

The classrooms as learning communities

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ABSTRACT

Classrooms are sites in which learning takes place through interactions with others and learners are given opportunities to construct knowledge, and to acquire skills, values and attitudes. Classrooms in which learners and teachers learn together and contribute to knowledge construction are called 'learning communities'. Learning communities as an area of study have been under researched despite the fact that there is a body of research that indicates that learning is a collaborative activity rather than an individual exercise, which brings with it significant benefits. This paper argues that effective learning takes place in a collaborative learning environment in which both teachers and learners work together to construct knowledge, and proposes ways in which classrooms as learning communities can function.

Keywords: learning community, collaborative learning, community of practice, instructional materials

INTRODUCTION

A classroom is a melting pot in which a confluence of ideas is shared and assimilated through interactions with others. A learning community refers to a classroom in which learners and teachers pull together for individual and collective learning. According to Crawford, Krajcik and Marx (1999), the concept of a 'learning community' has gained popularity because it creates opportunities in the classroom for learners to collaborate with their peers in problem solving during learning activities. In a learning community, everyone contributes in different ways to the construction of knowledge.

A study conducted by Marzano (1998) cited by Watkins (2005a: 47), arrived at two conclusions about learning: 'Metacognition is the engine of learning' so that thinking and reflection are key processes for the classroom; and 'the self-system appears to be the control center for human behavior' so that how the classroom engages learners' beliefs and control is crucial. Classrooms as learning communities aim to embrace both these conclusions.

Classrooms vary in the ways in which they operate, and their variation may be understood in terms of the approach to learning (Watkins, 2005a). A few of these approaches are considered in this discussion. The first approach, known as the 'responsive classroom' approach incorporates the learners' social and emotional growth into their academic learning. This idea stems from the belief that learners learn best through social interaction. Therefore social and emotional skills should be overtly taught to the learners together with their academic lessons (Rimm-Kaufman, Fan, Chiu & You, 2007).

The second approach considered here is constructivism. According to Ganga and Maphalala (2016), constructivism is a notion that is based on the belief that during the teaching and learning process learners construct their own knowledge and meaning through active learning and mental processes of development. In such an environment, the learner plays an active role in the learning process, and the teacher provides guidance and opportunities for the learner to explore, experiment, discover, conclude, theorise, hypothesise, predict, investigate and invent.

The third approach to learning is Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, based on the idea that development is defined both by what learners can do on their own and by what they can do when assisted by a teacher or by a more competent peer (Daniels, 1995; Wertsch, 1991). According to Vygotsky (1978) for the curriculum to be appropriate for the development of the learner,

the teacher needs to plan learning activities that incorporate not only what learners can do or learn on their own, but also what they can learn with the help of others (Karpov & Haywood, 1998). As a result, the focus is on cooperative learning activities for groups of children at different levels who can help each other learn.

According to the Center for Mental Health in Schools (2008), effective classrooms are characterised by:

- Positive social climates that personalise contacts and supports, offer accommodation so that all learners have an equal opportunity to learn, adjust class size and groupings to optimise learning, engage learners through dialogue and decision making, incorporate parents in multiple ways, and address social-emotional development.
- Designing and implementing quality instructional experiences that involve learners in decision making; contextualise and make learning authentic, including use of real life situations and mentors; are appropriately cognitively complex and challenging; enhance language/literacy; foster joint student products; extend the time learners engage in learning through designing motivated practice; ensure learners learn how to learn and are prepared for lifelong learning; ensure use of pre-referral intervention strategies; and use advanced technology to enhance learning.
- Modified instruction to meet learners' needs based on ongoing assessments using measures of multiple dimensions of impact, and learners' input based on their self-evaluations.
- Teacher collaboration, supported by personalised in-service, consultation, mentoring, grade level teaming, and specialised assistants who provide additional support in the classroom to ensure that learners with special needs are accommodated appropriately.

It is highly likely that teachers adopt various approaches in their classroom practices according to their preferences, usefulness and the contexts in which they find themselves. This paper argues that whichever approach teachers may use in their classrooms, they should view learning as a collaborative rather than an individualistic exercise as advocated by Watkins (2005b), who argues that there has to be a paradigm shift from the notion that learning is individual sense-making toward a new thinking that embraces the view that learning is constructing knowledge through collaboration with others. This is how classrooms can be transformed into communities of learning.

Mindich and Lieberman (2012) argue that in a learning community, learners' work interdependently, pushing themselves to think constructively about their work. This is in agreement with the earlier study by Scardamalia and Bereiter (1994) who argue that a learning community seeks to advance the collective

acquisition of knowledge in order to support both individual and collective knowledge accumulation. These assertions position learning as a negotiated process among the individuals in a learning community, and sees individual learning as rooted in the culture within which the individual learns. Prawat and Peterson (1999) cited by Watkins (2005a) believe that social relationships and knowledge creation form an integral part of the learning communities. Individual and collective knowledge are regarded as products of social interaction.

This paper argues that for effective teaching and learning to take place, classrooms must be treated as learning communities in which collaboration amongst and between the learners and their teachers is at the centre of the learning process.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE THEORY

The community of practice (CoP) theory was proposed by cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and

Etienne Wenger-Treyner in 1998. This theory has its origin in social constructivism, which regards learning as a social process. Lave and Wenger-Treyner (1998) define community of practice as a group of individuals in a particular environment who share a common goal, and then regularly interact and collaborate to attain it together. A classroom, in this case, is a good example of a community of practice as it consists of the three key elements of a community: the domain, the community, and the practice:

- *The domain:*

Learning is a social activity in which individual learners come together in a classroom because learning requires them to communicate, share ideas and learn from one another. A classroom where learners come together to learn can be referred to as a domain because it is a specified sphere of activity for learning and sharing knowledge, skills and values.

- *The community:*

When learners come together in a classroom they should then become a community where all the learners collectively learn together and over time everyone should feel accepted as part of the community. In a learning community learners feel safe to learn and contribute to the learning environment.

- *The practice:*

The engagements amongst the learners and teachers taking place in the classroom therefore becomes a practice because their collaboration results in collective and meaningful learning. In this practice learners engage in various learning activities under the guidance of the teacher who also applies various strategies of teaching informed by different theories and experiences.

On the other hand, Rowlands and Avramenko (2013) provide a distinction between communities of practice and collaborative learning. They posit that a community of practice is easily distinguishable because of its emphasis on the process of learning and building knowledge for all members at both the individual and community level. In a community of practice individual members are allowed to develop and learn collectively, whilst their individual skills and growth are enhanced. When classrooms operate as learning communities, all the learners are engaged in building knowledge under the guidance of the teacher.

According to Watkins (2005a), a community consists of individual members who are active participants, have collective responsibility, a sense of belonging, frequently work together, and embrace divergent thinking. All these critical components of a classroom community will enable sharing of learning experiences

amongst the learners, and ensure that they learn from one another in the process of collective construction of new knowledge in an inclusive environment.

Watkins (2005a) identifies four characteristics of a community: agency, belonging, cohesion and diversity. He argues that these are necessary ingredients for a community to flourish and grow:

- *Agency* refers to the belief by all members of the community that **they** can achieve their common goals through working together. In the classroom, learners need to have a strong belief in their collective ability to contribute to the learning environment.
- *Belonging* refers to the extent to which members of the community or learners in the context of the classroom feel respected, accepted, included and supported.

- *Cohesion* is the ability of the group to work in unity and the extent to which members are loyal and committed to achieving mutual goals.
- *Diversity* deals with embracing individual differences such as their beliefs, religions, cultures, etc.

The central ideas in ensuring that classrooms become learning communities are collaboration and active participation of learners in the teaching and learning process. This thinking is informed by the constructivists' views on learning. Crawford et al. (1999) citing Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer and Scott (1994), observe that the constructivist view on teaching and learning encourages teachers to facilitate learning by actively involving learners in their quest to make meaning of the world around them. They argue that this approach of active construction puts learners at the centre of the learning process, and proposes that the learners should be actively engaged in constructing knowledge by building upon their previous understandings. Social constructivists argue that engaging learners in meaningful conversations and interactions help learners construct new knowledge, and contributes to building classrooms as learning communities.

The driving principle behind the 'classrooms as learning communities' approach is to promote construction of knowledge as a collective community responsibility in which individual learners benefit. This is in direct contrast to the traditional approach to education in which learning was perceived as an individual activity where knowledge is transmitted by the teacher and through textbooks.

According to the social constructivist theory, learners learn best through a knowledge construction process which takes place through social interaction, and not only by assimilating what is taught by the teachers. Bielaczyc and Collins (2013) argue that for individuals to learn how to construct knowledge, it is necessary that the process is modelled and supported in the surrounding community. This is what occurs in a learning community. For the spirit of a learning community to thrive in the classroom teachers need to create an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for learners to be willing to take risks to learn, and be willing to experiment and try new things.

The learning activities in the classroom should be designed in such a way that learners can support one another's learning endeavours and encourage ways in which they can work together on their own to solve problems. In this step learners learn to work effectively with others and, one hopes, generalise those skills to situations outside the classroom. It is within the concept of constructivism that practitioners engage in problem solving, making requests for information, seeking the experiences of others, reusing assets, developing coordination and synergy, discussing developments, visiting other members, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps (Lave & Wenger-Treyner, 1998).

Teachers have to make a conscious decision to create learning communities out of their classrooms as they cannot just happen without any effort on their part and the schools. A learning community does not just

happen; it is created intentionally at every level of a school and organisation. Various approaches can be adopted by the schools to create such an environment by establishing core values which will serve to foster and sustain the community practices and activities. These values should be consistently communicated to all the stakeholders in events, at meetings, at home and through newsletters.

The School as a Context for Classrooms

The classroom environment is a microcosm of what is happening within the school community at large. The classroom environment is heavily reliant on the school culture. Kaplan and Owings (2013) view school culture as a school's persona. They argue that school culture is characterised by unwritten rules, beliefs and assumptions that guide the roles of members within a group. The school culture directs interactions, expectations, and behaviours of all the stakeholders, including learners, teachers, parents and education administrators. All the stakeholders shape what happens in the community (the classroom) on a daily basis. Therefore all the activities in the classroom will be affected by the culture of the school community, and its particular forms and features.

Watkins (2005b) concurs that classrooms cannot operate as islands as they are mainly influenced by the culture of the school. He argues that schools as communities provide a context for us to focus on classrooms, and that some schools function more than others as communities. The more schools function as communities, the greater the improvement in the way both learners and teachers perform their respective tasks and responsibilities. If the school culture is collaborative, supportive, caring and accommodating, this is likely to filter down to the classroom. Watkins (2005b) argues that a community of practice should be characterised by *cohesion*, which is the ability of the group to work in unity, and the extent to which members are loyal and committed to achieving mutual goals.

Elements for building a learning community in a classroom

Crawford, et al. (1999) identified six components that are essential in turning classrooms into learning communities:

- Instruction is situated in authentic tasks.
- Learners develop interdependency in small group work.
- Learners and teachers debate ideas and negotiate understanding.
- Learners and teachers publicly share ideas with members of the classroom community.
- Learners collaborate with experts outside the classroom.
- Responsibility for learning and teaching is shared.

There are various ways in which teachers can build a learning community in a classroom. Some of these are considered below.

Building a sense of community

A sense of community can be established in a classroom environment that promotes collectivism rather than individualism. The sense of community is achieved through sharing a common goal, active participation, collaboration and constructive dialogue in the classroom. The sense of membership within a learning community is key in ensuring success, which is attained by linking membership to the wider community. Watkins (2005b) identifies 'belong' as one of the characteristics of a community. Belonging refers to the extent to which members of the community, or learners in the context of the classroom, feel respected, accepted, included and supported.

Hittie (2000) argues that learners need to understand that the classroom belongs to everyone, not just the teacher. When learners are encouraged to participate actively in classroom activities their sense of community is enhanced. She argues that this will not happen by accident, but teachers need to make a concerted effort to involve learners in classroom activities. Teachers are challenged to build a collaborative culture and discourage a competitive culture in their classrooms. The creation of a supportive and collaborative learning environment by the teachers in the classroom will improve learner satisfaction, increase a sense of belonging, and instil a spirit of camaraderie amongst the learners. This may include giving opportunities to learners to formulate rules that will guide their behaviour in the classroom.

Instilling a commitment to learning

Learners need to put more effort into their learning, to stay focused and keep on working hard, even in the face of difficulties, until they master what they are supposed to learn. In order to achieve this, teachers need to motivate learners.

Giani and O'Guinn (2010) contend that motivation should look at the child holistically, focusing on the physical, emotional, cognitive and social aspects which propel an individual's desire and commitment toward reaching a particular goal even in the face of adversity. Commitment and motivation to learn in the classroom community should not only come from the teacher, but learners themselves should be sensitised to motivate both themselves (this is intrinsic motivation) and one another. Learners are most likely to commit to learning when they appreciate the value of education, and their diverse needs are taken care of in the classroom community by both their teachers and fellow learners.

Sharing responsibility for knowledge building

Quality interaction in the classroom amongst the learners and teachers is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Learning is a collective responsibility in which members of the classroom community rally around a common goal and vision. If the classroom environment supports interaction and exchange of ideas, it results in a meaningful learning process.

Watkins (2005a) advises that when classrooms operate as learning communities, responsibility for and control of knowledge becomes shared. In this type of classroom, individual learners do not only take responsibility for themselves and others, but also take responsibility for knowing what needs to be known, and ensuring that others know it too (Scardamalia, 2002).

Embracing diversity in the classroom

A classroom is a heterogeneous environment with learners from diverse backgrounds and with different abilities. Teachers are responsible for embracing and welcoming diversity into their classrooms. That diversity may involve culture, language, religion, race, tribe, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, etc. While these differences among learners can sometimes create challenges in the classroom, they should be viewed as opportunities to create positive relationships based on respect for individual differences. According to Watkins (2005a), a learning community is sensitive to diversity. The community should be able to embrace individual differences such as their beliefs, religions, cultures, ages and capabilities.

In a diverse learning environment learners learn from experiences, beliefs, and perspectives different from their own. This fosters mutual respect and collaboration amongst the learners, and helps to build the strong bonds essential for a learning community. Teachers have to make conscious, purposeful efforts to build healthy and diverse learning environments.

Teachers have the huge responsibility of embracing diversity in their classrooms by using various teaching strategies, resources and learning activities that develop various learners' capabilities. Brualdi (1996)

contends that all learners come into the classroom with different sets of developed intelligences, which means that each child has his or her own unique set of intellectual strengths and weaknesses. This is mainly due to the experiences that learners have been exposed to before coming to the classroom. These determine how easy (or difficult) it is for a learner to learn information when it is presented in a particular manner.

Using diverse learning strategies

When a range of learning strategies is used, learners become actively engaged in their own learning. Hence teachers should use problem-based learning, cooperative learning and discovery learning strategies to foster learners' active participation. Cooperative learning, in particular, creates opportunities for learners to practise various skills such as communication, articulating and defending ideas and beliefs, interpersonal skills and respect for different points of view, whilst learning from one another. Cooperative learning is encouraged through the use of various teaching methods such as role playing, group discussion, pair work, debates, case studies, etc.

Discovery learning strategy, as the name implies, allows learners to learn through discovery. Bruner (1967), a key proponent of discovery learning theory, believed that learning is an active process in which learners construct knowledge based on prior experience. It shifts learning from the transmission of knowledge by the teacher to a learning process that is guided by exploring concepts and answering questions through experience. Teachers implementing discovery learning strategy will use teaching methods such as projects, experiments, case studies, role playing and simulations.

The problem-based approach engages learners in their learning process by solving real-life problems, and was developed in response to the realisation that traditional teaching and learning methods failed to prepare learners for real-life challenges after school. Problem-based learning strategies should be used in the classroom as a learning community to encourage critical thinking in order to solve authentic problems. In the process of solving real-life problems, learners construct content knowledge and develop problem-solving skills and self-directed learning skills. The use of various methods will ensure that teachers meet the individual needs of many kinds of learners in their teaching. All the learners will therefore feel accommodated in the classroom learning activities.

Timely and constructive feedback

Feedback is an essential part of an effective learning environment. It helps learners understand how their learning is progressing, and provides them with alternative ways to improve their learning. The classroom should be the place in which feedback and exchange is frequent and non-threatening. Black and Wiliam (1998) observe that feedback that is specific, descriptive and immediate brings positive results to the learning environment as compared to feedback that is judgemental in nature. Chappuis and Stiggins (2002) point out that when the goal is to increase learner motivation and learning, productive feedback tells learners what they are doing right, pinpointing strengths and helping them to develop those strengths even further. When feedback is clear and constructive, it propels learners to perform even better throughout the learning process. Feedback in a classroom community is both collective and individual. The collective feedback is when the teacher debriefs the class about how they performed an activity, and learners also get an opportunity to reflect on their performance, focusing on the strengths and areas of development. Learners take collective responsibility for their successes and failures in performing activities, and together take corrective measures to address any failure. On the other hand, individual feedback seeks to address issues that are peculiar to individual learners by guiding them on what to focus on and where to go next.

Family involvement

Research suggests that there is a connection between the home and what happens at school, (Maluleke, 2014; Erlendsdottir, 2010; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008). Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein and Lloyd (2013)

concur that children benefit when parents and family members get involved in their learning and development. Researchers are in agreement that learning usually begins within the family environment. Learners learn better when their parents and other family members are interested in, and involved with, the school and with their education. When the child learns better he or she therefore makes a positive contribution as a key member in the classroom community

Onikama, Hammond and Koki (1998) observe that some schools are often disconnected from home and community. They argue that as learners enter school, their families may feel detached from the learning process. In such instances schools need to encourage family involvement through continuous communication (phone calls, letters, emails, notes, newsletters) and family classroom visits.

The positive attitude of a teacher

Ultimately, the essential element in creating a sense of community in the classroom is the teacher's attitude. It is not always the resources, the strategies or approaches that determine the effectiveness of the classroom. It is a loving, compassionate attitude towards the learners that creates the feeling of community.

Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006) posit that learners care about their relationships with their teachers, and respond with greater engagement and effort when they believe that their teachers care about them and are supportive. One way that teachers convey these qualities is through their discourse with their students in the classroom. Classroom discourse structure concerns the manner in which teachers engage student participation in learning, promote intrinsic motivation, and balance appropriate challenges with skill levels.

Integrate instructional materials into learning

Learning materials play an important role in enhancing the teaching and learning process. The use of these materials is an integral part of curriculum planning and delivery, and are known to enrich and enhance the learning process as they increase the enjoyment of the learners and stimulate learners to learn. Teachers can increase student motivation by incorporating instructional materials in the teaching and learning process.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that a learning community built around a collaborative learning environment in which both teachers and learners work together to construct knowledge is essential for effective learning. Elements for building a learning community in a classroom have been proposed to foster a sense of belonging such that learners learn how to participate actively in class, work collaboratively, negotiate and resolve disagreements, and embrace diversity. Such learning communities will promote positive social skills and academic achievement. However, creating a learning community in the classroom will require teachers to make conscious efforts to involve learners in their activity, and treat them equally. When classrooms become learning communities, learners and teachers are accountable to one another to achieve the shared goals of the classroom, school and the education system as a whole.

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