From Left Field
to Safe at Home-Base:
Building Community
in the Pre-Service Classroom
and Beyond

By Karyn Cooper

I write from the vantage point of a teacher educator who has been engaged in the process of formal education all her life. While I have always loved the learning process itself, I have often felt a deep sense of alienation on many of the educational landscapes I have traveled. I remember much of my own student experience as a time of learning to blend with a voiceless collection of other selves, all sitting in rows and thinking in lines. The teaching practices of the day ascribed to the notion that "silence is golden," specifically student silence. Teacher to student communication was the only kind permitted. Student to student communication was strictly forbidden, let alone discouraged by the very arrangement of the desks. We were isolated from each other. We were each in our own "left field," and left longing for a sense of social connectedness.

Even the form of thought in which we were being trained ignored context, and made problematic any connection-making other than linear ones. When we

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did demonstrate that we could bring our thoughts "in line," we were rewarded. Our worth was announced by stars on a chart, but a chart of someone else's making. Every child had her own chart. The focus was very much on individual learning, not on learning with and from others. We learned to work by ourselves, for ourselves. The unfortunate by-product of this learning, was, in my case at least, a profound feeling of alienation.

This sense of alienation from my peers did not end when I crossed to the "other side of the desk." As a teacher, I felt left alone to "do my best," teaching from my left field chalkboard to individualized desk-islands, in a classroom isolated from the other classrooms in the same large school. The high drop-out rate for the first five years of teaching in North America indicates that something is wrong — somewhere. As early as 1938, Dewey was suggesting that experiences of both pupils and teachers in the "traditional" classroom were largely of the "wrong kind." He emphasizes that the "trouble is not the absence of experiences, but their defective and wrong character — wrong and defective from the standpoint of the connection with further experience" (p. 27). Thus, Dewey associates this lack of connectedness not just within the social context of formal schooling, but also within the educational and learning context. Interestingly enough, Dewey acknowledges these "wrong kind" of experiences as belonging both to the students and the teachers.

This theme of 'left field alienation' is not peculiar to me alone as a teacher; it connects with much contemporary literature in teacher education and school reform (Britzman, 1991; Fine, 1987, Finley, 2000, Fullan, 1999; McLaren, 1994). While in my teacher education program, I certainly encountered experiences of Dewey's "wrong kind." First of all, the curriculum and the pedagogical practices continued to perpetuate the privileging of scientific thought over other forms of thought — no reforms or "progress" since my childhood schooling. Secondly, my pre-service classmates and I had reached this landmark by being classed as "successful" learners; most, if not all of us, had long since learned to abandon subjectivity for objectivity, empathy for distance, and connectedness for separation, both from ourselves and the object of our thought. Our current pre-service program gave us no reason to do otherwise. Thirdly, not only did this epistemological stance of distance, objectification, and separation continue to perpetuate the feeling of alienation begun in us as early learners, it was now carrying over into our relationships with our students. We were taught to keep our distance from our students, to avoid being entangled in the stories of their lives. We were not allowed to be connected to the things we thought about; we were not encouraged to be connected to our students. As a result, we were not connected to each other. There was no sense of "community."

My experiences as a pre-service teacher are not atypical. Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, and Minarik (1993) suggest that the general mode of teacher preparation grows out of research that emphasizes "apolitical, objective and distanced knowing" (p. 6). They argue that educators embrace this kind of knowing as a way of

avoiding the anxieties attendant on knowing themselves as teachers, and on reflecting on what it means to be a teacher. The result may well be technically-correct-but-less-than-compassionate teaching because "teachers are not freed by their training to develop the potential for compassion which comes from knowing themselves and others well" (p. 7). Smith (2000) echoes Hollingsworth et. al.. when he says, "The plethora of technical and curricular innovations and recommendations under the rhetoric of globalization has left teachers alienated from what their experience has taught them over time, which is that effective teaching depends most fundamentally on human relationships" (p. 18). These human relationships can only be grown in "community."

What is Community?

Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) define "community" as "a dynamic whole that emerges when a group: (a) participates in common practices; (b) depends upon one another; (c) makes decisions together; (d) identifies themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships; and (e) commits themselves to their own, one another's and the groups' well being" (Rainer & Guyton, 1999, p. 3). The group formed in response to external forces is, as Kong (1999) notes, a "community of place," and the group formed in response to internal forces is a "community of mind" (p. 3). The classroom community is this both. Key elements of "community" are "interdependence, relationships, common purposes, and collaborative decision-making" (Rainer & Guyton, 1999, p. 3). To these elements, Noddings (1992) would add the dimension of "caring," what I will call "compassion." Relationships with out compassion tend to be self-seeking and self-serving. Teachers without compassion tend to view themselves as objective, distant, separated, and unconnected from their students. Compassion provides teachers with the "heart" to view students as whole people, complete with complex personalities, multiple abilities, and the human need for acceptance and belonging.

My own alienating experience of schooling, and my discomfort with the "technically correct" model of teacher education that leaves compassion outside the classroom door have been the impetus for my finding ways to build a learning community within my pre-service teacher education classes. Now, from my position in teacher education, I can try to model community building for my students by building a learning community in my own pre-service classroom. They can then go out into their own classrooms, not only knowing that building community *needs* be done, but *what* it may look like, and *how* to imagine creating it. In this way, they make it possible for their students, and themselves, to have learning experiences of the "right kind."

To build such a learning community, I first had to overcome my own "conditioning," and in turn, encourage and enable my pre-service teachers to overcome theirs. By and large, those who enter teacher education programs are

those who have demonstrated that they have accomplished the goals of "modern" education; the "successful" ones who have learned to be silent, to think in lines, and to work by themselves, for *themselves* (Usher & Edwards, 1994). These successful ones now need to re-conceptualize "learning." Further, the pre-service classroom is essentially a competitive environment; she who gets the highest marks is most likely to get the best position after graduation. One certainly does not need a learning community in order to achieve high marks. However, if a person wants to teach "with heart," with compassion that seeks to ensure the "right kind" of learning experiences for all, then a learning community in the pre-service classroom is very important. I want my pre-service teachers to move beyond their own conditioned learning experiences, and to work towards building a supportive, connective learning community within their pre-service classroom. In order to be a "success-ful" teacher and "community" developer, a teacher first needs to be part of, to encounter the home-base safety of, a learning community in the role of learner. Personal achievement and community connectedness are not mutually exclusive.

Why the Concern with Classroom Community?

Why should we as teachers and teacher educators be concerned in the first place about building community? After all, many students, myself included, have "learned" in spite of feeling alienated. However, I submit that what many have learned is really the "scientific method" of reproducing verifiable facts and figures, cognitive aerobics at the expense of affective sensibility.

Neither does alienation, both from peers and from lesson subjects, prohibit learning. However, it does severely limit the "type" of learning that occurs. Students, be they children or adults, learn "better" when they feel "connected" to the subject matter, to their classmates, and to their teacher. They also "learn" greater lessons. They learn not to separate "head" and "heart," the cognitive from the affective nature of their being. Nearly twenty years ago, Sloan (1983) was warning of the "erosion of genuine community by a narrow technological rationalism" (p. 238). He calls for a "transformation of ways of knowing," cautioning that "the future of the human being and of all the earth now hang upon our recovery of imagination — of a thinking imbued with life and love" (p. 241). Scientific thought has its limits; ethical and moral dilemmas arise. Our 'successful' alienated students of today are ill-prepared to address such non-technological problems. Only within a compassionate learning community can they find the connectedness that trans-forms ways of knowing.

A second reason to be concerned with classroom community is the reality that the larger social community has changed. In the past, societies tended to be homogenous: one dominant ethnic group, one dominant religion, one preferred skin color, one central ideology. If you were born to that ethnic group, practiced that religion, had that skin color, and embraced that ideology, you "belonged." Other-

wise, you didn't. In recent years, societies have become more pluralistic. Canada, for example, has an official policy of multiculturalism, which not merely allows but also encourages ethnic diversity within Canadian society. As well, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms forbids discrimination on the basis of race, origin, ethnicity, gender, religion, and so on. The result of these official policies is a pluralistic society of many different voices. In the United States, too, enfranchisement of previously marginalized groups and changing policies and patterns of immigration have lead to an increasingly pluralistic society. To prevent these societies from breaking into fragments, it is important that their members understand how to build and maintain "community." Where better to learn the lessons of community building than in the classroom, a microcosm of pluralistic society? Therefore, it seems imperative that we teacher educators show pre-service teachers how to build a "learning community" in their classrooms.

How Do We Define a Learning Community?

The notion of a learning community begs the question, what is learning? The "learning" of my own childhood was linear: mastering the "process" to "success," or how to produce the "appropriate" responses that would enable me to " progress" within the society of my school community. Those appropriate responses were, of course, the ones that the teacher had painstakingly poured into our heads for re-utterance on the required tests. hooks (1994) calls this the "banking system" of education, "based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored, and used at a later date" (p. 5). If learning is this and only this, as it has been for decades, then there is no need for "community." Each student may stay in left field, memorizing facts to reproduce on command. The unfortunate by-product of this "education" is the sense of alienation which inhibits all personal development save the cognitive, and which ill-prepares students for future satisfying and productive lives in society. If, however, learning is viewed primarily as a complex process that involves new ways of looking at and solving problems, and that makes it possible for individuals to function together in a pluralistic society (e.g., Edelsky, 1999), then a learning community in the classroom is essential, and building one becomes even more so the responsibility of the teacher.

What does a learning community look like? Whether the learners are a primary class, a secondary class, or a class of eager pre-service teachers, all are engaged in the learning process, and therefore share certain generalized characteristics of a learning community. While age and maturity determine the mode and tone of interactive inquiry in a learning community, everyone becomes part of everyone else's learning. A learning community breaks down the old hierarchical relationship of teacher and students; learning becomes an interactive relationship between teacher and students, and between the students themselves. In a learning commu-

nity, the teacher is not all-knowing, allpowerful; students may and can contribute safely to the stock of classroom knowledge from their own experiences. According to Palmer's (1998) model, a learning community "is circular, interactive and dynamic rather than linear and static, and emphasizes relationships among knowers with the subject as the connective core of the relationships" (Rainer & Guyton, 1999, p. 2). For example, through collaborative learning, students can provide support for each other's learning and development. They can facilitate multiple points of engagement with content by interacting with one another.

Besides students interacting with students for enhancement of cognitive knowledge, a learning community provides for the understanding of others (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2001). From the "group development process" of the early 1970s emerged the cooperative learning group process officially called *Tribes: A Process for Social Development and Cooperative Learning* (Gibbs, 1995, p. 400). The *Tribes* concept of learning community emphasizes social development through the "internalization of positive social principles." The cooperative and collaborative environment wherein all students feel a sense of inclusion promotes not only equity for all but also recognition and acceptance of multiculturalism (Gibbs, 1995). The essence of a learning community is human relationships.

As well, a learning community encourages personal growth of the individual. A supportive and caring community provides students with means to succeed in life itself. As Gibbs (1998) points out, communities which foster caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation do successfully "work" to encourage personal growth in individual members because they meet the "basic human needs for love and belonging; for respect, challenge, and structure; for involvement, power, and, ultimately, meaning. In other words,... to be of value to a community" (p.3). Thus, while a community member identifies with the group, she may also be growing in her personal identity and self-knowledge.

How Do We Create a Learning Community?

When I was a pre-service teacher, I learned a lot about the kind of teacher I did not want to become. I experienced conditions which mitigated against the development of a learning community. I learned, for example, that I/community cannot be created by fiat. A principal of a school or a chairperson of a department may well give an order to her subordinates to create a "community," but delivery of the same upon order is problematic. Students cannot be forced to support each other's learning. In one situation, I observed, graduate students were forbidden to criticize each other's work in public. The result was a split between what could be said publicly, and what dared be expressed privately. The class objective of a truly supportive learning community was not achieved. This and other negative experiences helped me to create a positive concept.

One positive experience for community building is sharing of food and drink. I am not here advocating a potluck dinner for every pre-service class session; however, in a classroom or department where community building is already taking place, sharing can help the process. From Biblical injunctions to the cultures of many societies, sharing of food and drink is a bonding, building activity. I am sure most of us in North America are well aware of the "community building" that occurs over a cup of coffee.

Another element that contributes to community building is the physical environment of the classroom. Some educators spend significant time considering how to arrange desks and tables to facilitate interactive learning: round tables not rows, circles not lines. However, as helpful as seating arrangement may be, breaking up the rows does not necessarily break the linear pattern of thinking. Although a sense of "community" does not arise simply because physical distance is decreased, classroom arrangement can assist when the other conditions for community building are present.

Neither does community arise solely through group or pair activities. Students can feel just as alienated working in a group or with a partner, as they do working on their own. Far more important than seating arrangements and student grouping is the general ethos of the classroom: acceptance, respect, and, dare I say, love must be present for a sense of "community" to develop. Gibbs (1995) identifies some of the intangible conditions for community building: attentive listening to one another, appreciation and no "put-downs," mutual respect, and the right to choose the extent of participation in group activities. These intangibles represent a major paradigm shift from learning as an individual activity to learning as a social activity where collaboration enhances learning Gibbs, 1995). It would seem, then, that to create a learning community requires relationship building

Building Community in a Pre-Service Classroom

I indeed feel fortunate that I have experienced "first hand" how to build community in a pre-service classroom. In graduate school, I encountered several exceptional teachers who were masters at building community. One teacher-educator understood community through "place." Recognizing that the kitchen was traditionally the centre of family life on the farm, she set up a meeting place in a graduate department of education that came to be known as the "kitchen table." Her personal warmth made this place inviting. Her own students, other graduate students, and faculty met there informally, but regularly to exchange tips, make suggestions, offer advice, give support both moral and financial, provide comfort, and generally do the things that a "community" good family and friends do for each other. Difficult issues were not side-stepped, but dealt with humorously, seriously, and compassionately all at once. To my knowledge, all students felt "safe" at this "home-base" because at the heart of this community

was the belief that knowledge must be connected to life and to living with compassion.

In her pre-service classroom practices, this teacher-educator used a variety of student groupings. There were whole-class activities, group work, and one-on-one communication between teacher and student in the form of reading logs and responses. But, these groupings alone did not give rise to the sense of community felt in her classroom, though they did help it develop. This group work took place in a context of compassion and mutual respect, qualities evidenced in what the teacher-educator said, in how she said it, and in her responses to the reading logs. What strikes me most about exceptional teachers like my teacher-educator is that no particular set of teaching tricks, and no particular teaching style characterizes them as community builders. It is who they are as human beings, rather than what they do, that makes the difference. Fried (1995) says that of those teachers who inspire us most, "we remember what they cared about, and that they cared about us and the persons we might become" (p. 17). A community is always first and foremost a grouping of human beings.

Two Stories From My Own Practice

In my pre-service teaching, I have tried to create a sense of community within my own classroom. Sometimes, I have been successful, and sometimes, I have not. To deal with the latter first, I have found that glossing over complex issues, either because of time constraints, or from fear of what will happen if they are addressed, does not help build community. On the positive side, I experienced greater success in community building when I treated my students as people with names to know, stories to tell, and ideas to share. I would like to share two examples of building community from my pre-service course entitled "School and Society." I designed the course with three themes in mind. First, is the importance of self-understanding and of paying particular attention to the influences that shape who one is as a teacher in the classroom. The second theme, "Learning from and with others," encourages students to situate their self-understanding within the framework of the students they teach, and the larger culture within which they as teachers live and work. The third theme entails connecting self, school, and society for working towards re-scripting the story of "teacher" to be neither naive nor cynical, but pro-active in building a socially relevant curricula. These three themes are aspects of community building.

First Story: Naming

Introducing oneself to others seems to be an implicit act in the process of community building in the classroom at all levels of education. In beginning any class, instructors usually ask students to introduce themselves. This important first step in building community has become a ritual with which I have never been entirely comfortable either as a student or teacher. Last semester, I took a risk and

confessed my discomfort to my pre-service students. To my great surprise, many of the students were also willing to talk about feeling self-conscious about this introduction process. A discussion ensued concerning the ritual of naming, and the fundamental importance of the personal in building relations between teacher and students. My students also willingly shared different ideas for "breaking the ice" on that all-important first day of class. At that point, I shared a manuscript with them that presents a poignant account of an immigrant child whose teacher makes a name change because the child's name is deemed too difficult to pronounce. This manuscript (Kanu, 2000), launched a significant class discussion on how ordinary classroom practices, such as naming, carry all sorts of taken-for-ranted notions about difference and otherness, and on the fundamental human needs to be known, to be respected, and to belong. This incident signals the importance of making the implicit explicit and honoring what the students know about the process of community building. As one pre-service student put it: "It isn't enough to model something, I want to know why it is being modeled 'in the first place."

Second Story: To Feel Safe

One assignment I have used with pre-service teachers involves having them make a book that tells their future students something important about the pre-service teacher herself, and that explores a theme related to classroom community building. While this is not an entirely novel approach (Gibbs, 1995, 1998), the pre-service teachers learn much about themselves and their fellow students in the process, and they also become engaged in thinking about the whole process of community building, both in this pre-service classroom and in their own future classrooms as well.

One of the students produced a touching book about herself that she now uses to introduce herself to her students. The book is called *To Feel Safe*. I believe the several pages reproduced below speak for themselves:

> [Page one] To feel safe is to leave a country that is at war and to move to a country that offers peace and freedom. In the 1970's my parents moved from their home country of Lebanon to Canada. There was a war going on in Lebanon. My parents left loved ones behind and moved to Canada because they saw Canada as a safe place. I was the first person in my family to be born here. I was born on May 31st 1976, in Windsor Ontario.

> [Page two] To feel safe is to have a name that everyone can pronounce. My name is Nanor. It is an Armenian name. When I was growing up I was teased because of my name. Kids would call me Nanoo, Nanoo. I would alwavs crv and wish I had a normal name like Jennifer or Samantha. But now I meet people who say I have a pretty name. Today, my name makes me feel safe.

> [Page three] To feel safe is to go to a school where people don't put you down. I remember when I was younger and I hated math class. I always failed the test. One

day my teacher told me that he would always be there if I needed extra help. Every week I stayed after school and he helped me with math. One day in math class he announced that I scored perfect on my math test. Everyone applauded. To feet safe is to have people who care about you. To feel safe is to never give up.

[Page four] To feel safe is to have a normal hair cut. When I was growing up my mom would give me the worst hair cuts and I would be embarrassed to go to school. But now that I am older, I make sure that I get the best hair cuts ever .... okay, okav. I am still working- on that one .....

[Final page] To feel safe is to be able to look in the mirror (even when vou don't have all the things that make you feel safe~ and say to yourself "I love what I see."

Nanor read her book to both a grade two and grade six group of students. She reported that this activity made it possible for her to not only introduce herself to the students, but to engage them in discussion about what a safe learning community might feel like, and how she might work with them to accomplish this while she was their teacher. Most of the other pre-service teachers also reported positive experiences about sharing their books. However, some of them remarked on the fact that it was difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue with the children after they introduced their books because the "context" of the classroom they were in was not conducive to building community.

Building Community beyond the Pre-Service Classroom

Writing from my vantage point of teacher educator, I survey the landscape of my own learning and teaching experiences. I see that, sadly, many educational contexts are indeed not conducive to building community. Some even appear hostile to the very notion of community. Build a learning community is difficult in a highly competitive environment where every student is for herself and herself alone, and where school funding is often contingent upon standardized test results. Further, the intangible quality of "community" often discounted by those who serve the empirical, scientific, technological, 'enlightenment' values such as the supremacy of logical, mathematical, and representational thought, and by those who believe in measuring and evaluating the achievement of the same.

Faculties of education are today caught in an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, they are expected to perpetuate 'enlightenment' values through teacher-proof materials, and curricula that stress the easily testable gathering of information and the accumulation of facts. While on the other hand, they are expected to educate prospective teachers to handle the challenges of a complex, pluralistic society through a focus on socially relevant curricula. This apparent contradiction may be resolved by bringing these two "hands" together — whether in clasp or prayer, I leave to my readers to choose.

Hollingsworth et al (1993) remark that, "learning to teach children is a personal and emotional process as much as it is a cognitive and rational affair" (p. 6). The

same is true of teaching adults; it is a personal and emotional process. Only when the personal and emotional are admitted to the pre-service classroom can a learning community be built. Perhaps "building community" is too mechanistic a turn of phrase; it suggests a set of procedures that will "do the trick," in the same way that setting bricks in rows with mortar trowelled between will result in a wall. The practices of compassion for self and other, and of reflection on the meaning of teaching and being a teacher, do indeed assist to build a learning community; however, the result is not a "wall," but a shelter. Such shelters of safety and nurture and self-identity do indeed belong in the pre-service classroom. The "right kind" of experience for a pre-service teacher will ensure the building of shelters on other educational landscapes.

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