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Building Classroom Culture Through Effective Facilitation

The classroom is a diverse and unique community where standards, rules and expectations develop over time. In the adult learning arena, prevalent in graduate degree programmes, there is an experiential dynamic that adds depth and complexity to the community. As such, the community is best served in its omnipresent state of development through personal reflection of experience in the classroom combined with the world outside the classroom. Cultures, both collectively and individually held among members, seek structural balance between the need for change and the need for predictability. Just as members create the living culture of the community, disruption occurs when members of the community are changed by means of removal or arrival. The most prominent change in membership in an educational community of learning, especially those following a cohort model, is when a new

professor enters the dynamic and introduces his/her own classroom standard. This upheaval results in time spent on relearning administrative specifics of cultural rules and limits the members' ability to quickly focus on the course content. Recognising this classroom dynamic raises a serious question—are you a disruptive professor?

The Disruptive Professor

As a new member to the community, the professor engages, knowingly or otherwise, in acculturation. According to McMillan and Lopez (2001), community members assimilate, integrate, marginalise or separate with the culture at large.

As facilitators of learning, professors are not likely to avoid interaction with the class even if the culture is one they would otherwise elect to

avoid. Thus, a separation strategy is not likely. The professor usually has more than just a mild interest in building and maintaining relationships with students at least for the duration of his/her class. Therefore, a marginalisation strategy, which occurs when the new community member has little interest in building or maintaining ties with members of the society, is not an option for the professor. This leaves the professor with an integration or assimilation strategy.

Assimilation happens when an individual gives up his/her culture to take on the values and beliefs of the new culture. This may occur if the professor is looking to change her/his classroom style and is open to persuasion by the students' culture. While assimilation is an option, integration is more likely in the classroom and perhaps the most effective strategy. Integration occurs when an individual maintains his/her own culture while participating in a new culture.

Classroom Culture and Professor Style: A Strategy for Integration

The integration strategy is the most effective because over time, the cohort model of education engrains a culture among students/community members and this becomes increasingly difficult to change. Similarly, professors often have a unique and individualistic style that is too engrained. If the collective cohort/programme professors can integrate a culture of academic administration standards such as participation rules, rubric, use of technology, assignment format, testing protocols, boundaries and other expectations among themselves, then new professors (each semester or term) can continually reinforce the standards while integrating their unique professor style in terms specific to course content. This, however, takes finesse because it is a cultural change endeavour. So, how best can change be introduced into a classroom while reinforcing the rules and standards of students' culture?

The short answer to effectively addressing cultural change is member involvement. Since it takes time for patterns to emerge and styles to form into a culture, the first two to three classes of the programme are paramount in setting standards, rules and expectations desired by the educational institution. It is during these early classes that work patterns emerge and member behaviours solidify. If new professors come into the culture every semester with new administrative expectations, routines are hard to develop and students become increasingly frustrated. This frustration does not stem from

the challenge of new course content but from the constancy of administrative change.

We all have heard students say with a tone of disgust, "That is not the way other instructors have done it." While it is human nature to change for reasons of adaptation and survival, it is also human nature to desire consistency and balance. Such a statement is often a response to frustration. Asking students to change is difficult, especially in the later stages of the programme. One way to combat this is to have the programme and culture allow for subject-centric activities yet reinforce the existing student culture.

Integration Tactics: Setting Expectations and Ground Rules That Matter

The topic of setting or reinforcing classroom expectations and ground rules in an attempt to integrate student and professor cultures was discussed recently among 36 MBA students in a private university in the United States. The class was the students' last in their two-year MBA programme; hence a strong culture was established among them. The tactical process of the discussion was as interesting as the findings and is the focus of this article. While the facilitated approach was orchestrated by a single professor, the discussion was led and data were captured, codified and analysed by MBA students. The process, café-style facilitation, followed these steps:

1. At the start of the first class of the semester (the first time the professor met the students), the professor, serving as host, welcomed students and expressed appreciation for and value in their attendance, individual experiences, knowledge and capability.
2. The host asked for four volunteer student facilitators who were nominated based on their experiential knowledge from work and practice.
3. Each of the four volunteers was provided a question and a comfortable area with chairs, tables, flipcharts and markers in which a dialogue could occur. All questions pertained to the course and the classroom culture (e.g. what are your expectations from the instructor of this course, what ground rules should everyone uphold and respect throughout the course, what are the student-specific and professor-specific success factors for this course and what are the most pressing content issues that must be addressed during this course).

4. Students were divided into four groups and allotted 30 minutes in each of the four facilitated areas of dialogue. Although one large classroom was used for all groups, each was separated from the others enough to avoid disruption. To mitigate social facilitation and groupthink issues, after each 30-minute dialogue, each group was modified instead of taking on the next topic. While the facilitating volunteers remained to facilitate the same dialogue question, the group members—and thus group dynamics—within each dialogue were different. This meant that the eight-member dialogue groups had a different make-up of participants during each dialogue.
5. The facilitators' role was to introduce the question, ensure full participation and document the specifics of each dialogue. Along the way, similarities were categorised. While the volunteers' role is noted as a facilitator, each was encouraged to participate as well. Thus the facilitator is an active participant, referred to as a dialogue steward (Brown, 2005). As the second, third and fourth rounds of dialogue occurred, the steward reintroduced the question and quickly summarised the work from prior dialogues before the new members commenced their dialogue. Participating members were always encouraged to take their own notes, draw or document their ideas and feelings about the dialogue topic along with the facilitating steward.
6. At the end of the last dialogue, the professor thanked each member for their participation and allowed the facilitating stewards to report key findings. As the findings were reported, the professor acknowledged students' work and expectations, thus assimilating to their culture. When an issue arose, the professor negotiated with students, thus integrating both the students' and professor's cultures. The negotiations occurred only when a reported expectation was wholly unacceptable. To be sure, the professor attempted to assimilate as much as possible, but negotiated integration when necessary. This approach allowed for greater buy-in from students because they recognised that their involvement was valued and voices heard. The end result was an integrated student/professor culture.

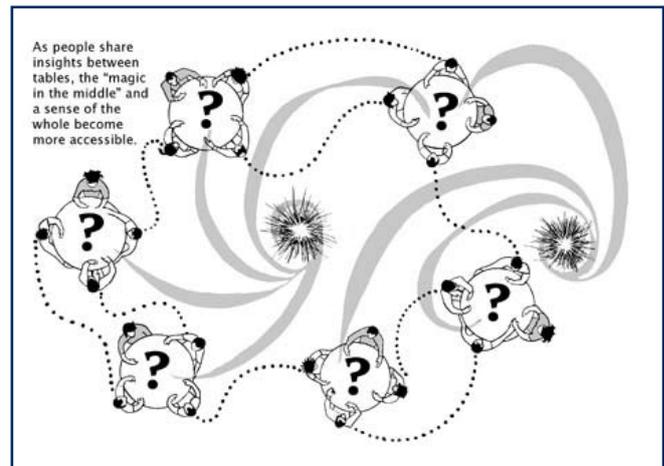


Figure 1. Illustrated example of café facilitation. Reprinted with permission from the World Café Community Foundation (www.theworldcafe.com)

People Matter: A Concluding Summary on the Power of Café Facilitation

The aforementioned findings from this MBA class may be of less interest than the café facilitation tactic employed to integrate two cultures. The tactic proved efficient and effective in quickly establishing the value of cultural members, as well as theirs and the new professor's expectations. The process can be modified to allow more questions or less, more time per dialogue or less, and it could even be done online. Furthermore, this tactic is not just for the start of classes. Whenever a professor wants a dynamic exchange of ideas discussed about an issue that is of significance to the audience/students, café facilitation is an applicable tactic.

References

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