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What Community-Building Exercises Work Best in a Reading and Writing Classroom?

Before getting into some dedicated community-building exercises, it is important to acknowledge that we should consider community building as the work of our curriculum choices and pedagogical moves throughout the entire school year. True community is not built with a couple of initial exercises. But with that said, here are a few of the isolated exercises that help build community in our ELA classes.

Community-Building Exercises to Start the Year

- 🕒 **Minefield.** On day one of the school year, Matt Kay often takes a bunch of printer paper and spreads it on the floor. He then asks for two volunteers. One closes their eyes, and the other one has to guide them through the “minefield” (the papers can also represent puddles or whatever hazards you find appropriate), using only their voice. When the blindfolded student steps on a paper, everyone in the class says “Bang!” or “Splash!” Matt volunteers to go last as a student guides him through. The kids have a lot of fun. After finishing, the class recaps. “If this activity is a metaphor for how you’ll need to communicate with each other this year, what do you think the lesson would be?” (The guide role teaches us to explain ourselves clearly, knowing that our colleagues can’t always see what we see. The walker role teaches how important it is to communicate when we don’t understand an instruction and so on.) This activity cuts through the noise on a day of “be-good” rules and syllabi reading, and it hints that this will be an ELA class that will get students on their feet a bit.
- 🕒 **Story of My Name.** We have all experienced classroom moments where teachers mispronounce a whole pile of student names on the first day. This is common enough that it may not seem like a big deal, yet when a teacher regularly mispronounces a student’s name, it can have meaningful negative effects on the student (Rice, 2017), given a name’s often deep connections to family, culture, and one’s own sense of identity. Further, messing up a student’s name in your first act as the steward of a new class does not leave a good first impression. In Matt Johnson’s class, students introduce their name on the first day by writing and then telling the class the “story of their name,” which is whatever they want it to be. This activity allows the teacher to hear the name first before saying it, helps the teacher and classmates know a bit more about the student, and establishes a theme of the importance of learning the stories of one’s classmates.
- 🕒 **First-Day Index Cards.** Dave Stuart asks students to begin their year in his classroom by writing their preferred name on one side of an index card and describing the person they’d like to become on the other side. It’s this second part—the aspirational side of the card—that Dave uses to launch a community focused on the pursuit of long-term flourishing via the mastery of reading, writing, speaking, and knowledge building. Students write and share statements such as the following:

- 👉 I want to be generous.
- 👉 I'd like to be a dependable friend.
- 👉 I hope I can be a kid my parents can be proud of.

👉 **Speed Dating.** Sometime in the first week, students in Matt Kay's class do a speed-dating activity. The kids split into two groups and stand in concentric circles, facing a partner of the opposite group. Matt asks a low-stakes question, such as "What's a guilty pleasure song you love to listen to?" Each student answers it, and then the inner group rotates. The questions eventually move to slightly more serious questions like "What is something you are excited about this year?" but nothing that requires significant vulnerability. Besides being a getting-to-know-you activity, it prepares students for some of the one-on-one conversational structures that they'll be using.



To read more about this exercise, check out Dave's blog post on the idea; the QR code in the margin will take you there.

Example Speed-Dating Questions

1. What is your favorite food?
2. What is a "guilty pleasure" song that you like?
3. What's your most embarrassing moment? (They normally love this one; just remind them that it doesn't have to be "serious" embarrassment—more like tripping in front of your crush.)
4. Tell a story about a horrid/awesome teacher you've had in the past.
5. What were you proudest of yourself for last year?

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Community-Building Exercises to Use Throughout the Year

- 👉 **House Talk: Burn 5, Good News, and High-Grade Compliments.** In *Not Light, But Fire* (2018), Matt Kay describes three activities meant to help students feel more secure participating in what he calls "House Talk." (Remember when you were a kid, and your parents said something like, "Don't repeat what you just heard. That stays in the house." Essentially, house talk is making space for those conversations that flow naturally in a supportive classroom "family.") These three activities can be modified to match your preference or what your students find meaningful. Good News and High-Grade Compliments were inspired by Matt Kay's brilliant former colleague Zac Chase's classroom.
- 👉 **Burn 5.** Speak informally with students before every class period. Check in about popular TV shows, athletic contests, school dances—anything that lets us speak with them about something other than our formal curriculum.
- 👉 **Good News.** Start the week giving kids a chance to share something good from their lives. Modification: Let them share "highs and lows."

