Literacy Connects

*A Content Literacy Newsletter from Regional Professional Development Program-**Issue XXXI***

Building Classroom Community, Part II

Our brain is strongly influenced by four enemies of learning: Threat, excessive stress, anxiety and induced learner helplessness. Each of these menaces causes the brain to shut down to minimal performance; at minimal performance, students use less of their brains to learn and revert to reactive behaviors. Threats also reduce higher-order thinking skills, creativity, and memory. Nearly anything can induce learner helplessness, from forgetting a textbook, lacking the resources to complete an assignment, to not understanding classroom procedures. Building community in the classroom is the first and most important step to alleviating learner helplessness and unnecessary stress (see *Literacy Connects Issue XXX* for more on building community).

- Classroom Norms: Allowing students to participate in setting class norms will build community and promote student buy-in. Even if you provide the norms, decide on a maximum of five and discuss each with your classes explaining why these behaviors are essential for learning. Wording is important: These should be statements of desired behaviors as opposed to a list of what not to do. Once you have established your classroom norms, have students choose the one norm with which they struggle the most. Have them write a short reflection explaining why they struggle with this particular directive and specific ways they can work on changing the undesired behavior. Post norms where they are fully visible to everyone.

- Don't confuse class norms with classroom procedures. Classroom procedures are routines that facilitate movement and student needs. Turning in and passing back papers, beginning and ending the period, transitioning from large group to small groups, getting out and putting away books and supplies, and greeting new students are just a few examples of activities that happen everyday in a classroom. Teach these procedures as you would skills, refining and adding new ones as the need arises.

- Establish a climate where learners feel comfortable making mistakes—we learn best from our mistakes! Discuss errors as a natural part of the learning process and have students identify, correct and explain their mistakes. Don't be afraid to point out your own mistakes and what you have learned from them.

- Provide plenty of wait time after asking questions, so students don't feel pressured to have an immediate answer. Research has revealed that teacher wait-time rarely lasts more than 1.5 seconds in a typical classroom. Increasing this to 3 – 5 seconds has been proven to have a positive impact on student learning, motivation and attitude.

- Get to know your students:
    - Learn student names as soon as possible. In a recent survey, students revealed the learning of names as the most important factor for creating a positive learning environment.
    - Interest surveys: Survey students to find out their likes and dislikes, their interests, hobbies, etc. Use this information to help connect and motivate.
    - Multiple Intelligence/Modality Surveys: Have students identify and reflect on their dominant learning modality. Discuss behaviors and learning strengths and weaknesses in terms of modality rather than individual student deficiencies.

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