message everyday to them that “we are in this together.” Ann and I strategically plan learning endeavors that will grasp our students’ attention, establish essential questions that will provoke critical thinking, and collaborate with students to identify individual goals and continuously monitor their progress. Thus, we are finding five “must-haves” within our productive student learning community, as they seem to have a direct positive impact on student progress. These “must-haves” also seem to be facilitating an environment that allows us to naturally integrate in the 21st century skills as we discover ways to do so.

Five Components for Student Learning Communities

- **Respect:** *Students should learn to appreciate the diversity within their learning community.* Ann’s and my overarching goal is meeting students where they are and addressing their individual needs by way of their learning styles and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011). Students learn to appreciate each other as learners through the discussions and celebrations of our unique abilities, characteristics, and personalities. Overall, students have the understanding that we may all be in different places with a specific target or goal, but we benefit by working together, sharing knowledge and expertise, and conversing throughout each day.

- **Retention:** *Students should understand that true learning is when you can retrieve the information.*
 You should be able to pull knowledge out of long-term memory and apply it in new situations, make connections to previously learned knowledge, and continue to build upon one's personal schema. So the mantra in our multiage classroom is "learning is remembering." We use Marilee Sprenger's *7 Steps of Memory*—reach, reflect, recode, reinforce, rehearse, review, and retrieve—with our students so they can understand the structure of learning (2005). We now even use two of the steps (recoding and reflecting) as thinking strategies, which coexist with metacognition, visualizing, determining importance, synthesizing, etc. With the understanding of retention, students have a daily purpose which is no longer to "sit and get" but rather "go out and gather."
- **Responsibility:** *Students should learn to be advocates for their own learning.*
 Learning is a huge responsibility and requires a "Backpack of Strategies," or various life skills. Within our classroom the teachers are not a student's first resource. We encourage students to be problem solvers and find a solution that fits their needs. Our purpose is for students to become efficient in setting goals, monitoring progress, managing their time, and contributing to the student learning community. We want them to understand and experience that learning is an ongoing process, rather than a disjointed set of tasks.
- **Resources:** *Students should learn what resources best fit their needs as learners.*
 To empower learners is to provide them access to a variety of tools and resources. Students must learn what specific tools they have at their fingertips, and they must be taught how to use the resources effectively. However, tools are meant to be utilized, not sit on a shelf or table. They need to discover how to choose a tool that will best fit them as a learner, as well as help them accomplish their task or project. Exposure to various resources allows learners the ability to dissect and devour their goals in order to obtain success.
- **Reality:** *Students should be made aware of the skills they will need as they move forward into the 21st century.*
 Technological tools, media, and communication should be a part of students' daily lives. Students should be exposed to the skills they will need in their future. Their real-world success depends heavily on their educational experience. Students also need to understand the reality of how our moment to moment choices can directly or indirectly affect ourselves and other people. When we are mindful we can approach each moment successfully, but making poor choices affects the common student learning community goals and the personal growth of the individual.

I have witnessed these components to be beneficial and aid in the success of each and every student within our classroom. Through offering one another **respect** we can encourage each other's growth. Thus, supporting the overarching objective of the community to **retain** information, whether it is regarding content-based knowledge or the use of specific strategies, in order to build our knowledge base and collectively grow. While on the journey for retention, each individual in the classroom must recognize their personal **responsibility** to the learning community and themselves. They must understand that our choices can positively or negatively affect others, but the choice is *always* our own. As students work towards meeting their goals, they must be aware of the **resources** around them and take every opportunity to self-sufficiently utilize them, yet share them with others within the community. And finally, students must be mindful of the **reality** they are facing within the world today and feel a sense of urgency to collaborate, work, and create within a diverse community. Overall, they need to believe in and act upon the message, "We are in this together."

REFERENCES

- Gardner, H. (2011). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York, NY: Basic Book Groups.
- Sprenger, M. (2005). *How to teach so students remember*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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