How to Build a Learning Community: Activate, Abdicate, Articulate

John Black


Introduction

In this paper I want to offer practical suggestions for building a successful learning community. My comments have two sources: first, my experience teaching in a modified “Great Books” program, namely the Liberal Studies BA program at Malaspina University College, and, second, the notion of community developed by Aristotle in Nicomachean Ethics. My over-simplistic formula for success is this: activate, abdicate, articulate. I hope that in the detail of my remarks, as in my pedagogical practice, there will be sufficient complexity to exonerate me of the charges of glibness and an undue devotion to the formulaic.

A word or two first about the circumstances of the Malaspina program: unlike many - perhaps St. John’s is a good example - Malaspina is not a residential college. Many of our students are part-time, and all take elective courses outside the core program, which occupies 60% of their load in third and fourth year. They join the program having developed most of their academic skills and expectations in two years of traditional lecture classes. Most work while they attend college, and a good number have responsibilities as parents. Furthermore, Nanaimo BC is relatively impoverished as a centre of (Euro-Canadian, at least) culture, so that students do not experience the kind of extramural intellectual community-building which, for example, was a major part - perhaps the major part - of my undergraduate education at the University of Cambridge. In a context of this sort, it becomes necessary to devote specific attention to developing a learning community, since circumstances conspire to prevent it appearing of its own accord.

As I see it, a learning community is such in two senses: it is a community which promotes learning, and it is also a community which must itself learn--among other things, to be a learning community. This reification of the community as a subject of learning is not idle, and does not overlook the dependence of community learning upon individual learning: rather, it serves to emphasize the importance of creating and maintaining a culture of community reliance. Students must believe, like Aristotle, that they are essentially members of a community. For this to happen in a college, and to avoid tokenistic attitudes towards the ideal of a learning community, requires that the students and faculty become friends in a real sense. And there are many ways in which faculty can design a pedagogy to promote a kind of friendship which is manifest in academic activity. At Malaspina, for example, students hold tutorials without faculty supervision in order to evaluate preliminary drafts of essays, and are sometimes asked to evaluate the seminar participation of their peers. Certain assignments, especially projects in art or science, are completed by small groups, all members of a group receiving the same mark. It is
even possible to work the conception of a community being itself a subject of learning into course content. While investigating the use of averaging in scientific measurement, for example, we asked students to estimate the age of one of the faculty. While individual results ranged five years on either side of the true value, the group average was correct to within three weeks!

If a learning community, then, must be a community of friends, there are other ways in which course content can be suborned in the service of this ideal. Because our program proceeds chronologically from the Old Testament and the Greeks, it is about halfway through the first term that we come to Aristotle, and reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides the perfect opportunity for discussing notions of community and encouraging some self-application of the concept. This brings me to the first element of my slogan:

**Activate**

One of Aristotle’s ideas with which our students often disagree is his remark that true friends must live together. They take it to mean, of course, that friends must share houses or apartments, and to this they are loath to commit, reserving, as true individualists, the option of their “own space.” I take it, however, that Aristotle was not primarily interested in co-op housing, and that his point, derived from the familiar notion that good living is *activity* (energeia), is that friendship must be exercised in collaborative activity which manifests both moral and intellectual virtue. This claim has consequences for learning community pedagogy.

It ties that pedagogy, to begin with, to the idea of active learning. This is not a new idea, but it’s worth mentioning all the same, since its implementation is required by the defining assumption of our interdisciplinary program, that the main goal, again eminently Aristotelian, is to enhance students’ general intellectual skills, for example in communication, critical thinking and cultural awareness, rather than to instil knowledge peculiar to a discipline. The practical suggestions relevant here are to avoid over-reliance on lectures, to prefer seminar discussion in which active participation is a requirement and to include class activities, such as science labs and art studios, which place on students a wide variety of demands for active involvement. We have had great success at Malaspina in incorporating elements of fine and performing arts: mask-making workshops, group painting and sculpture projects, play-readings, dance, music, singing, video-production and so on. Such academically “adventurous” activities provide an opportunity for limited intellectual heroism and pioneer spirit, as do simple field trips through the northern snow to visit an observatory or underground cavern. They contribute to the building of community in two ways: first, through shared experience and creative activity where the demands are academically unfamiliar, and therefore risky; second, through community celebration of individual contribution and performance, whether in presenting a skit or driving the bus. They require, and therefore promote, a high level of trust, which spills over into other activities such as peer evaluation and seminar participation. An educational bonus which some, but not all, faculty have failed to anticipate is that the creative arts components greatly enrich the more traditional academic work, in discussion and writing, which forms the greater part, still, of student activity.
Abdicate

Furthermore, if a community is to be truly focused on active learning, it is necessary for faculty to redefine their rôles in relation to students. Traditional rôles, such as that of fountain of truth, which encourage student passivity, as well as an over-reliance on authority, must be abandoned if room is to be left for the expansion of student activity. One must undermine expectations that faculty are the sole controllers of both the learning process and the injection of content. Instead, students must come to take themselves seriously as autonomous sources of ideas and perspectives, as sites of methodological and even pedagogical expertise, and as participants responsible to some degree for the encouragement and success of their peers. As Aristotle says, the true friend takes his friend’s goals as his own. There are various ways in which this shift of the onus of responsibility for content, skill-development and motivation can be achieved. I shall mention a couple of examples.

First, there is team-teaching. The multiplicity of perspectives represented in a closely-knit team of faculty goes a long way towards undermining the notions of the professor as semi-divine authority, or as commander-in-chief of the learning process. In addition, such a team can, in the interaction of its members, do much to model learning community virtues such as a respectful demeanour in seminar discussion, how to handle rational disagreement and so on. A faculty team will be most successful, I suggest, if it engages in the active learning “adventures” described earlier in the same way, and on the same level, as students. Not only will this include faculty in the general spirit of camaraderie, it will also define them as members of the same learning community as the students, and not of an elite group set apart.

Second, the faculty member must try to avoid being always the centre of attention, especially in seminars. It goes without saying that in classes of this type the point is to facilitate, not to lecture. Yet even students who adopt an active and leading rôle in discussion may, as a result of the more traditional contexts in which they have acquired their educational habits, direct most of their comments to the professor. This is particularly disturbing when the comment is a reply to one previously made by another student. A simple expedient, but one which it is not easy to adopt without conscious effort, is to break eye-contact with the responder and look towards the source of the original remark. This will usually have the desired effect of deflecting the responder’s attention to its proper object.

Two general qualifications must be made at this point: first, I’m not of course suggesting a total abandonment of all responsibility on the part of faculty, just a shift of emphasis towards a willingness to share the responsibility in a way which promotes skill development among students; second, it is of vital importance that when such a shift occurs, it does so because it has been adopted in full sincerity by the faculty involved. Mere lip-service to educational democracy will be seen by students to be exactly that, and will backfire with destructive consequences for the learning community.
Articulate

The last of my triad of pedagogical injunctions concerns the need to make absolutely clear to students the shift in pedagogical strategy and the resulting changes in the expectations placed upon them. I speak from unpleasant personal experience here. Despite repeated announcements in promotional material that the program involved student-centred active learning, the first team I co-ordinated in Liberal Studies was met with a torrent of student complaints during its first term. When we tried “outsider” lectures à la Meiklejohn, we were told we didn’t know our subject; when we refrained from controlling the content of seminars, we were told we were poor facilitators and shirkers of the professorial duty to pontificate. Our students had not made any adjustment in their traditional expectations, and did not realize that we had adopted a different approach to pedagogy. Our best efforts to explain, belatedly, what we were up to met with a skepticism which did not entirely dissipate over the remaining year and a half we spent with that group. Needless to say, we might quite sure with our second intake, through an intensive week of orientation, that they understood exactly why the approach was different, and exactly what the implications were for the rôles both they and faculty were expected to fulfil. Taking the students through this orientation enabled us to gain greater clarity on our own pedagogical strategies, and probably led to greater consistency in their implementation. It certainly had the effect of forestalling the kind of negative reaction we had experienced the first time.

Summary

My point in this short paper has been this: the best way to enhance the development of general intellectual skills is through building a learning community; to create the most effective learning community, it is necessary to activate students in their educational experiences and endeavours; to maximize their level of active involvement in learning, it is necessary to abdicate the professor’s traditional rôle as classroom monarch; and to modify this rôle sufficiently without running afoul of the traditional expectations of students, it is necessary to articulate the nature and justification of the pedagogical shift you have made.