

Creating a Learning Community

by Kiran Malavade and Krista Shaffer

“I thought I wanted one-on-one tutoring – more attention just for me. Working in a group, I found it really helped. We were all working on the same thing. We had trust. We learned from each other; we played off each other. I think I got more out of a group setting than I would have with one-on-one. I picked up something from everyone.” ~Write to Read student

“We’re All Students and We’re All Teachers”

While most library literacy programs offer primarily one-to-one tutoring, Alameda County Library Write to Read instead offers primarily small group tutoring because we believe that building a community of learners supports adults in pursuing their educational goals. As one student put it, “When I got into the program and I realized that I wasn’t the only one, it made me feel like I could do this.”

Seeing other classmates show up each week inspires someone who may be struggling with external pressures from work or family. We explain to everyone that the group relies on each other for learning activities, so one person’s attendance affects others. Here are some of the ways we work to create a genuine learning community.

- Most activities involve students working together as a team, sharing their skills and knowledge with each other.
- We use a list of commitments to make it clear that we are building a safe space where people can take risks and learn from each other.
- We ask students to write about and share their own life experiences. Students encourage one another to revise based on questions they pose to each other about their stories.
- We don’t return homework covered in red pen corrections. Instead, we use spelling errors as

a basis for in-class partner activities that build students’ knowledge of spelling strategies they can use to correct their own errors, and allow students to share their knowledge and skills with each other.

- Students are given many opportunities to give teachers feedback about the groups.
- Paid teachers have the time to continually develop and revise the curriculum based on student feedback and their own reflections.

We have found that these non-traditional approaches resonate with our students and keep them coming back to the program. Many of our students talked about having slipped through the cracks in traditional schools, and our approach can be a welcome change. One student reflected, “When we all share, and we’re all students and we’re all teachers; I really like that. We’re all sharing our thoughts.”

“Remember the Commitments”

In our group designed especially for new students, we present a list of “Class Commitments” that has been created and adjusted based on student input over the years. Students have suggested that these commitments be read at the beginning of each meeting, not only as a warm-up reading activity, but also as an important foundation and reminder to everyone about what each person needs to do in order to make the group a safe learning space. One student reflected at the end of a new student class:

“The list of commitments really helped me to relax. It pulled us together. Before I opened my mouth, I remembered the commitments. It helped me know what to say and not to say. Like I knew if someone was struggling with a word, to let them try to get it.”

Class Commitments:

While I am in this class I will do my best to:

- respect each person in the class
- not judge others
- keep what we share in the room
- offer hints when someone is struggling
- be encouraging and helpful to others
- take risks and give myself a chance
- express my own needs and speak up for myself
- give other people a chance to speak and participate
- give all my attention to whomever is talking
- remember we all have a right to have our own opinions
- remember that I can pass on any activity I don't want to do
- be here every week on time, or call the teacher if I can't come

One purpose of the New Student Class is to ease students back into being in “school.” We understand that it's hard to find the time to continue learning, and to stay in a program without support is nearly impossible. Through readings and discussions, we emphasize the fact that the group is there to provide support for each other to stay in the program and make progress.

“I've Come A Long Way Too”

In the New Student Class, we ask students to commit to two hours once a week for 12-15 weeks in order to build a consistent learning community, and to ensure students' progress in their learning. For students who finish the New Student Class, we offer a choice of several basic reading and writing groups on various nights of the week. We feel confident that when they join those basic groups, they will be able to make the commitment to the weekly meetings for a whole session. Since instituting the New Student Class, completion rates for the

basic groups have increased. Now, on average, 85% of students who start a 12-week basic group finish it. They are putting in enough time to make genuine progress, which then further motivates them to continue in their learning. One student noticed:

“There's a person in one of our classes. We were in the same situation. I remember when I could write maybe only one sentence and he could write one sentence, and now he writes two pages, and I can write one and a half pages. It's nice to see this person. If I see that he's done so much, probably I've come a long way too.”

They feel part of the community of learners now, and by seeing their classmates' progress, they often see their own improvements more than if they were studying in isolation.

“It Feels Comfortable”

In our experience, the external obstacles that adult students face regarding staying in school don't necessarily go away. What changes is that students start to put themselves first, and they get the encouragement to do that from their classmates and peers. They make a commitment to improve their confidence and skills, and they are able to make that happen when they have support. Students who have been in the program for a while tell us that they start to feel comfortable telling their employers and co-workers that they are in a reading and writing program. They say that they have to leave at a certain time because they need to come to their group. Of course that is not always possible, and sometimes the outside world's pressures make it impossible for them to stay in the program – for a time. However, we have tried to create a safe learning community that people can choose to be part of when the time is right for them. Our hope is that they find a supportive family to be part of at the library, where, as one student commented, “It feels comfortable, and it feels like being at home.”

Kiran Malavade and Krista Shaffer work at Write to Read in Fremont, CA. For a student perspective, see p. 49.