
Chapter 2: The Learning Community

CHAPTER 2: THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Partners in the Learning Community

Multilevel classrooms form a diverse and natural community, consisting of independent learners, the teacher, administrators, and supportive parents. This learning community is created through the gifts of time and diversity (in age, culture, learning styles, and abilities). Time enables the partners within the community to gain an appreciation of one another and allows for collaboration and reflection. Diversity creates a natural blend of community members.

The learning community is grounded in the following fundamental beliefs:

- **All students are equally important in the classroom.** A student's value is not based on his or her age or stage of development. The learning community respects a "different but equal" approach by ensuring that all students have an equal voice in discussion and decision making.
- **Each student has unique qualities that enrich the classroom.** The learning community celebrates and affirms each individual's strengths and accommodates differences and diversity.
- **All students play a role in each other's learning.** The learning community fosters interdependence and shared responsibility rather than reinforcing the notion that all responsibility rests with the teacher.

The Independent Learner

All partners in the multilevel learning community have important characteristics and interrelated roles and responsibilities. The ultimate goal of the learning community is to support its most integral member: the independent learner.

Multilevel classrooms are based on the premise that students are innately active learners who learn in developmentally appropriate ways within a supportive learning community. Independent learners are not characterized by their ability to work quietly on their own, but rather by their capacity to take ownership of their learning. They develop as independent learners through collaboration with others and by practising self-assessment and reflection.

Collaboration

An independent learner is not someone who works in isolation, but someone who can effectively collaborate with other learning community partners. In the multilevel classroom, as in all classrooms where students are actively engaged in learning, collaboration is a key to learning. In working with others, students use exploratory language, articulating their ideas and responses, comparing them to the ideas of others, and trying out tentative ideas. The multilevel classroom provides for a wide range of collaborative work opportunities. Students may work with same-age peers or in mentoring relationships with older or younger peers. In mixed-age groupings, each student is responsible for contributing and participating according to his or her developmental level.

The *Talking Circle*, based on First Nations teachings, contributes to a sense of trust in the classroom. (See *Success for All Learners* 7.5.)

Cooperative groups form a basic social unit in which students learn to

- develop trust and interdependence
- work collaboratively on long-term ongoing projects
- assume various classroom responsibilities (e.g., greeting guests, taking attendance, caring for plants and pets, managing the classroom library, monitoring homework)

Cooperative learning groups facilitate and support collaboration and independence in the multilevel learning community. (See Glossary.)

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is key to independent learning. Rather than relying on others to tell them whether they are learning, students are taught to monitor their own learning. Self-assessment creates and reinforces students' accountability for and ownership of their own learning. Students learn more effectively when they play a role in determining the direction of their learning, when they are active partners rather than passive recipients of what goes on in the classroom. Students who make significant decisions and pursue their own interests are engaged and motivated. When students are engaged, the classroom focus shifts away from behaviour management and towards learning.

Self-assessment is not limited to filling out a questionnaire at the end of a major project, but is woven into the fabric of the classroom through goal setting, formal and informal conferencing, and reflective thinking that turns the responsibility for learning back to the student. Terms such as *reflection* and *quality work* are central to the vocabulary of the multilevel classroom.

Students who practise self-assessment competently understand what quality work looks and sounds like. Students reflect on what is powerful in their own work and that of peers as they practise and develop self-assessment skills. Students need to be guided in generating criteria for quality work using student samples of powerful responses, or exemplars. (See BLM 2.)

Constructing Criteria for Quality Journal Writing

Teachers work with students in developing sound criteria for quality work (Gregory, Cameron, and Davies, *Setting and Using Criteria*, 7-14). The following example illustrates how student-generated criteria for quality journal writing may be developed.

- Share exemplars of quality journal writing from examples in literature, a portfolio, or a reflective journal, and ask students to select and share powerful examples from their own reading and reflection.
- Ask students to identify the powerful qualities of these pieces of work. Asking students to identify the qualities of a successful piece of work calls on them to think critically and fosters ownership. After several weeks of reflective conversation, guided journal writing, and sharing of powerful examples from their journals, students are prepared to generate criteria from their own exemplars. For example, in response to the question, “What does quality journal writing look like?” they may generate the following criteria:

Quality journal writing

- tells about something that I learned
 - shows a connection to something I already know
 - states what I need to do next
- Use these criteria to provide learners with feedback, and encourage students to use the criteria in self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting.
 - Guide students to refine and revise these criteria over time, continually raising the bar.

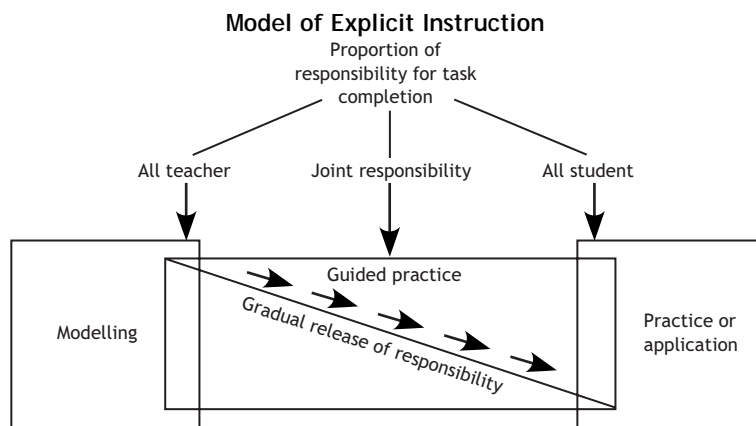
Reflection

Before students can practise independent and written reflection, they require modelling of oral reflection and explicit instruction in written reflection. However, as students become increasingly comfortable choosing and using reflection strategies—such as Y-Charts (see BLM 1), Exit Slips (Gere), and journal writing—they gradually become more responsible for their learning and are able to reflect independently.

Teaching Reflection According to the Model of Explicit Instruction

Teaching reflection includes modelled, shared, guided, and independent reflection:

- **Modelled:** Reflection begins as an oral skill, and needs to be modelled as part of day-to-day conversation. Read examples from literature and discuss what reflections look and sound like. Frequently use a Think-Aloud strategy (Davey) to share personal reflections. Rather than praising a student’s work, engage in a dialogue that reflects on various aspects of the work. Modelled reflection is key to independent reflection.
- **Shared:** Set a class goal for shared reflection, constructing the criteria for assessing progress in accomplishing the goal, and use a Think-Pair-Share strategy (McTighe and Lyman) for oral practice. Record class reflections on a Y-Chart, eliciting from students what they saw, what they heard, and what they think or wonder about, or even what their next goal may be. Observe students to determine who needs further instruction, and who is ready for independent reflection.
- **Guided:** Some students may need explicit instruction, or guided practice, in developing skills and strategies for reflection. Continue oral reflection and teach students how to use strategies (such as Exit Slips, portfolio reflections, learning logs, and journals) that help them think about their learning processes and goals. Ask students to reflect using a Think-Pair-Share strategy. Continue observations to assess students’ levels of independence and determine who may need differentiated instruction and support for success. For example, one student may need to use a Y-Chart for scaffolding reflection, and another may need an adaptation such as the assistance of a scribe to record reflective responses.
- **Independent:** Students can use strategies (such as Exit Slips, portfolio reflections, learning logs, and journal responses) to think metacognitively about their learning.



Model of Explicit Instruction: Reprinted from *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8, P. David Pearson and Margaret C. Gallagher, "The Instruction of Reading Comprehension," page 337, Copyright © 1983, with permission from Elsevier.

Through reflection, collaboration, and self-assessment, independent learners develop knowledge, skills and strategies, and attitudes that will help them achieve success within the multilevel classroom and beyond.

The Teacher

The demands on multilevel classroom teachers are many. To be effective, multilevel classroom teachers need to

- believe in student autonomy
- provide and encourage role modelling
- facilitate independent learning
- support students in setting goals
- facilitate conferences
- manage time, movement, and space
- build communication between school and home

The roles of multilevel classroom teachers are discussed in greater detail below.

Believing in Student Autonomy

Central to developing independent learners is a teacher who believes that all students want to learn and who trusts students to make responsible choices that promote learning. Teachers who express this belief

- turn responsibility back to students by asking, “How did you find that out?” and “What do you need to do next?” rather than praising “right” answers or directing students to the next step
- provide real choices that accommodate a range of learning styles, recognizing that curricular outcomes can be met in a variety of ways, and inviting students to choose what they will do to demonstrate their learning and identify the steps they will take to accomplish the task
- emphasize intrinsic motivation rather than external rewards

Multilevel classroom teachers see and respect their students as individuals and believe in their role within and their contributions to the learning community.

Modelling Roles

Independent learners need role models as well as models of successful work. Teachers are also learners who

- model curiosity, goal setting, and reflection
- guide students to be competent role models
- share exemplars of quality work and success and teach students how to identify quality samples of their own work

In setting examples of confident and competent learners themselves, multilevel classroom teachers mirror and reflect the essential qualities of the independent learner.

Facilitating Independent Learning

Rather than directly managing every aspect of the classroom, teachers in multilevel classrooms use their leadership role to support students in assuming responsibility and learning independently. Using a gradual release of responsibility approach, as reflected in the Model of Explicit Instruction (Pearson and Gallagher), the teacher guides and monitors student progress towards independence in using learning strategies. Independent learners then not only take responsibility for their own learning and make choices to advance that learning, but also serve as competent role models and guides for new community partners. Independent learners know and draw from a range of processes, strategies, and materials, and work interdependently within a learning community, as well as on their own personal learning goals. Teachers become freed to work closely with individuals or small groups, without spending instructional time in constant supervision.

Supporting Student Goal Setting

Teachers in multilevel classrooms support students, both in a whole-class setting and individually, in setting learning goals in various areas, such as social interaction, skills and strategies, learning processes, and content. Teachers who share their own goals with students and reflect on their progress towards attaining them act as powerful models of self-directed learning.

- **Whole-class goals:** Students work together from the beginning of the school year to determine what they need to do to be a responsible learning community. Supporting this process allows students to make decisions about the kinds of strategies that will promote learning.
- **Individual goals:** The best learning occurs when the goals of the classroom coincide with the student's own goals. Teachers collaborate with students in setting their goals, using tools such as reading/writing continua, goal sheets, and portfolios.
 - **Reading/writing continua** enable students to see where they are as readers and writers, and what they need to learn next.
 - **Goal sheets** enable students to monitor their goals at school and at home (see BLM 3: My Learning Goal Log).

- **Portfolios** enable students to add the evidence of their progress towards achieving learning goals.

Teachers who facilitate student goal setting empower students to become independent learners.

Facilitating Conferences

Teachers confer with students through a variety of means:

- **Over-the-shoulder conferences:** Much of the learning in a multilevel classroom occurs in the conversations that happen among students and between students and the teacher in the course of a day. These informal conferences may occur when the teacher is making the rounds during a workshop. (For a discussion of workshops, see Chapter 4.) These conversations allow teachers to watch and listen, and thereby learn about each student's progress and needs. They also provide students with immediate feedback for learning.
- **Formal conferences:** Teachers often designate 15 to 20 minutes during each workshop for individual conferences with two or three students. The purpose of these conferences is to revisit students' learning goals and provide descriptive feedback, invite students to reflect on their own progress, and assess and monitor student learning.

In planning conferences, teachers may wish to

- post a conference schedule or use a pocket chart to advise students when a conference will take place so that they can prepare to share their learning with the teacher or a peer
 - keep a record of observations to monitor student learning over time
 - allow for flexibility, as some students may need conferences more frequently than others
- **Student-led conferences:** These conferences are the cornerstone of summative assessment in the multilevel classroom, allowing students to take ownership for their learning. Student-led conferences give students opportunities to select and showcase work that demonstrates their learning and growth, as well as to negotiate or set new learning goals with their parents. (See BLM 10: Student-Parent-Teacher Conference Record. For more information on summative assessment, see Chapter 3.)

Conferences are a means of learning to know each student better.

Managing Time, Movement, and Space

Teachers model and teach a variety of classroom-management skills and techniques.

- **Routines, processes, and strategies:** Students who use their time productively know the processes and strategies by which they will accomplish their goals. It is the teacher's responsibility to diversify and integrate a variety of routines, processes, and strategies.

Managing a Classroom for Independent Learners

The goal in multilevel classrooms, as in all classrooms, is to support students in learning to manage themselves through a variety of routines, processes, and strategies.

- **Routines:** Let students know where they are expected to be at each point during the day and what they are expected to be doing. Have clear protocols in place so students know classroom expectations and ways to manage their own behaviour. Invite older students to play a leadership role in modelling routines.
 - **Start-up routines:** Students need to know what is expected of them so that they can begin their work independently. Start-up routines may include getting out folders, book club discussions, homework checks, and journal writing.
 - **Classroom responsibilities:** Post and rotate "jobs" such as managing the classroom library, greeting guests, monitoring homework assignments, caring for plants and pets, and restocking art materials and sports equipment.
 - **Processes:** Instruct students in the steps required for processes embedded in all classroom work, such as workshops, cooperative learning, reflection, and goal setting.
 - **Strategies:** Teach students to choose and use strategies and tools such as reading strategies and graphic organizers in order to solve problems more effectively and independently.
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- **Timetables:** Students need to know what lies ahead in the day and in the week. Knowing the schedule gives students a sense of stability, helps them make choices, and honours their role as partners in the learning community. Whenever possible, teachers involve students in planning timetables.

In planning a timetable, teachers may wish to

 - post the timetable on big sheets (one, two, or three weeks at a time)
 - designate large blocks for workshops and integrated inquiry to explore topics in content areas
 - use the timetable as a basic structure to plan the daily agenda with the class

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- allocate 10 to 15 minutes daily for reflection (using strategies such as whole-class reflection with a Y-Chart, Think-Pair-Share strategy, journal writing, updating portfolios, sharing portfolio with a peer, or Exit Slips)
 - **Whole-class time and class meetings:** Whole-class learning experiences are important means of building community and sharing the responsibilities of the community. Whole-class time can be used to share information, plan, work on collaborative skills (e.g., how to reach consensus), reflect, and celebrate learning. Whole-class discussions teach students that they have a voice and that their ideas are valued.

Some multilevel classrooms hold formal class meetings that put the responsibility of managing the learning community into the hands of students. As students' skills develop, cooperative groups may take turns conducting class meetings that address learning community issues and needs.

In planning class meetings, teachers and/or students may wish to

- give each member a role: chairperson, recorder, and timekeeper
 - post a blank three-point agenda so that any student in the learning community can add items
 - have students who bring agenda items to a meeting assume responsibility for developing an action plan for follow-up
 - keep meetings short—15 minutes are ideal
- **Ongoing student choice:** Because individual students require varying lengths of time to complete a task, multilevel classroom teachers often provide work options or establish learning centres that reflect the multiple intelligences and that enable students to activate, acquire, and/or apply learning. As these choices generate high-interest experiences, students who work more slowly are also given time to engage in them.

Learning centres may include

- collections of Aboriginal artifacts for a social studies unit
- math-challenge stations that reinforce the concepts learned
- science observation stations with logs for recording observations
- classroom libraries of quality literature, including a broad range of authentic texts for student choice
- computer stations for online inquiry or slide show presentations

- artists' stations for experiencing a variety of media
- physical fitness stations that promote active, healthy living
- stations that integrate various subject areas

Resources for Managing Choice Time

Teachers in multilevel classrooms use various resources for managing and tracking students' choice time, including

- planning boards or pocket charts to suggest where students may plan to go
- agendas for whole-class discussion at the beginning of each day
- checklists of tasks that need to be completed each week with minimum guidance or supervision
- daily planners or learning logs for students to outline how they will use or have used their work time
- wall charts and class lists to track student choices

- **Classroom organization:** The physical environment conveys powerful information to students about the expectations of the classroom. It facilitates the development of a community of learners by offering workspace for whole-class, small-group, and individual learning. The physical environment requires accessible resources for independent learners.

The Physical Classroom Environment

Multilevel classrooms have

- tables that can easily be arranged for a variety of group scenarios
- open floor space if room permits for whole-class learning experiences, class meetings, and workspace for students who prefer to work on the floor (If students sit on the floor, a horseshoe configuration promotes active listening.)
- community supplies (e.g., pencils, erasers, rulers, scissors, highlighters) at each work station
- storage bins for easy access to materials and resources such as art supplies, math manipulatives, science supplies, and physical education equipment
- shelves for storing journals, notebooks, and portfolios
- library carts for text sets used for instructional, practice, and research purposes
- a classroom library with a broad range and variety of texts for reading for enjoyment
- reading bags for silent reading, each bag containing at least an "easy read," a "just-right read," and a "challenge read"
- two or three study carrels to provide for individual workspace
- a message board for posting information such as agendas, routines, group lists, criteria, continua, and classroom or school news and announcements of celebrations
- surface areas for displays and projects

Planning for effective use of time, movement, and space is essential for an organized multilevel classroom.

Building Communication between School and Home

Teachers communicate frequently with parents. Holding a parent-information meeting early in the year helps inform parents of classroom expectations, goal setting, and curricula. These meetings provide opportunities to suggest ways in which parents can support the learning community. (See BLM 12: Parent Brochure.)

Students may play a role in parent-information meetings, deciding what is important for their parents to know about their classroom community, including aspects such as personal learning goals, collaborative group work, project work, quality work, portfolios, classroom reading continua, book talks, and science clubs. Teachers who involve students in weekly exchanges of information also create opportunities for both students and parents to reflect on learning.

Increasing Communication in the Learning Community

Communication is accomplished through various means:

- **Take-home envelopes:** Set up take-home envelopes that students can use to transfer the piece of work they think is most significant each week, along with a note reflecting on their reasons for selecting this work. Parents can send back a response and other communication in the same envelope.
- **Home-school journals:** Establish the weekly practice of having students describe their week in letters to a family member of their choice. Keep students' letters and the responses in a folder labelled Home-School Journal. This collection of letters can form a memorable record of the year for families to keep.
- **Books and games:** Share strategies with parents that they can use to support learning at home. Send books or games home in a plastic sealable bag, for example, and include a parent handout of tips for learning with their daughter or son.
- **School newsletters:** Include classroom news in the school newsletters so that parents can see that the multilevel classroom is integral to the whole school community.
- **Surveys and requests:** Send home parent surveys or volunteer requests at the beginning of the year. Teachers may outline the goals for the year and ask for parents' areas of expertise and their availability.

Teachers in multilevel classrooms learn to take advantage of the "extra time" they have with students and parents to build communication among partners within the learning community over several years.

The Parents

As active and informed partners in the learning community, parents understand, value, and encourage student goal setting, inquiry-based learning, collaborative/cooperative learning, student self-assessment and reflection, and conferences. Parents value the pedagogical theories that support a multilevel classroom.

Families and other members of the school and surrounding community are wonderful resources for a multilevel classroom, and having an open-door classroom with frequent visitors has many benefits for students, families, and teachers. With a parent base that is relatively stable over several years, multilevel classrooms can build an active volunteer program. Besides providing essential support for the class, volunteers gain a firsthand understanding of how the classroom works.

Parents may participate and choose the nature or extent of their involvement as volunteers, based on their time, interest, and comfort level in the multilevel classroom. As volunteers, parents have options such as the following:

- Help with scheduled activities such as book groups.
- Share expertise related to a project or inquiry.
- Supervise or drive students on field trips.
- Collect and donate materials (e.g., buttons, bottle caps, jar lids, keys) that can be used as math manipulatives.
- Prepare materials for learning centres or projects.

Parents may also wish to observe in the multilevel classroom. When arriving, it is important that they meet briefly with a teacher or administrator to share the purpose of various learning experiences and to identify what evidence of learning they might look for as they observe. Visitors often turn into regular volunteers.

As partners in the multilevel learning community, parents offer valuable resources and are integral to supporting student learning. Their commitment to the independent learner and the philosophy of the multilevel classroom fosters trust in the classroom community, as well as the surrounding community.

The Administrator(s)

Administrators play an active role in the learning community. Successful multilevel classrooms are supported by administrators who understand the theory and research behind multilevel learning and are committed to the opportunities that this learning environment may offer learners.

Multilevel classroom administrators can provide encouragement and support in a variety of ways:

- **Classroom visits:** Visit the multilevel classroom regularly.
- **Classroom set-up:** Involve teachers in the decision-making process for setting up a multilevel classroom, whether that classroom is being created for pedagogical or demographic reasons. Ideally, the teachers selected for multilevel classrooms will understand the concepts behind multilevel education and will be eager to establish their own classrooms.
- **Release time:** Provide release time for teachers to visit existing multilevel classrooms and discuss their plans with exemplary teachers. This is particularly helpful for teachers in meeting the unique challenges of multilevel programming.
- **Team teaching:** Take steps to ease the transition to multilevel classrooms. For example, the year before establishing multilevel classes, support teachers in team teaching of cross-grade integrated units, and ensure that a core group of students who were in the teachers' classes the previous year are part of a new multilevel class.
- **Whole-school decision making:** Plan for whole-school dialogue so that all teachers in the school can develop an understanding of the multilevel classroom(s) and participate in making school-wide decisions about developing timetables, rotating topics in the subject areas, and planning for a continuous curriculum across the school.
- **Timetabling:** Collaborate with teachers in preparing the timetable and plan the best way to schedule specialists' time (if available) for multilevel classrooms. Scheduling physical education and music classes simultaneously, for example, provides time for classroom teachers to collaborate. Ensure that teachers have large blocks of time for supporting class workshops.
- **Professional learning:** Provide professional learning for teachers and specialists who will be working in the multilevel classroom. Hold in-service sessions about multilevel classrooms for all staff so that other teachers recognize and support the needs and goals of multilevel programming.

- **Debriefing:** Provide time for teachers to share experiences and debrief.
- **Orientation:** Arrange a parent visit to an existing multilevel classroom as an orientation to multilevel learning in the spring before a new child is to join a multilevel class.
- **Educational information and communication:** Support teachers to help educate and prepare parents, and be prepared to answer parents' questions. Create a handout for parents explaining the advantages of multilevel learning. (BLM 12: Parent Brochure can be used or adapted for this purpose.)

Quality learning and teaching happen when administrators have a clear understanding of the theoretical underpinnings for best practices in multilevel classrooms, ensure the provision of adequate supports for multilevel classroom teachers, and are committed to ongoing communication with parents.

The Dynamic Learning Community

The composition of the learning community is diverse and dynamic. Graduation, shifting enrollments, mobility, and staffing changes affect everyone in the learning community. Although individuals in the learning community may come and go, the interrelated roles and responsibilities of the partners remain.

A successful learning community depends upon valuing the gifts of time and the diversity of its participants. Each partner shares the responsibility of supporting the independent learner. Strengthening communication about and commitment to the multilevel classroom and multilevel philosophy benefits all partners of the learning community, especially its most integral member, the independent learner.

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