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Citation

MARTIN, James Edward. Student Bonding as Community-Building. (2014). *English Language Teaching World Online*.

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Student Bonding as Community-Building

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Introductory remarks

The concept of student bonding is likely to be supported by most teachers. It is quite clear that student attitudes influence learning, and bonding is often seen as a way to help create a positive atmosphere that will promote participation in class (i.e., making students more comfortable in the often “socially risky” environment of the English language classroom). For this purpose and to maximize bonding, cooperative language learning techniques, for example, have sometimes been used (see, e.g., Wichadee & Orawiwatnakul, 2012).

In this article, however, I will focus my discussion on a related but somewhat different rationale for bonding and offer some activities to promote it in the particular environment of a university writing class.

Bonding and the writing process

By definition, bonding involves making connections and forging a kind of community in the classroom. In this sense, promoting it is a more profound task than just fostering comfortable interaction among classmates. By calling bonding a kind of community-building, I am suggesting that the task, always a work in progress, is the creation of a de-facto community, albeit one with a life span of only one semester and a narrowly defined purpose (Johnson, et al., 1998). This community is first and foremost a discourse community, specifically, in our case, a subset of the discourse community called “academic writers.” Since we can define the community’s scope and duration, we should also be able to define its characteristics. Then we can devise strategies to build, support, and develop them and this is where bonding activities come into the picture.

Members of the classroom community should be characterized by an open-minded and curious attitude. Students should care about what their fellow classmates are thinking and writing, and be ready to engage in discussions with them about it. Although students may

“compete” to be the best writers in class, the atmosphere should be characterized by a strong willingness to collaborate. In this environment, prior experience with writing is viewed not as indicative of a set of weaknesses to be overcome or gaps to be filled, but rather relative strengths to be shared. Consequently, it is a place of peer teaching and peer learning. Without strong mutual bonds among students, it will not be possible to successfully build such a community.

It is obvious to many writing instructors that the characteristics mentioned above are at odds with the attitudes that students often bring into the writing classroom (e.g., highly competitive spirit, relative disinterest in everything but their own progress, low regard for their own expertise as writers, overall low motivation to participate sometimes bordering on apathy, reliance on teachers as sole purveyors of wisdom and knowledge). These attitudes, destructive to forging bonds, need to be actively discouraged and new, more constructive ones promoted in their place.

Activities to promote bonding

In this section, I present some practices I engage in for the purposes of bonding.

Activities on the first day of class

On the very first day, I organize my writing classes into small table-groups, as shown in Fig 1 (see Wong, in this issue, for a different perspective on this point). In my experience, it is easier for four or five people to bond with each other than for 25-30 people to bond. The daily class activities, many collaborative in nature naturally bond the table-group members. Of course, there are lots of opportunities for informal socializing as well.

Fig 1: A table group of 4-5 students in a writing class at Singapore Management University.



To further encourage bonding within the class, I shift the students to form new table-groups three times during the term (i.e., every four weeks or so). This mixing allows students to eventually work and bond with most of their classmates during the term. Once the first group has bonded, they find it even easier to build their new group bonds. I also tell them the rationale for shifting their groups, which is that they can work with new people to gain new insights, get to know other classmates, and share skills with different people.

After organizing the table groups and giving group members a few minutes to exchange names and personal information, I show a short video clip relevant to the theme of the class. A themed writing class focuses on a specific topic or set of related topics for reading, discussion, research and writing assignments, in order to help the students to build context and understanding. For example, in a class themed on “weight management”, readings and other activities would include a range of closely related topics under the umbrella of the theme, such as obesity, public health, body image and eating disorders, food and nutrition, fitness, technological tools to manage weight, and child nutrition.

Activities throughout the term

One of the activities I engage the students in is peer editing. Because it is done for pedagogic purposes, it can also facilitate student bonding. Peer editing as an assessment technique has been around since the 1960s, and despite reservations about the “blind leading the blind” feel of the activity from both teachers and students (e.g., Brammer & Rees, 2007), support remains strong among many educators (e.g., White, 2001). Since peer work is crucial to building bonds (in that collaboration is necessary), I make much use of it in the class, but include a different focus than in the usual model. Colleagues past and present have often used peer editing to help students point out errors or weaknesses in their partner’s writing. The idea is that each student has a degree of competence that enables them to apply to evaluate another person’s writing. It also decentralizes the class and avoids over-reliance on the teacher as expert.

The above rationale for doing peer evaluation is no doubt valid, and I use the technique for these purposes too, but the activity needs to be tweaked in order to promote bonding. Although it may be empowering to a student reviewer to be deemed competent enough to point out errors and weaknesses in their partner’s writing, the practice does little to promote

bonding, and may easily have the opposite effect. In fact, students realize the potential for giving offense when peer editing and they sometimes sugar-coat their comments or just voice platitudes, even though they know that is not the purpose of the activity. For this reason, my peer review heuristics always contain questions that identify and comment on positive aspects of the partner's writing. To give an example, I might show the following short video clip, entitled "Reality" early in the first lesson: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94c43AlwLKo>. I instruct students to write a brief response of 50-100 words that details their personal reaction to the clip. I then ask them to exchange papers and fill out the peer review sheet (see **Appendix 1**). The peer review sheet guides students to find strengths and positive aspects of the writing. Then students talk about it, swap papers with the other table-group members, and repeat.

Students often find this task surprising. Although many of them have had prior experience with the ubiquitous process-teaching technique of peer review, few of my students say that they have ever been asked to focus on strengths in their partner's writing. This reaction is likely the result of their being used to the error identification and correction focus of peer review activities found in many classrooms. The resulting discussion about writer strengths always creates a reservoir of goodwill and a respect for the skills and views of the partners. It kick starts the bonding process, which will extend throughout the term.

Besides peer review, I also engage my students in many other collaborative activities familiar to writing instructors, such as groups/pairs jointly writing or editing short texts, analyzing readings, doing planning activities, etc. (see **Appendix 2** for an example of a collaborative activity). In order to maximize the bonding potential of these sorts of activities, when doing the post-task debrief, I always include a reflective set of questions about the quality of the collaboration and how it can be enhanced. Below are a few relevant questions I usually ask.

- a. What was your partner's/group mates' best contribution to the discussion?
- b. What was one new insight you gained by working with your partner/group mates?
- c. How did you respond to the ideas presented by your partners? Did your comments indicate reflection, open-mindedness, creative feedback?
- d. How would you rate your own contribution to the discussion?

- e. What was your most valuable contribution? How could you have made your contribution stronger?

I find that repeated focus on the quality of interaction and mutual learning reinforces the bonding process and in turn leads to better collaboration. The questions also highlight the role and contribution of both parties (the self and the addressee) in any meaningful interaction. They give the students a framework to do evaluative appraisal and strategize how to improve their interaction in the future.

Activities on the last day of class

At the final class meeting of the term, I conduct a discussion with the entire class during which I reiterate the intention of the bonding activities mentioned above and get students to reflect on their effectiveness. Points I cover include evaluating specific bonding activities in the writing class, learning to collaborate on writing activities, getting and using feedback to improve writing, teamwork and future success in academic and professional careers. I ask students to first respond in writing to a set of open-ended questions designed to get them to reflect on the above points and share their feelings with the group. Below are some examples of the questions I often ask. In order to highlight the importance of team bonding and collaborative learning to their work after our class, some questions contain reference to hypothetical future academic and workplace situations in which these skills would be useful.

- a. What qualities can you identify in your group mates that have made it comfortable and productive for you to work together with them?
- b. Did you often get helpful feedback from your group mates?
- c. Give an example of feedback you received that you used in order to improve your writing.
- d. How do you feel about giving them feedback?
- e. Why is it helpful for coworkers or fellow students who must work together to build strong bonds with each other?
- f. How do you think forming strong bonds with fellow students will help you to work successfully on group projects in your future classes at this university?
- g. If your future boss put you on the same team with unfamiliar co-workers to work on a project (e.g., writing a report), what would you do to strengthen group bonds?

- h. What other activities could have been done in our class to strengthen our bonds?

Students then exchange papers and read their group mates' responses. Finally, the whole class discusses the responses, which essentially constitutes a debriefing on this aspect of the term's work. The discussion brings out the students' (often unconscious) understanding about the importance of learning to work in groups and bond with their group mates. Students typically give positive feedback about their bonding experiences in class, and find it easy to extrapolate from their classroom experience to future hypothetical group situations in which group bonding will clearly be beneficial to them.

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have discussed the central importance of student bonding in my writing classes. Basically, bonding is a prerequisite to the essential task of building a discourse community in the classroom and guiding students to an understanding that they are bona fide members of such a community with contributions to make and relationships to foster, largely through writing activities. Attending to the physical layout of the classroom, establishing a strong collaborative and mutually-respectful atmosphere at the beginning of the course, continuously reinforcing the understanding of the dynamics of bonding throughout the course by reflecting on class activities, and retrospectively exploring the meaning and usefulness of bonding at the end of the term are all techniques I have used to facilitate the building a community of writers in the classroom.

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Appendix 1. Peer review sheet for response activity in session 1

Directions: Read your partner's response to the video, and comment on the write-up by using the questions below. Then discuss your comments with him/her.

1. What is one thing you liked about your partner's write-up? What did you find enjoyable about reading it?
2. What does the writer do well? What makes his/her write-up effective?
3. What point(s) in your partner's write-up do you agree with?
4. What is one word (vocabulary) or phrase that was well chosen and well used?
5. How did your partner make his/her opinion clear to you?
6. What did you learn about the writer from reading his/her response?
7. What do you think your partner has in common with you?
8. How can you help your partner to be an even better writer?

Appendix 2. Sample collaborative writing task

UNIT 3 SESSION 7A - PART 1 ACTIVITY 1: WORKING WITH REGISTER

The following business communication is written in **informal** register. As this is not a recommended style for the task, analyze the problems, and together with your group mates, rewrite it in order to reflect a more appropriate **formal** register.

Dear Ms. Dolma:

We got your letter asking us to cancel your long distance plan on December 3, 2009. Sorry but we are going to have to charge you a penalty fee of \$300 if you cancel this service before January 10, 2011 because you're locked into a three-year contract with us. I'm sending you a copy of the original contract so that you can have a look at it.

If you still don't want the service, just send a cheque for \$300 and I'm sure the customer service department will have no problem cancelling your contract.

Cheers,

(available at: <http://www.settlementatwork.org/lincdocs/linc5-7/business.writing/pdfs/bus.writing.LINC7.pdf>)

About the author

James E. Martin has spent most of the past 30 years in the Asia/Pacific region, having taught ESL/EAP, American and British literature, literary and rhetorical theory and writing at the university level. His research interests include rhetoric and discourse theory, composition theory and practice, American literature, poetry, and instructional media. He has lived in Singapore for the past five years, where he teaches writing for Singapore Management University.