Creating Community in the College Classroom: Best Practices for Increased Student Success

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Abstract

A sense of community is vital to the success of today's college student. Students who report feeling a sense of community in the classroom are more likely to attend class, more likely to participate during class, and more likely to graduate from college. Each of these realities is especially evident among undergraduate students, first generation students, and underrepresented populations. For each of these reasons, the present study surveyed more than 500 undergraduate students at 25 diverse colleges/universities in southern California to develop best practices for creating and maintaining a sense of community in the college classroom. Consistent with contemporary literature on the topic, results revealed four specific ways that students communicatively understood community within higher education: (1) shared space, (2) openness/acceptance, (3) common interests, and (4) sense of belonging. Based upon these results, this study concludes by also offering four practical implications for both students and instructors who hope to foster a shared sense of community within their own classroom settings: the creation of (1) third places, (2) genuine dialogue, (3) strong ties, and (4) superordinate goal(s).

Keywords: community, third place, genuine dialogue, strong ties, superordinate goal

A sense of community is vital to student success. College students who report having "strong communal ties" are more likely to attend class, more likely to remain enrolled in class, and more likely to graduate from college (McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, & Schweitzer, 2006; see also Jenkins, 2014a; Rovai, 2001). A shared sense of community has also shown to positively correlate with a student's likelihood to contribute during class discussion, and to negatively correlate with a student's feeling of personal anxiety in the classroom (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2010). Tebben (1995) found that a classroom community was not only one of the strongest contributors to student satisfaction, but also contributed to their actual academic performance. Meanwhile, Harris (2001) found that nearly 90% of students cited the creation of a classroom community as contributing "significantly" to their completion of coursework (p. 22). Each of these realities is especially evident among undergraduate students, first generation students and minority/underrepresented groups, making community in the classroom a particularly significant topic within today's increasingly diversified society (Asher & Skenes, 1993; Akerheilm, Berger, Hooker, & Wise, 1998; Terinzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Because of community's influence upon student success, this study explored the way(s) in which this concept is communicatively understood within higher education. Specifically, this study surveyed more than 500 undergraduate students at 25 diverse colleges/universities in southern California to develop best practices for creating and maintaining community in the college classroom.

We begin this study by offering a brief literature review on the ambiguous nature of *community*. We then describe our study's methodology, including its procedure, participants, instrumentation, and analysis. Next, we reveal the results of this study by outlining four specific ways that students communicatively understood community in the classroom: (1) shared location, (2) openness/acceptance, (3) common interests, and (4) sense of belonging.

We conclude by discussing four practical implications for both students and instructors who hope to foster an increased sense of community within their own classroom settings: the creation of (1) third places, (2) genuine dialogue, (3) strong ties, and (4) superordinate goal(s).

Each of the study's implications correlates to students' understandings of community, and is grounded within one of four theoretical frameworks. The need for a shared location, for instance, can be realized within the classroom by leveraging Oldenburg's (1999) notion of *third place*. Similarly, the need for openness/acceptance can be realized through Buber's (1955, 1965) *genuine dialogue*, as well as Bohm's (1987) notion of *Bohmian Dialogue.* The need for common interests among peers can be accomplished by developing *strong ties* (Wenger, 1998), and the need for belonging can be manifested through the pursuit of a *superordinate goal* (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993).

Research on building community in the classroom has a rich and storied history within academia. This is especially true within the field of Education, and to a lesser extent within the fields of Psychology, Sociology, and Communication (Halaby, 2000; Pallof & Pratt, 2007). The majority of this research, however, has been limited to elementary and high school settings (McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, & Schweitzer, 2006; New Detroit, 2003). As Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2010) note:

College students' sense of belonging, especially early in their college careers, may be important for their academic motivation and success in that setting. To date, however, little is known about the importance of the sense of belonging for college-level students or about the conditions that might support the perceptions of belonging. (p. 203)

It has only been in more recent years that scholars have turned their attention to community building at the university level. Yet the vast majority of those studies have focused exclusively on online courses and long distance learning (see Rovai, 2002; Summers, Bush, Turner, Svinicki, & Achacosco, 2003). Notable exceptions to this trend include Ellsworth's (1999) study of constructivist teaching roles, Fassinger's (1997) study of group work behaviors, Hirschy and Wilson's (2002) study of socialization's effect on study learning, Lenning and Ebbers' (1999) study of university learning communities, Tinto's (1997) study of student persistence, and Tebben's (1995) aforementioned study of student satisfaction and supportive environments.

With the present study, we contribute to this burgeoning field of research that focuses on creating community in the traditional college classroom. Consequently, by exploring the way community is communicatively co-constructed among today's college students, it is our hope that this study's implications will help additional students and instructors create a shared sense of community within their own classroom settings. In doing so, we aim to increase student attendance and participation, resulting in higher levels of academic success and – ultimately – higher levels of personal and professional success beyond academe.

Community

The term "community" derives from the Latin loanword *communitas*, a product of *cum* and *munus* – cum meaning "together," munus meaning "gift" (Esposito, 1998; Goodman & Goodman, 1947/1990). Yet such an antiquated definition rarely results in contemporary understanding. Meanwhile, scholarly attempts to characterize community are often so vague and indefinite that they fail to substantiate the human intricacies and specific processes necessary for genuine communal kinship (see Jenkins, 2014a, 2014b). McMillan and Chavis (1986), for example, define community as "a sense of psychological feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group" (p. 8). Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) delineate trust, values, interactivity, interdependence, and shared expectations as the hallmarks of community. Meanwhile, Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) outline seven features of community, which range from "feeling at home" to a "feeling of belonging" (p. 8). Finally, Bellah and colleagues (1985/2008) characterize community as a group of people who are "socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it" (p. 333).

Because of the ambiguity surrounding community's definition, three interconnected views are typically used to comprehend its meaning: community as physical space, community as shared values/interests, and community as communication process. People who live or work in close proximity area are often considered a community, regardless of whether they care for or even know one another. As Young (2003) writes, "In ordinary speech for most people in the U.S., the term community refers to people with whom I identify in a locale" (p. 244).

Beyond physical distinction alone, however, many scholars view community as a disembodied concept – a shared set of values or interests that develop among a particular people group (Cohen, 1985; Jason, 1997; Putnam, 2000). Examples include professional communities, ethnic communities, faith communities, and political communities, to name but a few. Kanter (1972) articulates the emotive characteristic of community by writing:

> The search for community is also a quest for direction and purpose in a collective anchoring of the individual life. Investment of self in community, acceptance of its authority and willingness to support its values, is dependent in part on the extent to which group life can offer identity, personal meaning, and the opportunity to grow in terms of standards and guiding principles that the member feels are expressive of his own inner being. (p. 73)

Within the field of communication, a third view of community is typically emphasized: community as the constitution and reconstitution of communicative practices (Adelman & Frey, 1997; Wenger, 2004). In the words of Rothenbuhler (1991), "Communication and community grow in each other's shadows; the possibilities of the one are structured by the possibilities of the other" (p. 76). As a result, communication scholars see community as more than mere internal or emotive processes, but rather the external and demonstrative (inter)actions that those processes entail: social rules, communal norms, patterns of speech, etc. (Jeffres, Dobos, & Sweeney, 1987). Tinder (1995) writes, "Community, it may be said, is that which is realized in the activity of communication" (p. 68). Hence, communication is "the essential, defining feature – the medium – of community" (Adelman & Frey, 1997, p. 5):

Community in the Classroom

Within the classroom setting, community can be even more difficult to define. Scholars and teachers alike agree on the fact that a shared sense of community is beneficial for students' current and future success (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993; Tebben, 1995). Yet defining what exactly that shared community looks like has not been so easy. Hittie (2000), for example, frames a classroom community as one in which both formal and informal learning takes place. When this is achieved, a sense of community in the classroom can help connect students to their classmates, as well as connect them to their work outside of school. Meanwhile, McMillan and Chavis (1986) use the term *learning community* to describe a classroom culture wherein everyone has a mutual involvement and understanding of the concept being presented. The creation of such communities has shown to increase levels of classroom loyalty, satisfaction, and participation (p. 2, 7). Still others describe a communal classroom as one in which students feel "nurtured and supported" (Church, 2015, par. 1), a context that allows for open discussion and intellectual inquiry (Goos, 2004, p. 259), an environment where students play an "active role in… constructing meaning" (Bloome, 1986, p. 71), and so on.

Just as there are a variety of defining characteristics used to describe classroom communities, there is also a wide range of tips and techniques available for creating one. Some authors emphasize the importance of high impact teaching practices (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), others emphasize the role of the instructor (Wong et al., 2004), others emphasize the role of the student (Greene & Mitchum, 2012), and still others emphasize maro-level program planning (Bettez & Hytten, 2013). More specifically, McMillan and Chavis (1986) emphasize student involvement and active learning approaches to instruction: class discussion, game based learning, roleplaying activities, etc. (see Rutherford, 2012). McMillan and Chavis also advocate for the students' ability to communicate with and among each other, and to deal independently with problems that arise within the classroom.

Rather than prioritizing a particular type of teaching practice, Wong et al. (2013) argue that professors are the primary impetus for creating a sense community among student peers. Wong and his colleagues argue that instructors not only contribute to a classroom's culture, but also establish its norms and expectations by "modeling preferred attitudes for community, creating a physical environment conducive to community, and framing the subject of inquiry for the class" (p. 49). One way to embody Wong et al.'s notion of preferred attitude is through transparency: instructors can model transparency in class discussion by displaying an openness and vulnerability with their students. Another practice that promotes community is an environment where students can freely express their outlook and views about the class. This practice of assessing and evaluating the classroom can stimulate an open community, which can be further improved via anonymity and confidentiality.

While Wong et al. (2013) emphasize the instructor's role in creating community, Greene and Mitcham (2012) advocate for a focus on students in creating their own communal ties. Teachers must create a setting that is supportive and encouraging for students.

Yet according to Greene and Mitcham, teachers are no longer the overseer of their classroom. Instead, they should become an active member of the conversations that occur within the class – alongside their students. For this reason, the role of an instructor should be to persuade her/his students to share their own experiences and to become advocates of their own learning: "The classroom [is] a community, for both teachers and students, [which] requires a proactive attitude and demands the willingness to support an environment of collegiality and respect" (p. 107).

Finally, Bettez and Hytten (2013) argue that effective community building must begin at the administrative level. It isn't enough to simply infuse classes with high impact practices, or to expect instructors to model what it means to be in community with one another. Only some students will thrive in such environments, and only certain instructors are capable of modeling a healthy sense of community. Rather, a more effective approach is to "conscientiously create community through facilitation of activities that requires students to both critically reflect upon their experiences and simultaneously support each other" (p. 22). In order to achieve this, universities should provide a platform for students and instructors to talk openly about fears, challenges, and the feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Universities should also promote activities that increase a connection amongst students rather than competition. This has shown to be significant because academe's emphasis on individualism is often a barrier to community building.

Despite the wealth of data on creating a sense of community in the classroom, the overwhelming majority of studies focus upon elementary and high school students. As aforementioned, far less research and attention has been afforded to community in the university classroom: how it is communicatively understood by college students, and how both students and instructors can work to create a shared sense of community within their own classroom settings. Therefore, the present study expands upon this current body of research by exploring the way community is understood by today's university student, in effort to develop best practices for creating and maintaining a shared sense of community in the college classroom.

Methods

In order to explore students' understandings of community, we surveyed 505 college/university students located on 25 distinct campuses. Our study's (a) procedure, (b) participants, (c) instrumentation, and (c) mode of analysis are further detailed in the present section.

Procedure

Following IRB approval, this study engaged students at 25 distinct colleges/universities in southern California: ten public universities, ten private universities, and five community colleges (for a complete of schools, please refer to Appendix A). Snowball sampling was used to garner participants both in-person and online. Each potential participant was explained the focus and scope of our study, and then offered an anonymous survey. They were given a minimum of one week to record their responses; results were collected in an unmarked manila envelope. Online participants were recruited via email and social media platforms. These participants were sent the survey as an attachment, along with a hyperlink that directed them to an anonymous Google Form.

Participants

Of the 505 undergraduate students surveyed, 306 self-identified as female and 198 as male, with one participant declining to respond. Two hundred and seventy-five (275) participants self-identified as white, 109 as Hispanic/Latino/a, 79 as African American, 32 as Asian American, and eight as Pacific/Islander. Two participants declined to indicate their race/ethnicity. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 42 ($M = 23.3$). Students from all grade levels were included, with the majority of participants identifying as seniors ($N = 364$). Students also represented a total of 33 majors, with Business (140), Biology (78), and Communication (72) being most common. Grade point averages ranged from 1.9 to 4.0, with an average GPA of 3.2.

Instrumentation

Data for this study was collected via qualitative surveys. In addition to demographic information (age, gender, race/ethnicity, major, GPA, grade level, and college/university), our survey included 9 open-ended questions (see Appendix B). The survey's first three questions explored participants' general understanding of community:

1. *What does the word "community" mean to you?*
2. *What adjectives would you use to describe the word "community," and why?*
3. *What does it mean to be in community with other people?*

The survey's subsequent three questions focused specifically on community in the classroom setting, by asking participants to reflect on past experiences within higher education:

> 4. *Describe a time when you felt a sense of community in the classroom. What made you feel this way?*
> 5. *What have professors successfully done in the past to help build a sense of community in the classroom?*
> 6. *What have you and your fellow classmates successfully done in the past to help build a sense of community in the classroom?*

The survey's final three questions challenged participants to consider how both professors and students could work to build a stronger sense of community in the classroom:

> 7. *What can professors do to help build a stronger sense of community in the classroom?*
> 8. *What can you and your fellow classmates do to help build a stronger sense of community in the classroom?*
> 9. *Finally, what is one thing that you, your classmates, and/or your professors might <u>avoid</u> doing, in order to help build a stronger sense of community in the classroom?*

Analysis

Survey results were coded by individual group members in search of dominant themes. After several intensive readings of our individual findings, we concluded by clumping and re-coding the data together until a tree of large-order and small-order themes emerged (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The subsequent process focused upon theorizing, a procedure Morse (1994) describes as "the constant development and manipulation of malleable theoretical schemes until the 'best' theoretical scheme is developed" (p. 32). In effort to validate our readings, each author of this study also worked together to sensemake our preliminary data, and to recontextualize our results for the purpose of developing best practices. The following section reveals the results of our joint analysis.

Results

Due to community's positive impact upon student success, this study explored the way(s) in which this concept is communicatively understood by more than 500 undergraduate students at 25 diverse colleges/universities in southern California. Results revealed four specific findings: (1) shared space, (2) openness/acceptance, (3) common interests, and (4) sense of belonging. The present section discusses each of these themes in more detail; the following section concludes by offering four corresponding implications.

Theme #1: Shared Space

The primary way participants of this study communicated their understanding of community was through a sense of *shared space*. A slight majority (54%) of all survey responses referred to a "shared," "central," "common," "communal," and/or "mutual" location in which to interact with others as both a necessary and defining feature of community. In response to our survey's first question – *What does the word "community" mean to you?* – one participant by the name of Amanda[1] commented: "To be around others in a shared place or area, like a town or neighborhood" (white female). Similarly, Sam (white male) responded "Hanging out… just being together in the same spot" when asked what adjectives he would use to describe community, and Sofia (Hispanic/Latina female) replied "Having a special place where you know other people will be who want to spend time with you" when asked what it means to be in community with other people.

Within the university context, respondents also referred to shared space as a necessary element for community building. Our survey's fourth question asked participants to *"Describe a time when you felt a sense of community in the classroom. What was it that made you feel this way?"* Participants routinely referred to the college class itself as not only a place that can benefit from community, but also as a site that can naturally serve to foster community among classmates. Demarco commented on this recursive reality by writing, "You need feel community in the classroom… [and] coming together each week in the same place often helps to build that… There's something about sharing a space and seeing the same people in it week after week" (African American male). Samantha (white female) not only referred to the classroom's ability to help build a sense of community, but also went as far as to contrast this reality with the difficulties of creating a sense of community in online or hybrid courses: "That's why online classes are so difficult for me. I don't ever feel like I know anyone because I never see or talk to them face to face… We're never together in the same classroom."

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[1] All names used in this study have been changed to preserve the anonymity of its participants.

Because of the need for communal space, combined with the classroom's inherent ability to supply that need, participants of this study also offered several ideas for how to build a stronger sense of community in the classroom. Several of those potential implications are outlined within the following section.

Theme #2: Openness/Acceptance

A second theme that emerged from this study's results was the importance of *openness/acceptance*. Nearly half (44%) of survey responses alluded to the significance of building a community space in which people felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions, and felt comfortable being themselves. Brandon referred to this necessity directly by writing, "What's important is that a space is created where people are open and accepting of one another and feel like they can say what's on their mind without being embarrassed" (white male). A second participant seemed to agree: "Community to me means accepting others as-is and being accepted in return. I don't see any other way" (Hispanic/Latina female). Meanwhile, Michael went as far as to characterize community as an impossibility apart from openness/acceptance: "It's impossible to really open up or know your classmates unless you know you can speak your mind without being self-conscious about what you say" (white male). Finally, Luis evidenced this reality by contrasting a classroom defined by openness/acceptance with a personal experience he had as a college student in the past. When asked what professors might avoid doing to help build a stronger sense of community in the classroom, Luis described in detail a time a when he felt disrespected by a past instructor:

The professor would always ask the class to answer [his questions] but he never   wanted to hear our answers. He was only interested in his own answer, and no   matter what you said he'd always disagree and prove you wrong. Over time the   entire class learned not to speak up or open up about what we thought. I'd just sit there   with   my eyes down… There was not a strong sense of community in that classroom,   I'll   tell   you   that   much. (Hispanic/Latino male)

Theme #3: Common Interests

One hundred and forty-four (154) participants in this study (31%) referred to the need for *common interests* among community members. This commonality was framed as both physical activities (e.g., shared hobbies or pastimes) and philosophical beliefs (e.g., shared views or values). Jonathan, for instance, referred to the need for fellow community members to participate in similar activities by writing, "Baseball, football, any type of sports really, that's how I define my friends and form community" (white male). Sally also pointed to the importance of physical activity as a common interest among community members: "What matters to me – where I've made my closest friends from high school until now – is through playing softball together. There's something about practicing together, winning and losing together, that brings you together like nothing else can" (white female). Meanwhile, Daniela seemed to agree, commenting on the power of shared physical interests in a less formalized way. Instead of high school sports or local sporting leagues, Daniela (Hispanic/Latina female) characterized "doing things together and liking the same activities" as what it means to be in community with others.

In addition to physical activity, several respondents alluded to the theme of common interests in a more philosophical way. Just as previous examples referred to formal sports teams and leagues, some of these participants invoked the significance of faith, church, and religion upon community building: "It's always comforting to see someone in church from school or work… It's like you're in instant community with that person" (African American female). Just as previous examples also referred to informal activities, however, some of these participants also invoked shared philosophical interests in a less organized manner: "shared values," "shared beliefs," "[shared] worldview," or simply "having the same outlook on life." Jaime elaborated on this particular view by commenting, "Community is a complicated thing to explain, but when you see the world similarly as someone else… you know you've found it" (white female).

Theme #4: Sense of Belonging

The final theme that emerged from this study's results was a *sense of belonging*. Participants specifically referred to the need to "know their place," (white female) "know [they] belong," (Asian male), and "know that they're welcome to stay" (white male). Mia referred to this necessity among community members by reflecting on her own recent experiences, "Sometimes you just don't feel like you're in the right place… And other times, I've felt like I was right where I was supposed to be… To me, that's what I would call community" (Hispanic/Latina female). Kyle reiterated Mia's sentiment by referencing the theme song from a 90's sitcom:

It's like that song from the TV show *Cheers*. Community is a place where everyone knows [your] name, where you're greeted by name and invited to relax and be yourself… It isn't always easy to find, but when you do [find it] you know it immediately because you feel like you just belong. (white male)

While explaining the importance for community members to create a sense of belonging, several participants spoke specifically about the significance of teamwork and group projects. One participant responded, "I hate group work, but it always brings people closer together in the end" (white female). Similarly, a second participant described his love-hate relationship with group projects by characterizing them as a "necessary evil" (white male), and a third respondent went as far as to describe an instance when his reluctance to work in teams was eventually outweighed by the relationships it helped to foster: "I avoid group work when I can, but [in a class] last semester our group really gelled and I became close friends with my group members because of the work we did together as a team."

Conclusion

A shared sense of community is vital to the success of today's college student, whether measured by class enrollment, attendance, satisfaction, participation, performance, or overall graduation rates (Harris, 2001; McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, & Schweitzer, 2006; Tebben, 1995). This phenomenon is especially evident among undergraduate students, first generation students, and historically underrepresented populations (e.g., impoverished students, undocumented citizens, racial/ethnic minorities, etc.; Asher & Skenes, 1993; Akerheilm, Berger, Hooker, & Wise, 1998; Terinzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Despite each of these realities, scholars have not traditionally examined the topic of community at the university level, focusing instead upon elementary and high school students (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Summers, Bush, Turner, Svinicki, & Achacosco, 2003).

Because of community's positive influence upon academic success – combined with a lack of literature within the university context – this study explored student understandings in effort to develop best practices for creating and maintaining a sense of community in the college classroom. This study revealed four specific findings: shared space, openness/acceptance, common interests, and sense of belonging. Based upon these results, we conclude the present study by outlining four corresponding implications for both students and instructors, grounded within one of four theoretical frameworks: (1) third places, (2) genuine dialogue, (3) strong ties, and (4) superordinate goal(s).

Implication #1: Third Places

The first theme that emerged from this study's results was the view of community as shared space. This understanding aligns with traditional views of community as people who live or work in close proximity, as well as Young's (2003) aforementioned characterization: "In ordinary speech for most people in the U.S., the term community refers to people with whom I identify in a locale" (p. 244). For each of these reasons, we argue that an understanding of community as shared space must be leveraged by anyone who hopes to build a sense of community within the classroom setting. More specifically, we argue that university instructors should embrace Oldenburg's (1999) idea of *third place*.

Oldenburg (1999) defines *first place* as home, *second place* as the workplace, and *third place* as "places of social gathering outside of the home and workplace" (p. 27). Consequently, third places are often anchors for social life, and help to foster communal interaction and relationship building. Within his influential book entitled *The Great Good Place,* Oldenburg identifies several specific establishments that commonly serve the role of third place in today's society: churches, public parks, town squares, community centers, and so on. According to Oldenburg, each of these places constitutes the "heart of a community," while simultaneously offering a form of social satisfaction that is unattainable within the domains of home or work. Oldenberg goes on to delineate six essential hallmarks of a third place. First and foremost, a third space should be inexpensive, easily accessible, and welcoming. They should also offer food or drink, regulars, and opportunities for socializing with both old and new friends (see also Putnam, 1995, 2000).

Since the 1990s, it has become increasingly common for businesses to adopt Oldenburg's notion of third place. Starbucks (Rice, 2009) and Barnes and Noble (Spector, 2005) serve as familiar examples for most, in addition to McDonald's more recent introduction of the McCafé (Milletto, 2009). Each of these businesses offers open spaces, power outlets, oversized chairs, and wireless internet access free of charge. They consequently invite customers to loiter, with no obligation of purchase (Halpern, 2002; Jovel, 2008).

Inspired by a trip to Milan, the CEO of Starbucks writes specifically about his company's goal of becoming a home-away-from-home for its customers (aka, third space):

> In an increasingly fractured society, our stores offer a quiet moment to gather
> your thoughts and center yourself. Starbucks people smile at you, serve you
> quickly, don't harass you. A visit to Starbucks can be a small escape during a day
> when so many other things are beating you down. We've become a breath of fresh
> air. (Schultz, 1997, p. 119)

In addition to for-profit businesses, several religious and nonprofit organizations have worked to implement Oldenburg's third place as well. Such a trend has resulted in an increased number of churches – particularly megachurches – that offer their own bookstores, coffee shops, food courts, and even fitness facilities (Keilholtz, 2008; Jenkins, 2014a),

In accordance with each of these examples, university instructors must also consider ways to integrate Oldenburg's (1999) idea of third place into the college classroom. Pursuant to Oldenburg's characterization of what a third place entails, instructors should strive to make their rooms as welcoming, friendly, and easily assessable as possible. They should also consider ways to introduce food into the course experience (see also Purnell & Jenkins, 2013; Putnam, 1995, 2000). Specific strategies for creating a more welcoming classroom include making sure the space is clean, well lit, and set at a comfortable temperature. There should also be diverse visual representations of the students on display throughout. Strategies for introducing food into the course include supplying snacks, encouraging students to bring their own snacks, meeting in an alternate location that sells snacks, or even asking students to signup for periodical "snack duty." Together, each of these strategies will take steps toward creating a "home-away-from-home" for students by implementing the six essential hallmarks that Oldenberg (1999) uses to delineate third places.

Implication #2: Genuine Dialogue

Forty-four percent of participants expressed the importance that openness/acceptance plays in the creation of any successful community. Participants characterized a sense of openness and acceptance as the ability to share personal thoughts, the feeling that one's opinions are valued, and the capacity to be one's "true self" within a given space. Despite the clear import placed upon openness/acceptance, however, results of this study still raised the question of *how* such a culture can be created within the college classroom. To that end, we offer several implications based upon Buber's (1955, 1957, 1958, 1965a, 1965b) concept of *genuine dialogue*, as well as Bohm's (1987, 1996) notion of *Bohmian Dialogue*.

Buber (1965a) describes the concept of genuine dialogue as interactions where "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" (p. 19). Neither member subsumes the other, but rather each individual learns to co-exist through deep-listening and genuine dialogical engagement. By relating to the other as *I-Thou*, each person participates in the reality of the other, as they "meet" in the "between" (Buber, 1955, p. 204).

In order to pursue genuine dialogue within the college classroom, university instructors must work to address the factors that Buber (1965b) argued impede dialogic engagement. In particular, a number of participants in this study – as exemplified by Luis' comments cited in the previous section – alluded to their instructors' attempts to "impose" a certain view or understanding upon the classroom. These instructors did not allow for personal conceptions to "unfold" through natural and organic interaction: "The professor… was only interested in his own answer, and no matter what you said he'd always disagree and prove you wrong" (Hispanic/Latino male).

One specific way of addressing this issue may be to follow David Bohm's method of facilitating dialogic interactions among groups 20 to 40 people – a particular fitting size of participants for the typical college classroom. According to Bohm (1987), such group discussion is inevitably *bracketed* by the various perspectives of its participants. Consequently, it is only through prolonged and free-flowing conversation that each person is able to suspend her/his own worldview in order to understand and fully appreciate the worldview of others:

> What is essential is essential is that each participant is, as it were, suspending his or her point of view,
> while also holding other points of view in a suspended form and giving full attention to what they mean…
> Such a thoroughgoing suspension of tacit individual and cultural infrastructures, in the context of full
> attention to their contents, frees the mind to move in new ways… The mind is then able to respond to
> creative new perceptions going beyond the particular points of view that have been suspended. (p. 242)

to Bohmian Dialogue or simply Bohm Dialogue, such free-flowing conversation is achieved by sitting down together with no predetermined agenda, other that of "thinking together" collectively. In this way, participants must learn to value the dialogic process itself over that of their own perspectives:

> In dialogue it is necessary that people be able to face their disagreements without confrontations and be willing to explore points of view to which they do not personally subscribe. If they are able to engage in such a dialogue without evasion or anger, they will find that no fixed position is so important that it is worth holding at the expense of destroying the dialogue itself. (p. 241)

Since first being introduced, Bohmian Dialogue has been widely used by organizational communication scholars and in a variety of ways, once again making it an especially appropriate technique for consideration within the college classroom (see Harris, 2002, 2003; Holman & Devane, 1999; Isaacs, 1999; Palmer, 2004; Senge, 2006; Shaw, 2002). Despite the technique's range of incarnations, four principles remain. First, no group-level decisions should be made during the dialogue. As Bohm (1996) writes:

> In the dialogue group we are not going to decide what to do about anything. This is crucial. Otherwise we are not free. We must have an empty space where we are not obliged to anything, nor to come to any conclusions, nor to say anything or not say anything. It's open and free, (p.18-19)

Second, participants must suspend their judgments during the conversation, "so that [they] neither carry them out nor suppress them. [Participants] don't believe them, nor do [they] disbelieve them; [they] don't judge them as good or bad" (p. 22). Third, by suspending their judgments, group members must remain open and honest, while simultaneously sharing any and all ideas that come to mind. Last of all, individuals must work to discursively build upon the shared ideas of others.

In the end, pursuing Buber's notion of genuine dialogue via Bohm's method of dialogic interaction will allow both students and instructors an opportunity to reach beyond the "self-sustaining traps" of their own worldviews (Griffor, 1997). This approach will also provide an opportunity to perceive and attend to the diverse experiences and perspectives of others, while helping cultivate and strong sense of community within the college classroom.

Implication #3: Strong Ties

The need for common interests among community members was framed by participants of this study in two primary ways: physical activities (shared hobbies or pastimes), and philosophical beliefs (shared views or values). Central to each of these perspectives was the way in which such interests must reach beyond the classroom. In other words, students rarely referred to the value of shared interests within the physical classroom, forged over course material. Rather, they valued commonalities that extended beyond the class setting alone: sports, religion, etc. For this reason, additional avenues and opportunities for community building outside out of the classroom include group projects, field trips, volunteer and/or service-learning assignments, or simply planning a class period somewhere other than the typical meeting location: outside, within the quad, or at an on-campus coffee shop.

Each of these attempts to extend interaction beyond the classroom will serve to build a stronger sense of community by fostering *strong ties* among peers. Wenger (1998) characterizes strong ties as sustained and dense relations of social engagement over time (p. 73; see also Adams & Smith, 2008). Similarly, Easley and Kleinberg (2010) describe strong ties as having a "greater frequency of interaction" (p. 53). Such an understanding owes itself, in part, to *social interactionism*, as pioneered by Strauss (1978) and colleagues. Social interactionism explores the communal configurations that are created by shared interests in the seemingly unrelated categories of art, baseball, and business, to name but a few (Wenger, 1998, p. 283). In much the same way, by seeking opportunities for social interaction outside of the classroom, (e.g., the aforementioned group projects, field trips, volunteer work, service-learning assignments, etc.), classmates will inevitably identify overlapping spheres of interests and forge shared identities with one another beyond that of academe alone. They will come to see each other not only as members of the same class or university, but also as members of their community's larger social fabric.

Implication #4: Superordinate Goal(s)

This study's final implication correlates to participants' understanding of community as places that offer students a sense of belonging. In order to achieve this, we suggest seeking a spirit of collaboration among classmates.

A spirit of collaboration can be fostered via teamwork and group projects: reading presentations, in-class activities, collaborative writing assignments, and so on. Such an approach helps students to learn one another's names, to delineate clear roles within a smaller group structure, and – ultimately – to feel more secure and included within the classroom environment.

As valuable as teamwork and group projects can be, however, we also argue for a more holistic approach to cultivating group collaboration. Specifically, we argue for the need to infuse the college classroom with *superordinate goal(s).* Sherif et al. (1961), defines a superordinate goal as a shared aim or objective that is of a higher rank, value, or condition. In a classic study performed by Serif and his colleagues, two competed groups of campers were eventually united by the mutually beneficial (i.e., superordinate) need to repair their campsite's disrupted water supply. On a related note, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) *social identity theory* argues that people perceive those with similar characteristics as being "in-group" members and those with diverse characteristics as "out-group" members. People are more likely to prefer association with those that they perceive as being in-group. Yet research has shown that a superordinate goal or identity can supersede in-group/out-group discrimination (Rabinovich & Morton, 2011). In other words, out-group discrimination diminishes when a superior objective is established (Gaertner et al., 1993). For each of these reasons, superordinate goal(s) should be used in the college classroom to help peers overcome potential instances of in-group/out-group discrimination that might otherwise pose a barrier to relationship building.

In the end, the identification of a superordinate goal can coalesce with each of this study's three previous implications: the creation of third places, opportunities for genuine dialogue, and the formation of strong ties. Together, each of these implications can also serve to foster an increased sense of community within the college classroom, thus, resulting in higher levels of personal and professional success within as well as beyond academe.

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Appendix A

Colleges/Universities Surveyed

Public Universities:

1. California State University of Channel Islands (Camarillo, CA)
2. California State University of Chico (Chico, CA)
3. California State University of Bakersfield (Bakersfield, CA)
4. California State University of Dominguez Hills (Carson, CA)
5. California State University of East Bay (Hayward, CA)
6. California State of Long Beach (Long Beach, CA)
7. California State University of Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA)
8. University of California, Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA)
9. University of California, Santa Barbara (Santa Barbara, CA)
10. University of Southern California (Private; Los Angeles, CA)

Private Universities:

11. Antioch University (Culver City, CA)
12. Art Institute of North Hollywood (Hollywood, CA)
13. California Baptist University (Riverside, CA)
14. California Lutheran University (Thousand Oaks, CA)
15. Chapman University (Orange, CA)
16. Loyola Marymount University (Los Angeles, CA)
17. Pepperdine University (Malibu, CA)
18. Point Loma Nazarene (San Diego, CA)
19. Santa Clara University (Santa Clara, CA)
20. University of La Verne (La Verne, CA)

Community Colleges:

21. Lost Angeles City College
22. Los Angeles Valley College (Los Angeles, CA)
23. Pasadena City College (Pasadena, CA)
24. Santa Monica College (Santa Monica, CA)
25. West Los Angeles College (Culver City, CA)

Appendix B

Voluntary Survey: Community in the Classroom

Age: _____   Gender: _____   Race/ethnicity: _____

Major: _____   Overall GPA: _____   Grade Level:
_____

College/University: _____

Directions:

Please use the space below to respond to each open-ended question. This study is voluntary; the results are anonymous. You are indicating your desire to participate in this study by completing the following questionnaire.

1. What does the word "community" mean to you?

2. What adjectives would you use to describe the word "community," and why?

3. What does it mean to be in community with other people?

4. Describe a time when you felt a sense of community in the classroom. What made you feel this way?

5. What have professors successfully done in the past to help build a sense of community in the classroom?

6. What have you and your fellow classmates successfully done in the past to help build a sense of community in the classroom?

7. What can professors do to help build a stronger sense of community in the classroom?

8. What can you and your fellow classmates do to help build a stronger sense of community in the classroom?

9. Finally, what is one thing that you, your classmates, and your professors might <u>avoid</u> doing, in order to help build a stronger sense of community in the classroom?