
Talking about classrooms as learning communities

What do we mean?

The phrase “learning community” is increasingly used and often empty. Sometimes it’s used as a simple synonym for school. If we use both of the words in a strong sense, then a *learning community* is a collective which learns together, including about its collective process of learning. A classroom is necessarily a collection, but is it operated as a collective? If you enquire of teachers and pupils how they want classroom life to be, they will tell you about aspects of community.

What might we see in the classroom?¹

In a classroom operating as a learning community we might see:

- Students operating together to improve knowledge
- Students helping each other learn through dialogue
- Learning goals emerging and developing during enquiry
- Students create products for each other and for others
- Students accessing resources outside the class community
- Students reviewing how best the community supports learning
- Students showing understanding of how group processes promote their learning
- The classroom social structures promoting interdependence
- Students displaying communal responsibility including in the governance of the classroom
- Assessment tasks being community products which demonstrate increased complexity and a rich web of ideas

What are the effects?²

A. In Classrooms which operate as Communities

- Students are crew, not passengers
- People feel part of a larger whole
- The language shifts to “We” rather than “you and me”
- Diverse contributions are embraced

B. In Classrooms which operate as Communities of Learners

- Engaged enquiry emerges
- Students help each other learn
- There is productive engagement and orientation to learn
- Students show better knowledge, understanding, application and transfer

C. In Classrooms which operate as Learning Communities

- Discourse characteristic of the discipline (subject) develops
- We share what is known and what needs to be known
- Lone learning is not enough
- We understand our learning together

In short, better learning (and performance), better behaviour, better social development.

¹ Watkins C (2005), *Classrooms as Learning Communities: what's in it for schools*, London, Routledge
<http://chriswatkins.net/download/112/>

² Watkins C (2004), *Classrooms as Learning Communities (Research Matters series No. 24)*, London: University of London Institute of Education: National School Improvement Network
<http://chriswatkins.net/download/110/>