

Crafting Creative Community

Combining Cooperative Learning,
Multiple Intelligences and Nature's Wisdom

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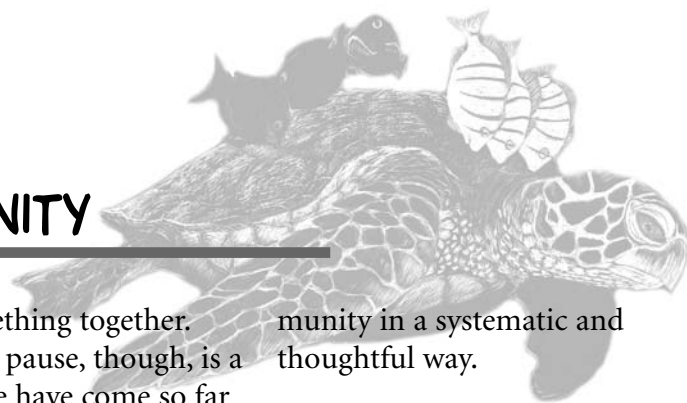
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I Introduction

CRAFTING CREATIVE COMMUNITY



COMMUNITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Our times are full of rapid and often disturbing change. We are challenged by increasing violence and adversity in society, frequent environmental threats and disasters, requests for educational institutions to do more, but often without an increase in funding or support. Teachers are putting forth tremendous efforts to cope with the demands and extremes of these changing times. Schools are feeling the impact of change and more students than ever appear to be at risk. Many different educational programs and proposals deal with how to adapt to this situation.

Strangely enough, just when it seems people have more difficulty than ever doing anything together, there is also a deep, often unsatisfied need for community. Is building community, for many years a forgotten factor within our cities, neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools, perhaps an antidote to some of these change pressures? The recent rise of “learning communities” within education and business tells us that many hope and believe this is the case.

We are a social species. We yearn for belonging, collaborating,

building something together. What gives us pause, though, is a feeling that we have come so far from the roots of traditional community ways in modern times that a complete transformation of our habits, attitudes, behaviour and institutions would be necessary for us to regain what we have lost. We wonder if it is even possible in this day and age.

Crafting Creative Community addresses the question of community — for our students, teachers, schools and neighbourhoods — from a new angle. We cannot go back to the idealised community of the past. But in recent years we have learned much about the key elements that make community, how both human communities and natural ecological communities, work. We have realised a great deal about requirements for building collaboration among community members that used to be subliminal, automatic or due to forces beyond conscious control. We now have, in an age that has great enlightenment along with dark areas of turmoil, the unprecedented ability to benefit from both lessons of the past and experiments for the future. Instead of being born into or stumbling into community we can carefully *craft* com-

munity in a systematic and thoughtful way.

Crafting classroom community to be creative, collaborative and caring does not happen overnight. The amount of experience of any kind of community varies a great deal from person to person. And the process of developing community requires patience, resilience and the integration of many different elements into a functioning whole. The elements that can bring us past cynicism, hopelessness, doubt and fatigue into a successfully operating community are multiple. *Crafting Creative Community*, a yearlong program of activities, sees these elements as the following:

- insight and guidance from different fields of knowledge and research about community
- wisdom from natural communities, human and ecological
- a foundation in cooperative group strategies
- methods for creative group thinking

Introduction

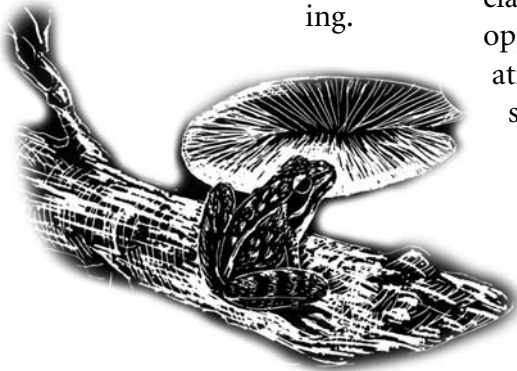
- ways to incorporate the rich diversity of community members' minds and experiences
- understanding of and practice in the stages of community development
- realisation that each season of community development has its own needs and skills.

BENEFITS OF CRAFTING COMMUNITY

When you choose to bring your class into community by integrating the above factors, as facilitated by this book, you can expect certain benefits to yourself, your students, your classroom and the school and wider community.

1. Inclusion and Belonging

Students need to feel they are valuable members of a group. If the classroom or school group excludes them, they will find another group, often one with destructive, retaliative intent, to belong to. Feeling truly accepted for being who you are provides the social-emotional strength and wellbeing essential to concentrated learning.



When students study and work within a caring community, they gain energy and engagement from the group effort far in excess of what they could manage alone. There is always a need for interesting and challenging curricula, but beyond this, seeing other team members productively engaged is like a magnet. If those who respect us and whom we respect seem interested, we are drawn in to discover many delights we might have passed up on our own.

2. Motivation to Learn

Learning is more fun in community. Even the most difficult jobs seem lighter with many hands. In addition, true communities operate with more self-determination, self-management and problem-solving than conglomerations of individuals. This leads students to feel more autonomy, more self-esteem, more confidence in their ability to learn. A caring community provides cheerleaders for every step toward greater mastery and higher-level thinking a student makes. In this atmosphere, it is unnecessary to gain attention by disruption; class management becomes an opportunity for practice in creative problem-finding and solving.

3. Synergy and Group Creativity

The diversity of perspectives, experience and talents within a group leads

to the possibility of synergy (an outcome where the whole is superior to any of its parts). If diversity is systematically encouraged and honoured by the class community and students are taught creative thinking, they will produce more and better ideas, products and projects. They will bring to bear more modalities for learning and stretch to learn the modalities others demonstrate. Their commitment to the group helps them overcome obstacles to a much greater extent than they could alone. And access to many minds helps students generate spin-off ideas they would never have individually considered.

4. Practice of Citizenship

Classroom communities devise guidelines, jobs, roles, run meetings, problem solve, come to joint decisions, resolve disputes and make action plans. There is personal and small-group accountability to the community, and a sense of what it means to live in a pluralistic society. In community, students are also motivated to learn the skills of cooperation, collaboration, creative thinking and conflict resolution so necessary to a well-functioning society. The total context of classroom unity, identity and cohesion supports these skills. Where a strong community is in place, students are more willing to move between different small groups. Teams support the goals and projects of the class as a whole

rather than becoming rival factions. Individuals strive to contribute more to group projects. Student groups become eager to contribute to solutions for problems in their neighbourhood community. This kind of learning will support students, and their society, for the rest of their lives.

Beyond these benefits for your students, your school and the society, you will be able to do what you went into education to do: teach and facilitate the learning of others. When engaged as an active community citizenry, students welcome your efforts as a wise community resource.

HOW TO GET THERE TOGETHER: THE PROCESS OF CRAFTING COMMUNITY

Crafting Creative Community does not expect you to dump your established curriculum, learn yet another new educational trend or undergo extensive professional development institutes. If you have at least a beginning knowledge of active learning strategies for cooperative and collaborative work, and familiarity with the need for engaging students in many different ways to learn (perhaps through Multiple Intelligences work), you are ready to craft your classroom into a functioning collaborative community that thinks and acts creatively.

Through a sequenced series of activities, you and your students

will experience all the stages of community group development, including the development of small-group teams that contribute to the class. Your students actively learn the principles of effective community from the inside out by becoming part of a functioning whole. At each level of community development (Sections I through to IV), students participate in learning activities appropriate to that stage. You, as teacher, are a valuable senior member of the community, and you also represent for the class their school community, which has its own rules and guidelines. Each of the three activities in a chapter gives students a taste of the major lessons of that chapter through metaphors from the natural world. Your curriculum then fits into these activities as the ongoing major content.

The following points give you some keys for using this book as you craft community:

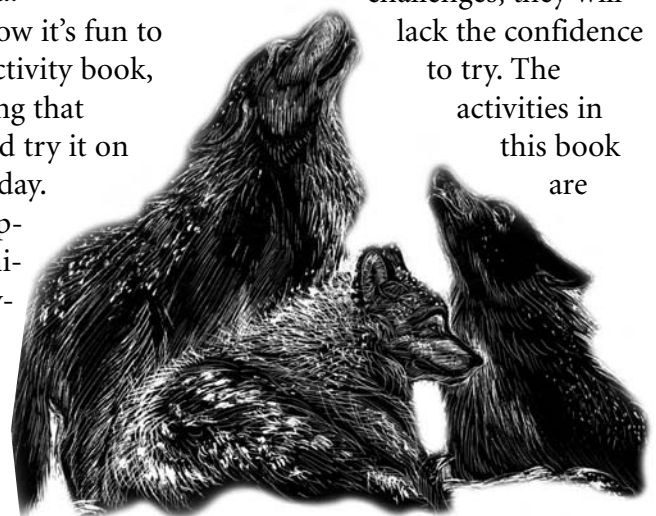
1. Timing is crucial

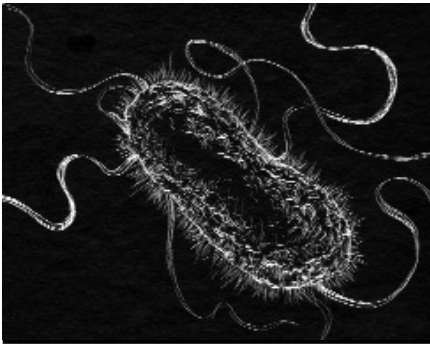
As a teacher, I know it's fun to flip through an activity book, pick out something that looks exciting, and try it on the kids the next day. But in the development of community, timing is everything. If the kids aren't well acquainted, they won't be ready to work together

with equal participation. Later, if communication skills are not in place, they won't be able to do certain kinds of teamwork. If students are bounced into complex levels of coordination between groups before they are functioning well as a team, they can have discouraging or confusing experiences.

The advantage of *Crafting Creative Community* is that thinking through what is best to do first, next and later, are worked out for you, based on research and experience with community development from many fields. While some students and classes are full of cooperative individuals who are ready to plunge ahead, others lag behind. You simply will find greater student success if you follow the sequence of activities suggested for maximum community development. If they rush ahead, students may flounder in deep waters. On the other hand, if you are too hesitant or timid about allowing

them to take risks or challenges, they will lack the confidence to try. The activities in this book are





BEGINNING TO GET IT TOGETHER: CREATING CLASS COMMUNITY

Activity 1.1

Materials

- Sea Dream (script for teacher)
- Writing materials, personal journal
- Drawing materials for each student

Multiple Intelligences

- Intrapersonal (imagery)
- Interpersonal/Social (interviewing)
- Verbal/Linguistic (writing, discussing)
- Visual/Spatial (drawing)
- Bodily/Kinesthetic (movement, enactment)

Creativity Skills

- Visualising
- Personifying
- Seeing Things Differently
- Being Sensitive and Aware

Group Development

- Getting Acquainted
- Finding a Place
- Discovering and Welcoming Differences

ECO-Concepts

- Interdependence
- Life Begins with Togetherness

Structures

- Guided Imagery
- Think-Pair-Square
- Stand and Share
- Simultaneous Share
- Three-Step Interview

Students relate early beginnings of planetary life – particularly its communal and creative aspects – to their own developing sense of class community through guided imagery and writing/illustrating their fantasy journey. Working with a partner, then a group of two pairs, students transfer their fantasy insights to ideas on how to build class community.

Steps

1. Students take Fantasy Journey

After talking to the class about the beginnings of community (see Chapter Orientation), tell them that they now will take a guided fantasy journey to imagine the beginnings of life on the planet and how the first communities of life were formed. “In this way you can discover what qualities we need for our classroom community.” Put on soft instrumental music, and ask students to get comfortable in a restful position with closed eyes. Use the **Sea Dream** script for a guided imagery experience taking students back billions of years to ancient seas.

2. Students Write and Draw

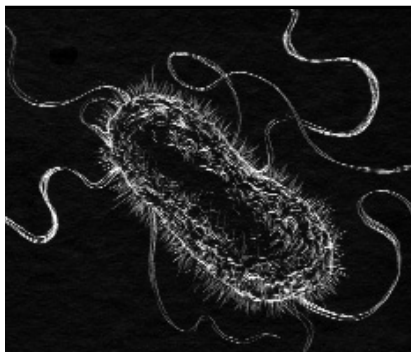
Ask students to write about and illustrate their fantasy journey

experience. Ask them to emphasise what they felt and saw about how early life “got it together”.

- What was exciting, heroic and admirable?
- What was it like being a Bluegreen Bacterium?
- What kinds of cooperation took place?
- What creative new ideas did you learn?

3. Partners Share Their Journeys

Have students pair up and exchange names. Then partners take turns sharing the writing and drawings about their experience. Encourage them also to illustrate with movement or gestures some of the things they saw on their journeys.



Activity 1.1

BEGINNING TO GET IT TOGETHER: CREATING CLASS COMMUNITY

4. Partners Introduce Each Other to Another Pair

Have each partner introduce the other by saying, “This is (name), and he/she saw (at least one feature of the other person’s visualisation) on his (or her) journey.”

5. Students Think and Share

Ask each person to think about this question: “Why was it that early creatures shared, cooperated and developed interdependent relationships?” After sharing ideas with their partner, students turn back to the group of four and share their partner’s ideas with the others (Think-Pair-Square). Ask the groups to write the ideas on a list.

6. Groups Share with Class

Ask all students to stand in their groups of four. Ask a student from each group to share with the class one answer to the above question. Each time an answer is given by the group or some other group, it is checked off the group’s list. When all ideas on a

group’s list have been given, the group sits down (Stand and Share). Then pose the following question to the class and write it on the blackboard: “What can we learn from early life on earth about creating community? What did we learn that can help us create community – even in this classroom?”

7. Groups Combine Ideas

Ask students to write their answers to these questions in their personal journals. After five minutes, ask students to share their ideas with their group of four. Tell students to listen respectfully to everyone’s ideas “because in our community, everyone counts!” Together, the group must come up with at least three ideas for creating community.

8. Groups Write Ideas on Board

Call on a representative from each group to write these on the blackboard at the same time or have each team write ideas on an overhead slide (Simultaneous Share). Later combine similar ideas and write up the list of ideas on a chart under the label “We Create Community”.



Have students write briefly in their journals about “One time when things were really tough, this is how I handled it” or “Sometimes when I really feel up against a wall, this is what I do”.

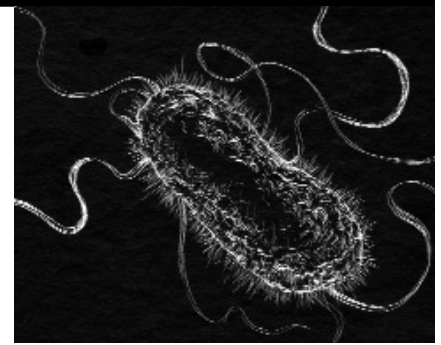
Remind the class how the “bacteria heroes in the fantasy saved life on earth by finding creative solutions to their problems. Ask students to remember a time when they found a way out of their problems, coped creatively with hard times, conflict or difficulties.

Next have students pair up with their original partner and interview each other about their creative coping strategies. Students can then share the information from their partner’s interview with the group of four (Three-Step Interview), emphasising how well the partner has coped with difficulties.



- Students can read creation myths in children’s literature or the myths and legends of other cultures. How do other people imagine the beginnings of life on earth?
- Students can write their own creation myths or stories of legendary heroes, on this planet or on a fictional planet. These can be rehearsed in the group of four and acted out for the rest of the class. Then have the class reflect on the elements in the myths that are similar.

- Students can create a display board featuring their favourite heroes (male and female, human and non-human – either living, from history or from mythology).
- Students can make a time scale with their bodies to represent the ages of the earth (see Extension #1, Back to the Beginnings of Life on Earth).
- Ask students to bring to class on a specified day a picture of themselves as a baby or toddler. Have each student write a couple of paragraphs about something they have been told about their personal beginnings: how or where they were born, what anyone said about them, what kind of a baby they were, what stories they have heard about themselves, anything they may remember (see p. 33, “Baby Beginnings: How I Began”). Have them share these with their partner(s). Post the stories and pictures on a display board labelled, “Our Beginnings”.



Activity 1.1

BEGINNING TO GET IT TOGETHER: CREATING CLASS COMMUNITY



Teacher Tip

When reading the script for the fantasy journey, insert plenty of pauses for the students to visualise and feel what is happening in their internal scene. Make your rendition as dramatic and exciting as possible with voice modulations of pace, tone and volume. Playing music behind your narrative enhances the mood of the adventure and aids imagery. For younger students, you may wish to shorten the fantasy or remove some terms to make it more appropriate to their level.