

Using Literacy Connections to Build Classroom Community: The Story of a Teacher, Students, and Harry Potter

C. Lorraine Webb, Ed.D.
Professor, Department Chair
Texas A&M University-San Antonio
USA

Robin R. Kapavik, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Texas A&M University-San Antonio
USA

Abstract

When a teacher started her teaching career, never did she think one community building read aloud would contribute to a life-long friendship with her students. But Harry Potter afforded her the opportunity to create a sense of community within her 4th grade classroom that has endured into the students' adulthood. Because of that experience, she continued to select read alouds by both students' interests and how the content of the literature could forge connections amongst students.

Keywords: community building, literature, Harry Potter

1. Setting the Tone

Near midnight, a fourth-grade girl, with the assistance of her parents traveled to several homes around her community to hang owls made out of white poster board, with yellow pipe cleaners for talons on doorsteps followed by ringing the doorbell to awaken the inhabitants of the home. Each owl held a scroll in its talons, which had a message written in calligraphy. This elaborate gesture was all created in order to invite her friends and teachers to the midnight-movie premiere of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.

One of the authors was one of the lucky recipients of that wonderful invitation. And she was also lucky enough to be a fourth-grade teacher of the girls involved. That was over 15 years ago, and what started as a fun novelty led to a magical (no pun intended) tradition of spending every Harry Potter midnight-movie premiere together.

2. Read Alouds

Read alouds had always been incorporated into the author's day-to-day schedule while teaching elementary and middle school students, but the focus had been on the content of the literature in relationship to standards up until that point. "Unfortunately, for students in some classrooms, literature is treated more like information to be memorized and tested than an experience to be enjoyed and appreciated" (Dugan, 1997, p. 87). She learned from the students in this class that the read alouds could also assist in building community. In addition, she had always used community building activities within her classes to build relationships which was the cornerstone of successful classroom management. However, the author had not directly linked these activities to literacy in meaningful ways.

“It has long been argued that teachers who are readers convey their love for reading to their students, that this love for reading provides a role model, and that it makes a difference in classroom practice” (Dreher, 2002/2003, p. 338).

3. School Environment Background

This particular year in the author’s teaching career occurred in an elementary school which was located in a small neighborhood. No school buses ran for regular drop-off and pick-up. Students either walked to school or were brought by personal transportation. The community was close-knit: parents heavily involved in the school, their children’s lives, and with other families within the community. The author was new to this school and was amazed at the closeness of the community within and outside of the school environment. Some of the closeness was due to the size of the school community. Each grade level consisted of only two classes with 25 or fewer students in each. The closeness of the students and parents was intriguing for the author, and she was excited to work in such an environment.

What she did not realize, however, was that students being in the same classes with each other over five years with little to no opportunities to interact with new peers could lead to a lack of a true community spirit. Community building for the entire class, not to mention the entire grade level, took on a new challenge for her. These students had already established microcosms and did not believe they needed, nor wanted, to create a whole-class community. They preferred to stay in their well-established clicks which even stemmed from entrenchment at an early age through their own parents’ microcosms. And they did not like the idea that the author’s community building activities disrupted those. Prior schools she had taught in had demonstrated a completely different sentiment. Students in those schools needed and wanted to belong so desperately; they truly thrived on the idea of building a community – even if they pretended it did not matter, the way they embraced the community building activities told a different story.

4. Building Community through the Movie Premiere

Back to the movie premiere... the author had begun that year reading aloud Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. Two students, one in her homeroom and one from her partner teacher’s homeroom which she saw for certain subjects, along with their parents decided to invite her partner teacher and her to this first midnight screening in our city. Jenna was an athletic girl, who was extroverted and liked to question authority. Celia, also athletic, was soft-spoken, reflective, and introspective. Yet, the two girls were best friends. The premiere stirred in them a passion for Harry Potter. Not only were the invitations intricate, the pre-premiere party was elaborate with costumes, decorations, and food from “Hogwarts.” A total of five students and two teachers were invited, along with the Celia’s parents. When the author interviewed Celia and Jenna about their experiences, specifically, “How has including your teacher(s) affected your personal relationship with them,” they answered positively. Celia replied:

My relationship with the teacher included has undoubtedly been strengthened through her inclusion with Harry Potter. I have gotten to know her outside the classroom, and continued to be in contact with her many years after she stopped being my teacher. And Jenna expressed, “I believe it has helped me enjoy the books and movies so much

more! It’s exciting to see my teacher every premier and I love that we have stayed in touch. It is definitely a highlight of my year.” When interviewed by the co-author, the author stated, “I think of them as family. I would have no qualms if they called me and needed something to jump in the car and do whatever I needed to do.”

5. Building Community with the Class

Once the girls invited the author to the midnight premiere and their classmates discovered the bonds that were being built between them, she began receiving invitations to attend other extracurricular activities, such as soccer games. The author had made a concerted effort to know about her students’ extra-curricular responsibilities and would often ask them directly about those activities, but now she began attending these activities – and further bonds were made.

The relationships built that year led the author to move up to fifth grade as their Language Arts and Social Studies teacher. To this day she remains in contact, at least minimally, with at least 60% of those students. And back to Jenna & Celia... every midnight premiere following the 1st included an invitation to the author. She was the only teacher included after the 2nd premiere. And the number of students who attended went from five to eventually three. She saw every midnight premiere of the books with those three students – the last one while they were seniors

in high school. At the last premiere, the students were saddened by the thought of the tradition ending so they asked if she wanted to continue with the Hunger Games series, which they did through their college years. Of those 3 students, the author still remain closely in contact with Jenna and with her parents. She even formed a bond with her older sister because of the closeness they'd shared over the years.

When the co-author interviewed the author about how these experiences affected her relationships with students in general, her response was:

In the beginning it just demonstrated that you can build relationships with students that could hopefully encourage them to be lifelong learners – instill that love of learning. Making connections with them... it just proved that it is possible to have that relationship with a student and impact their lives in the long run, not just for one year or one semester. Too many times we don't know the end results of all of our teaching that may happen five years down the road. In this case I saw directly how their lives were impacted. Jenna and Celia were asked, "How has including your teacher(s) affected your

relationship with learning?" Their responses were similar. Celia stated:

It has taught me how to form a strong bond with my teachers, which in turn has enabled me to feel more comfortable in the classroom. I have definitely noticed that my comfort with a teacher positively correlates to my ability to learn from him or her.

Jenna responded:

It has made me appreciate the teachers I have now. As students you don't really think teachers have a life outside of school, but through our experience I have learned that they definitely do and their lives can be just as interesting as ours. It has really encouraged me to try to get to know my teachers better and develop stronger relationships with them.

6. Literature and Community Building

As stated before, the concept of utilizing a read aloud as a community building activity was new to the author. She had utilized community building activities every year to build connections between her students and herself, as well as amongst her students – just not integrating the content with those connections. Now she had a new lease on life! "Engaged readers are socially interactive; for example, they talk to friends and family about what they read. They engage in sharing, discussion, and collaborative efforts in which meaning is extended and refined." (Dreher, 2002/2003, p. 338). The author used to choose a read aloud based on students' interests, as well as the cliffhanger effect. She always wanted to end each day's read aloud session with the students wanting more. After that year she began choosing a piece of literature for a read aloud by not only considering students' interests, but also by contemplating how the content of the literature could forge connections amongst her students.

Another example was *Gregor the Overlander* by Suzanne Collins. In one fourth grade class the author had a student with special needs, including dyslexia and dysgraphia. He worked tirelessly to complete work and ensure that he understood the written words, but he did not want to read if it was not required. Then came *Gregor the Overlander*. The author began reading the series to the class and for Christmas that year he asked his parents for a copy of the book. He brought the book to class every day and would follow along as the author continued to read it aloud. When the next book in the series was published he was no longer the author's student, but he asked for a copy from his parents at Christmas again and proceeded to read the book to his younger sister with the assistance of his mother. He continued asking for more until he had all the books published in the series. The author and this student also kept in contact over the years, and every once in a while, the author has received a random message from him that just says "remember Gregor" or something that eludes to the story.

7. Incorporating Literature into Community Building Activities

In addition to read alouds, many common community building activities can be tweaked to revolve around literature or other content areas. I have included a short list below, along with a brief description of each.

7.1 Examples

7.1.1 Milling to Music: Directions are simple. When students hear music playing, they are to mill around the room making eye contact with those they pass. When the music stops, they stop and find a nearby partner. With their partner they are to discuss a question or topic posted on the screen. They repeat this process for as long as the teacher wants. Each time they stop they should choose a different partner. They can discuss the same posted question/topic or the teacher can have multiple questions/topics for discussion throughout the activity. Example: Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt. To introduce this book we would be studying next as a class, I used Milling to Music to ask thought-provoking questions such as “If you could live forever, would you want to? Why or why not?” and “If you had to live forever, what age would you want to be? Why?”

7.1.2 Stand on the Line (continuum): Ask students to physically stand and place themselves on a continuum line based on topics such as, agree/disagree with character’s action from literature currently studying; identify with a character in a specific story, etc.

7.1.3 Slide the Line/Fold the Line: As a second part to Stand on the Line, have students split the line in two halves then have one half slide down to stand in front of the other line. This puts someone mostly located in the center of the continuum in front of the extremes of the line. They then discuss why they chose where to stand on the line. Fold the Line follows the same principle without splitting into two halves. The two extreme ends of the line just fold to be in front of each other.

7.1.4 Two Truths & a Lie (or vice versa): Each student should write down two “truths” about a text pertaining to plot, character traits, etc. and one “lie.” In small groups the students share and determine which are the truths and which are the lies. This can be used as facts versus opinions, as well.

8. Conclusion

When the author started her teaching career as an elementary teacher, never did she think one community building read aloud would contribute to a life-long friendship with her students, Jenna and Celia. But Harry Potter afforded them the opportunity to create a community within their 4th grade classroom and beyond into their adulthood. As Radigan so eloquently stated:

It is no wonder that Harry appeals across genders, ages, races, and ethnicities. We all have felt left out and misunderstood. We all have had our fears and embarrassments made public. We all have been misunderstood and mocked. We all have had to find the desperate courage to go on. And we all have felt the wonder of things going just right. We have huddled with our friends in laughter and mischief and enjoyed the moment (694).

While the author’s reflection about her experiences with her students may be unique, it also offers a reassurance to teachers that what is shared with students really does matter. Students hear their teachers and connect to the literature included in the curriculum, especially when a concerted effort is made to build community connections since, “Participating in talk around texts offers readers identity and membership in a community. It is a shared adventure” (Kooy, 2003, p.141). And, for that, the author is grateful for the shared adventure with Jenna, Celia, and Harry Potter.

References

- Dreher, M. J. (Dec 2002/Jan 2003). Motivating teachers to read. *The Reading Teacher*, 56(4), 338-340.
- Dugan, J. (1997). Transactional literature discussions: Engaging students in the appreciation and understanding of literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 51(2), 86-96.
- Kooy, M. (2003). Riding the coattails of Harry Potter: Readings, relational learning, and revelations in book clubs. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 47(2), 136-145.
- Radigan, W. M. (May, 2001). Connecting the generations: Memory, magic, and Harry Potter. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(8), 694.