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# Creating a Sense of Community in the Classroom

Jesús Nieto and Suzanne Valery

Current national influences on education such as ever-increasing cultural diversity of students, high-stakes testing and national debates regarding immigration policy present unique challenges and opportunities for higher education faculty and students. It is critical that both students and faculty be able to shape and participate in educational structures and activities that emphasize cooperation rather than competition and promote holistic learning. Additionally, an influx of first-generation students means that some incoming students are not well versed in the workings of higher education environments. Pedagogies such as learning communities and cohort models help address these concerns. An example of an ideal learning community is presented, along with strategies for creating a stronger sense of community in any classroom.

## Creating a Sense of Community in the Classroom

*“What I think makes this class very effective is the atmosphere you feel once you walk into the class. I remember the way the class looked and felt the first day of class. The desks were all facing forward and everyone was to themselves. Now, that we are at the end the feeling is different. We have shared so much, and cried so much, in that class and it truly felt like that room was ours. It did not feel like a regular college classroom. . . I walked into class knowing that I would not be judged, knowing that I could express how I felt, and looking forward to what I was going to learn. I want my classroom to feel like that. As future teachers, that is the type of classroom we should strive to achieve, a classroom that is safe to learn in; in which students feel cared about.” —Maria*

Demographic trends, immigration patterns, social conditions and political circumstances have resulted in a vibrant ethnic, linguistic and experiential diversity in the United States (Gay, 2003). This cultural richness has implications for all social arenas and professions, including teaching and counseling. The number of K-12 students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds continues to increase exponentially (Major & Brock, 2003). This trend poses challenges for educators, particularly since the existing hierarchical systems of professional development are not well suited to the rich diversity found in today's schools (Kelly, 1999).

There have been many calls for reform in teacher education. Reformers mention better preparing a predominantly female, European-American teaching force to teach an increasingly diverse students population (Glazier, 2003; Steeley, 2003). The importance the need to reform teacher education is heightened when we consider that while about <sup>2</sup>1,025 teacher education programs produce about 100,000 new

teachers each year, over the next few years there will be a need for 2 million teachers in the nation's elementary and secondary schools (Kincheloe, 2004). The need for unprecedented numbers of new teachers – and teachers who are sensitive to the diversity of the student body – is particularly acute in such states as California and represents one of the most important challenges facing that state as well as the nation (Quartz & Oakes, 2003).

This crisis in demand for new teachers represents an uncommon opportunity to align the cultural composition and cultural competency of teachers more closely to that of their students, since so many new teachers will be in credential programs during the next few years. The current climate that recognizes and values cultural diversity more than has been the case in the past increases the likelihood that the various values and ways of thinking of today's students will be incorporated into educational practice.

As this article is being written, many marches around the country have taken place in opposition to H.R. 4437, the Sensenbrenner bill on immigration. Passed by the House of Representatives on December 6, 2005, H.R. 4437 would turn all undocumented persons into felons and would make it a felony to provide humanitarian assistance to undocumented people (National Immigration Forum, 2006; Wikipedia, 2006). Outraged by this proposal, Mexicans and Chicanas-os have organized many demonstrations including a march in Los Angeles in April 2005 which had an estimated 1 to 2 million participants and a march of hundreds of thousands in Dallas that same month. Many Mexican and Chicana-o high school students have walked out of school in protest of the bill thus placing their teachers in the awkward position of supporting or opposing the walkouts. Educators are currently struggling with how to take advantage of “teachable moments” such as these—and in the case of Los Angeles teachers, moments which exist in a context which can lead to great political participation within Mexican and Chicana-o communities.

## **Learning Communities**

One response to the challenges of diversifying student populations has been the creation of learning communities, which Funk (2002) defines as

*“ . . . a fellowship of learners in which the teachers in a school and its leaders look for new and more effective means of practice and make changes based on what they have learned within this community.” (p 1).*

Another definition is provided by Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990):  
*“A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses – or actually restructure the curricular material entirely – so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material*

*they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.” (p. 19)*

An example of substantial curricular restructuring is the San Diego State University Community-Based Block program, which will be described later in this article.

Reasons for forming a learning community include deeper student learning, clearer connections between disciplines, closer connection between students and faculty, and increased academic and social interaction (Moore & Dille, 2003). Learning communities help institutions in their quest to provide students with opportunities to actively participate with faculty members, build support networks, form friendships and connect with their institutions (Kellogg, 1999). When educators create a culture of caring in the classroom this helps students to develop their personal power by promoting a sense of community and connection to social skills (Levine, 2003).

Such an approach is a relatively recent phenomenon, one which surfaced in the twentieth century. It is in great contrast to the factory-style approach that consists of memorization and regurgitation of facts selected by the teacher. Paulo Freire called the latter the “banking” concept of education in which the teachers deposited their wisdom in the empty vessels represented by their students’ minds. Freire contrasted that approach to a “problem-posing” pedagogy in which teachers and students are both teaching and learning (Freire, 1970).

Students’ sense of community correlates strongly with their sense of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as individuals and accepted as part of the school (Cheng, 2004). The concept of learning communities meshes well with the philosophy of learner-centered education, which focuses upon individual learners’ experiences and perspectives and involves the learner in the programs, policies and teaching that support effective learning for all students (Henson, 2003). Learning communities provide an environment in which students actively participate in their own learning (Kellogg, 1999). The emphasis on teacher-student collaboration also overlaps with democratic education’s goals to foster decision-making skills and respect for the rights of others (Slater, 2004). Developing an increased emphasis on community is important because people in this society are stratified by gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, language, and citizenship status (Imani, 2004). Given the current appreciation for cultural diversity and valuing of multiple perspectives, the creation of community can result in a far richer set of interactions than might have previously been the case.

According to Kellogg (1999), there are five models of learning communities, all of which involve two or more courses that have been paired:

1. **Linked Courses**—a content course (math, science, etc.) is linked to an application course (e.g., writing, speech) so that syllabi and assignments are coordinated and the application course focuses on the subject matter of the content course.
2. **Learning clusters**—similar to the Linked Course model but involves three or four linked courses which are usually based on a theme, issue or historical period.
3. **Freshman Interest Groups**—three freshman courses are linked by theme and academic major and include a peer counseling component where participants can discuss course work and problems in adjusting to college.
4. **Federated Learning Communities**—a cohort of students takes three theme-based courses and a three-credit seminar taught by a Master Learner (a professor from a different discipline who takes courses and fulfills requirements along with the students and then leads seminars).
5. **Coordinated Studies**—faculty and students are involved in full-time active learning based on an interdisciplinary theme which can be broad or narrow in scope. Several faculty team-teach 16 units per semester in set blocks each week.

Benefits of these types of learning communities include increased student motivation, intellectual development, learning, academic achievement, and retention (Kellogg, 1999). Research on cohorts suggest that creating an environment of mutual respect, supported risk taking, and critical reflection helps foster a sense of belonging and develop shared understanding so crucial to encouraging and sustaining diverse perspectives (Stein & Imel, 2002).

According to the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education (2006), which has an excellent online Learning Communities National Resource Center (<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=73>), there are currently 280 learning community initiatives in their directory of such programs. The Second National Survey of First-Year Academic Practices found that “The enrolling of at least some cohorts of students into two or more courses (i.e., a learning community) is common practice at approximately 62% of institutions. But it is still rare for learning communities to involve more than 50% of first-year students. Not surprisingly, the most likely location for learning communities is the research extensive university.” (Barefoot, 2002).

## **The San Diego State University Community-Based Block Program (CBB)**

Both authors of this article participated in a one-year Master's in Counseling program called the Community-Based Block (CBB) at San Diego State University (Nieto: 1977-78; Valery: 1981-82). This program was similar to the Coordinated Studies model, as three faculty members team-taught on a full-time basis for both semesters. The curriculum focused on counseling philosophy and methods with a very strong emphasis on cultural diversity (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, etc.) and the need for counselors to be change agents. In the CBB, students are responsible for deciding as a community how they will meet the program's learning objectives. The CBB program is described in an undated brochure as follows:

*The CBB is a pioneer in the training of multicultural counselors. It is a year-long intensive program which prepares students to work in a variety of educational and social service settings, complete their first year toward the School Counseling credential, begin coursework toward the MFCC or School Psychology programs or prepare for doctoral study. The program is called 'community based' because it is always held off campus, in the heart of a San Diego multiethnic neighborhood and because it creates a learning community in which a multicultural team of faculty and a carefully selected, diverse group of students 'partner' in the learning process. Each cohort of students helps to structure its unique learning experience. It is referred to as a 'block' program because all classes are required of all students, who stay together as a group for the entire year. The CBB seeks to develop the counseling skills of diagnosis, process and therapeutic intervention, the academic skills of critical thinking, program evaluation and effective written and oral communication and the personal growth experiences necessary to enable graduates to use their skills for the benefit of clients." (CBB brochure, no date)*

CBB graduates become school and college counselors, community college teachers and administrators, university professors, program directors, probation officers, psychologists, researchers, social workers, business owners, CEOs, real estate agents, therapists, and educational consultants. The Community-Based Block program had a profound effect on each of the authors. I (Valery) was a first generation college student who, although had been tracked away from college courses in high school, was allowed to enroll in college in the late 1960's when colleges were experimenting with "nontraditional" students. After graduating with a liberal arts degree and having no job prospects, I entered graduate school, only to fail to adapt to the culture of the academy, drop out, and spend the next ten years working at traditional working-class jobs.

Although reluctant to go back to school, I took advantage of the opportunity to attend CBB with its promise to provide an alternative educational experience. It lived up to its promise, and I was able to voice for the first time what a difficult challenge it had been for me to graduate from college with very little family support, very little financial support, and no means of expressing the anxiety of being a working class person in a middle-class environment. Before my CBB experience, I didn't think in terms of race or culture. In CBB, I was able to express my doubts about my intellectual abilities, and for the first time, I realized I was not alone with those doubts. The bigger gift to me, however, was listening to others' stories and learning from others' cultural and ethnic values and traditions. In the world of higher education, we were all struggling to "fit in" to a world that often only gave lip service to wanting to let us in. CBB taught me to appreciate people who are very different from me and to listen beyond the languages people speak. Before attending CBB, I held firm opinions about matters of politics and how things should be in general and didn't question my 'right' as a white person to define the world. In CBB, I grew in awareness of the impact of this presumption as others shared stories of living according to these definitions.

I remember one such 'story' of a Chicana who told of working in the fields with her family, and even at her young age noticing that there were only Mexicans picking the vegetables. She told of questioning why God would have Mexicans living in such hell, bent over all day in the hot sun. In the ensuing years, I became a CBB adjunct faculty member for a few years. I facilitated group discussions on the topics of gender and class and the politics of social dominance and I facilitated the "white ethnic support group." I encouraged students to keep reflective journals about their experiences and to express themselves in whatever modality was meaningful to them, whether or not it was in the traditional academic form. One student got in touch with how alienated she felt from her two older sisters because she supported her mother, who had left the family and become a lesbian. She expressed her many complex feelings in a mobile that depicted the connected family members on one strand, her mother in the middle, and herself on a single strand (an example of arts-based curriculum). She used the mobile as the vehicle through which she then shared her story with the group, no doubt a much more powerful depiction than if she had not worked through the many feelings in the process of making the mobile. This illustrates the importance of working on oneself to increase self-awareness, thus enabling one to interact more fully with others. In the end, the family, whom I never met, was reconnected as the student brought her realizations home and encouraged her sisters to reunite with their mother. I received a note of gratitude from the mother who thanked me for making it possible for the family to talk about her lesbianism.

Because of CBB, I was able to make the transition from working class jobs to professional positions in which I could become more self-authoring and creative. Eventually I went back to school yet again, this time to challenge myself to achieve in

the traditional academic modality. I earned a doctorate degree, which then allowed me to teach, develop programs for adult learners, and mentor others on succeeding in higher<sup>10</sup> education. Now I oversee the development of grant projects at a community college designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution dedicated to helping its community of learners achieve educational success. In this case, the term “community” applies to students who enroll in the college as well as residents, primarily Mexican agricultural workers, who live in the surrounding community.

I (Nieto) feel hard-pressed to summarize all of the positive effects CBB had on me because there so many and they were so profound. While there were many valuable aspects of the CBB experience, probably the most important one for me was the degree to which it incorporated student empowerment. As its name implies, the CBB program emphasizes a sense of community and this is done by de-emphasizing the hierarchical relations which are part of faculty-student interaction. Students play a major role in deciding what and how they will learn. Being asked for my opinion helped to build my self-confidence and thus facilitated my successful pursuit of a doctorate in education.

CBB provided me with strong communication and counseling skills which I have used in every job I've had since then. In addition to communication and counseling skills, I learned a great deal about group dynamics. My CBB experience also taught me a great deal about the importance of establishing a sense of community in any class. I came to believe that trust and mutual respect are essential for any significant sharing to take place and that creating a warm, personal, safe environment within the classroom is of paramount importance.

My year in CBB greatly expanded my awareness of diversity issues related to gender, ethnicity, skin color, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and disability. Listening to my CBB classmates' stories regarding discrimination and attending conferences that year which focused on social justice issues, I became passionately interested in social justice. Sexism, racism, classism, ableism and homophobia were among the topics we learned about, and I embraced these painful topics enthusiastically. I couldn't believe how sheltered my life had been and how naïve I was regarding diversity and justice. I was determined to learn, change and grow as a person and as a professional, and that is why I became active in Central America political movements and other causes related to gender, culture and power.

That zest for constant development which CBB imbued me with has never left me. It keeps me going day and night and there aren't enough hours in the day to pursue all of my interests or to learn all that I want to. Hours spent reading and on the internet keep me abreast of current events and fuel my desire to spark my students' interest in diversity and social justice.

## **CBB as a Model Learning Community**

While there have been numerous calls for the creation of learning communities, there have been few suggestions in the literature for how to do so (Hipp, 2001). However, theories about the structure of cohort groups may provide some insight. Stein & Imel list three characteristics or functions of cohort groups, first identified by Drago-Severson (Stein & Imel, 2002): 1) They must “hold well” by accepting and confirming who the individual is without expectations for change; 2) When individuals are ready, the cohort must “let go” by challenging learners and allowing them to develop beyond their existing ways of knowing; and 3) They must “stick around” to provide continuity, stability, and availability to the individual undergoing growth and development. The primary challenge is for instructors to shift their role from instruction to facilitating the learning process. (Brooks, 1998).

CBB as a model learning community was ahead of its time. It was a product of the educational innovations of the 1970's, and from the outset, CBB experimented with modalities of teaching and learning that were then radical but now receive wider acceptance. As a nonhierarchical cohort model, not only are the students challenged but so are the instructors. Indeed, so is the institution, which must support the idea of faculty “relinquishing” power. As a learning community, there is equal emphasis on process and content. In CBB, individuals engage in self-reflection as any student would in a counseling program, but they also actively engage in processing interpersonal and group dynamics, which in this case inevitably results in conscious dialogue on the “isms” of which we are often unconscious. This then is blended with theories of counseling and group dynamics, theories of learning, etc. into a dynamic program in which meta-reflection or double-loop learning, as described by Senge (2000), is the norm. In the community, members deliberately challenge their norms, attitudes and assumptions and reflect on how these contribute to the effectiveness of the group.

Another way in which CBB is a model learning community is that it provides social support, and not only for members of each cohort group. Once a CBBer is identified in the larger community, often an instant camaraderie emerges, so much so that CBBers become a professional network for recent graduates. The vision and purpose of CBB is often shared among members from cohort to cohort across the years.

Although traditional approaches to the creation of learning communities (which involve multiple courses) have often proven to be very effective and worthwhile, we strongly believe that it is possible to implement the general principles of a learning community into a single course. We have attempted to integrate as many of the

Community-Based Block program's principles and approaches in our teaching, even when our students are not officially in a cohort model program.

### **How We Implement in our Work what We Learned in CBB**

As an adjunct instructor, I (Valery) had an opportunity to explore these concepts in two different environments. I taught a course called "School-Community-Family Relations for K-12 teachers" in a Masters in Educational Leadership program at a private international university. Although the students were neither a cohort nor defined as a learning community, most of them knew each other and they were in fact taking most of their courses together. Because of my experience with CBB, I was inclined to facilitate the group using dialogue, reflection, and collaborative learning approaches. Although baffled at first by the expectation that they would take full responsibility for their own and each others' learning, students were also relieved not to be sitting through a four-hour lecture. We agreed on a structure for the sessions: topical content would be presented by an individual or a team, discussion would follow, and then teams would work on their major group projects for the term. Students were not used to working collaboratively, and one student thought "I was getting away with not doing my job (lecturing.)"

Most students, however, were soon carried away with ideas about what they wanted to do and were eagerly assigning themselves much larger projects than I ever would have assigned! At this international university, language and cultural differences are the norm, and the need to work with these differences is fully accepted. At times the challenges of working together were stressful and people voiced concern that they could not accomplish their tasks on time. The idea of being empowered learners—that since they had chosen and defined the task in the first place, they could also change it—was the most difficult for students to accept.

In another instance, at a state teachers college, a sequence of courses for the M.Ed. for K-12 teachers was established on the cohort model and the course I taught – Creating Communities of Learning—was near the end of the sequence. Because this was an ongoing cohort, and because of the title of the course, my goal was to create an environment in which students could experience what we hoped they'd be able to create in their own classrooms.

Although students had been in a cohort for most of a year, I soon realized they were not conscious of being in a learning community. It took most of the term and a great deal of dialogue and reflective writing in response to reading "Schools That Learn" by

Peter Senge, et al, (2000) for many of the students to give up their anxiety about getting the content “right.” Early on they were only aware of themselves as professionals (teachers) who were there to learn and acquire a degree, but ironically had little awareness of themselves as learners. It was not until the end of the semester that students could appreciate that developing an experiential awareness of the process of learning was a viable objective for the course.

A few years after I completed the CBB program, I (Nieto) began teaching a counselor education class called “Social and cultural determinants of human behavior” at San Diego State University (SDSU). This course focused on cultural diversity issues in counseling and provided me with my first opportunity to implement some of the community-building techniques that I’d experienced in CBB and to go beyond them.

The single most important element in my teaching is respect for each and every student and for all opinions. Contact with students outside of class is also very important and some of my most memorable lessons in CBB were learned in informal conversations outside of the classroom with both faculty and other students. Sitting in a circle, personal sharing by instructor, values clarification, sharing experiences of discrimination, and allowing all members of the class to provide input on a topic were among the CBB techniques I have incorporated into my teaching.

Following several years of teaching the counseling diversity class, I was hired in a full-time,tenure-track position to teach introductory multicultural education classes for future teachers in the SDSU School of Teacher Education. In this position I teach 3 sections of the course each semester and I continue to focus on community-building as an essential prerequisite for successful teaching, particularly given the emotionally-charged nature of multicultural curriculum.

## **Strategies for Creating a Strong Sense of Community in the Classroom**

Through our work teaching at the university level, we have used the following strategies for creating a strong sense of community in the classroom and strongly recommend them:

Sitting in a circle—this physical arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and implies that everyone is an equally valued participant. It helps create a feeling of connection and makes it easier for folks to speak to everyone else.

Using name tags—at the beginning of class we make name tags, surrounding our names with 4 or more symbols of things that are most important to us (e.g., symbols for religion, sports, family, friends, education, money, etc.). The name tags reflect who

each person is, are a good icebreaker, and facilitate the use of first names in the classroom. While some students state that they initially perceived making name tags as reminiscent of kindergarten, this simple activity often reveals very important aspects of students that would not surface otherwise.

Sharing food—once a week we will have a few people bring snacks for the entire group. There is nothing like sharing food to help create a feeling of community in a group and we have found that this practice makes a dramatic difference in the group's dynamics. (Note: Some schools don't allow food in the classroom because of Ed Code regulations).

Modeling exploration of personal biases by instructor—it is quite frightening for many students to discuss such emotion-laden topics as racism, sexism, homophobia and personal biases. Instructors can greatly facilitate such exploration by acknowledging that they have various biases, rather than pretending that they are above such human foibles while asking students to confront their prejudice. Such sharing should be brief but honest and heartfelt.

Hearing everyone's opinion on topics—after watching a video or listening to a speaker, we will sit in a circle and have each student share their reactions. We begin with whoever volunteers to go first, and then that person gets to choose which way the circle will go. Everyone speaks and this prevents one or two people from dominating class discussion. Everyone's opinion is heard and sometimes the quietest people say the most profound things. The rules of this activity are that we speak from the heart, that there be no questions/comments/reactions, and that we listen with respect to all statements regardless of whether we agree with them or not. Sometimes each person speaks as long as they wish, sometimes we will say one sentence each, and sometimes we say one word each, depending on time constraints. Even just one word spoken by each person really helps to create a sense of community and to allow everyone to feel heard and respected. Two specific topics which seem to greatly foster community are sharing a personal experience of being discriminated against and sharing what inspires most in our lives.

Values line—we begin by defining values and identifying controversial issues on which there are a broad range of opinions, such as capital punishment and abortion. I (Nieto) then ask the students to imagine that there's a line running from one side of the room to the other and that each end of the line represents one end of the spectrum of opinion regarding the issue. For example, we might imagine that one end of the line represents total support for capital punishment and the other end of the line represents total opposition to it. Students are then instructed to physically stand on the point in the line which represents their views. I will then tell them to express their opinion in one sentence, beginning at one end of the line and continuing

sequentially until everyone has spoken. We listen respectfully without asking questions or making comments to all views, however similar or different they might be from our own. After having done this with two or three controversial issues, we all take our seats in a circle and give our reactions to the activity without further discussing the issues themselves.. We reflect upon what kinds of influences affect people's opinions (family, church, school, mass media, peers, etc.) and how this relates to teaching. *Note: It is essential that trust be built before this activity is implemented. Typically it is conducted in the last two or three weeks of the semester.*

Being respectful of all views; being nonjudgmental—as has been mentioned in a couple of the preceding items, being respectful and nonjudgmental of all views and opinions is a core value of our classes.

Being authentic and self-reflective—ground rules should include that each person is willing to express his/her honest views and feelings, be responsible for giving reflective consideration to new ideas, and be open to change.

Providing “retreat” experiences can help the group coalesce by developing a shared vision and common values.

Incorporate activities that foster both individual and group development – when students from different cultural and ethnic groups work on projects together, they learn about communicating through differences to achieve common goals.

Appreciate diverse learning styles—learning in community requires a lot more active participation from students than passively taking notes in a lecture. It is important to provide assignments and activities that encourage experiential learning and creative presentation of that learning.

Rely on principles of adult learning theory, one of which postulates that adults have a need to connect new learning to a foundation of life experience and knowledge they have accumulated. Similarly, when students of all ages can connect new learning to their experience and prior knowledge, it increases their desire to be actively involved in the learning process. Teachers can draw out students' experience related to the topic at hand, thus facilitating the process of meaning making and knowledge construction.

Incorporate reflective writing and journal keeping to help students process and integrate the dynamics taking place in the group. This also helps to generate a higher level of discourse.

## Excerpts of Student Papers

The following excerpts from my (Nieto) students' course reaction papers illustrate the importance of creating a sense of community in the classroom:

*"The discussion circle is a lot more productive and engaging than listening to a professor talk for hours on end about boring subject matter. I also believe students can learn just as much from each other as they can from the teacher."* —Leonard

*"This class has taught me the importance of working to become a better listener, and thus a more compassionate human being. . . . one of my biggest challenges was trying to be open to my fellow students' ideas and values. When we did the activity where we gathered along a continuum which portrayed how we felt about controversial issues, I was happy to learn that I could sympathize with what some of the students who held a different viewpoint said. It is important it be able to find common ground. I am practicing being a better listener. I try to listen to ideas and lines of reasoning. I may not agree with their conclusion, but I am consciously trying to listen to people's reasoning."* —Heather

*"I liked how the class sat in a circle because I could see everyone's face as they spoke. I liked having snack times because snacks are always good and everybody has to eat. . . . Thank you for showing me what it is like to be successful in creating a classroom where everyone feels comfortable and non-threatened. The atmosphere in our class was so great and it allowed me to hear the perspectives of all my fellow classmates, some of which turned out to be extremely powerful. This had a huge impact on what I was able to learn and experience in ED451. It gave me a great perspective of listening, learning, and accepting other people and everything that makes up their being. The kind of perspective I got was not one that I could have learned in a book, seen on television, or be told about, but one I had to experience."* —Alice

*"We have all learned so many things from listening to our neighbor's views and ideas about certain subjects. I believe this gives us all a greater understanding of people's differences and what makes us alike. I was scared at first to speak my mind because I thought everyone might ridicule me for it. After the first week I was excited about speaking out and it made me feel good that somebody was listening to my opinion."* —Roberta

## Implications, Recommendations

Furthering the goals of democracy for pluralism and respect for differences will require that the next generation of teachers be prepared to work and teach in culturally diverse environments where they are responsible for modeling the value of

respect for the rights of others. New pedagogy has shifted the focus from teaching to learning, from lecturing to facilitating, and from students as passive recipients to students as engaged learners. Teaching and learning are now accepted as relationship-based activities. We believe that creating a sense of community in the classroom is key to having a successful learning experience. It is the foundation upon which any attempts to educate ought to be based. Relationships between teachers and students are perhaps the most important element of the curriculum, as they speak volumes about the values being transmitted.

Communities of learning and cohort models, while in classrooms from elementary to doctoral programs for educational administrators, are still and deserving of future research. Further study could also determine if the learning community model helps first generation students succeed in higher education. In the spirit of student empowerment, a key element of a learning community, we think it best to end this article with the words of a student of one of the authors (Nieto):

"I enjoyed hearing everyone's thoughts. It made me comfortable when our views were the same and it made me realize that there is another side to the story when the class' views were different. . . I learned more from this class than any other classes I have taken at SDSU. This class was a life changing experience and teachers should not be allowed to teach if they have not taken this class." —Marie

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