TIPS FOR STARTING OUT STRONG

Some simple changes to how teachers present and structure a class at the beginning can promote a positive classroom community. Starting out strong can have big benefits for both teachers and students, and a strong start can have a lasting impact on how students feel about their classroom experiences. When students feel more positive about their learning experiences and feel a greater sense of belonging, they are more motivated and engaged in class—which leads to more successful learning.

This week's Teacher's Corner offers a series of tips for starting out strong by setting the right tone in a class and preparing all learners to feel that they are important members of the classroom community.

LEVEL

Any level

CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING

The way you design and use the space in the classroom can be a vital component to building your classroom community. Imagine how different a conversation feels when you speak to someone while looking at them, versus speaking to someone from another room. When you are in different rooms, do you feel as connected to the person or conversation? Most people do not. This goes for our students as well. They often feel more encouraged to participate when people are looking at them and listening to them. To increase the feeling of connectedness in class, use the space of your classroom to encourage discussion and shared experiences. Here are some ways to set up your classroom space to do this. Notice that some techniques are quite simple and easily implemented.

- **Have students sit in a circle facing each other.** Even if the desks in your class cannot be moved, occasionally have students stand or sit in a circle to discuss a new topic or to hear a new lecture.

When students can see everyone else in the class, they are more likely to pay closer attention and be encouraged to participate more fully in the class.

- **Get down on their level.** Teachers can seem intimidating and unapproachable because they are standing at the front of a room while students are sitting and facing them. Instead, step away from the board or your desk and move among the students. If a student is working and asks a question, kneel or sit down so that you are at eye level with the student. By moving through the class and interacting with students on their level, you can give students a sense of importance and reduce their intimidation toward you. When students can interact with a teacher in a way that makes them feel more comfortable and included, then students are more likely to pay attention and participate.

- **Use body language to make all students feel included.** For example, when a student is answering a question, instead of looking only at the student answering, look both at the student and also at the other students in the class. By doing so, you are showing that you are listening to the student and also checking that other students are listening as well. Another opportunity for using body language is to scan the room regularly and not just focus on one part of the room. Teachers often find that they regularly look to only one part of the room or only to certain students; however, in doing so, they are neglecting other learners. The students that are ignored quickly recognize this and may start to lose interest or become less likely to participate. Scanning the room regularly by looking at all parts of the classroom and at all groups of students helps you to connect with students and keep their attention.

- **Learn students' names, and encourage students to use the names of their classmates.** Think about a time when someone has forgotten your name. How did it make you feel? On the other hand, can you remember a time when someone, surprisingly, remembered your name? How did that make you feel? Students have these same feelings when teachers (and other students) remember or don't remember their names. Learning each other's names can be a small but

important step in creating a sense of belonging in a classroom community. If you have trouble remembering students' names, ask them to wear nametags, or use placards with their names written in large letters. Eventually, both you and the other students will learn the names of everyone in the class.

USING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

- **Praise and validate learners on a regular basis.** When students participate and give correct answers, do two things: thank them for their participation, and praise them for their answer. For example, you could say, "Thank you, Maria, for giving the correct answer. Great work." Not only will the student feel encouraged to try again, but other students will see that participating in class is a positive experience. If a student answers incorrectly, it is important that you still thank him or her for participation and gently encourage or redirect the student to the correct answer. For example, you could say, "Thank you, Thomas, for answering. Why did you choose this answer?" You could also say, "Thank you, Thomas, for raising your hand. Do you remember when we talked about the past tense? Can you think of any exceptions to adding an –ed to the end of a verb?" Always give students a chance to come to the answer on their own. If they look discouraged, remind them that they are doing great, then give them a question that they can answer. Another alternative, when a student gives an incorrect answer, is to thank the student for participating and then ask all students to turn to their neighbors to discuss the question. After students have discussed the question, ask the original student if he or she has thought of a different answer.

- **Use and encourage the language and media of learners.** Our students communicate in a variety of ways, and there are a number of ways that you can incorporate the many modes of communication available and familiar to students. Connect students through social media so that they can exchange information in and outside of class. Try setting up a social media account for students to use during class as a way to comment on a discussion or lecture. Use clicker software

or phone apps that give students a different way to answer questions. There are clicker software and phone apps that ask students questions through a poll or survey. You then share the number where students can text their answers. You can see the results of the poll or survey (results can be anonymous or linked to students' names) and use the results to adjust your lesson as needed. Many students are much more comfortable communicating through a phone or computer than in person and, for some activities, encourage this. By using different media, you can ensure that learners will participate fully and comfortably in the class through multiple channels of communication.

- **Highlight commonalities within the class.** What experiences, attitudes, and aspects connect students in your class? How can you help to define your classroom community in a positive way that unites them as a community? One possibility is to use an assignment to differentiate the students from another class or group of students. For example, "In this class, we will spend a little extra time on *X*, unlike the other class, so that you will be better prepared to… This might take extra time on your part, but as students in the class, you will finish the course with a greater sense of…" Once students recognize that they are in a project or experience together, they develop a sense of shared responsibility to their community. This sense of responsibility can increase participation and motivation since students may not want to be seen as running counter to their community.

Using one—or all—of these tips can help to create and support a feeling of community in the classroom. Even the simple act of encouraging the use of each other's names will prove fruitful in uniting your students for the duration of your class.