

Creating community in the virtual theatre classroom

By Gretchen Nordleaf-Nelson

After one week in my virtual classroom in March of 2020, I was floundering. I was faced with students not having reliable internet connections, their books were in their lockers at school and not at home, they hated looking at themselves on the screen, they had discovered they could change their Zoom background or make new ones, and the list goes on. Sound familiar? It was as if students and teachers alike had been cast in a science fiction movie that none of us had auditioned for in the first place. Going to school was truly going into another reality.

My students were on overload and we were only one week into virtual learning. We were all in a new environment with variables that had not been in the social mix before. I could not teach my class as usual. Something had to change.

Giving grace

My first step was giving grace to myself. I do not think as teachers and artists we do this often enough. Giving myself grace was permission to forgive my mistakes, lapses in judgment and hurtful behaviour because no one is perfect. After having taught for over 25 years this one was hard for me. The reality was that teaching virtually was a completely foreign land I had to navigate.

Realising that the way something was supposed to happen in-person will not go that way online was inevitable. We were all adapting, students and teachers, to this new format, and at some point, along the way, we might stumble, and it is okay. I had to surrender to the fact that the uncertain and inequitable world was happening as my class was happening. Everyone was holding a lot. I had to remind myself and my students of this. By giving grace to myself and to my students I was cultivating compassion for one another. Being real and truly authentic through the journey allowed me to breathe. For example, when you think you have shared your screen and you are midway through a PowerPoint and you hear a quiet voice say: 'Ms. Nordleaf, should we be able to see this?'. Yes! Glitches happen and when you are truly authentic – 'Oh my gosh! Did the screen share not work? I am so sorry!' - it creates bridges of connection.

I wanted my students to experience the joy of learning again and to have fun, to play – even though we were stuck in boxes on a screen. So I became the student again. I started researching online and rereading different works for ideas and inspiration.

I thought about my roots as a theatre teacher. I found my copy of *Improvisation for the Theatre* by Viola Spolin. I knew how to build community in my theatre classroom but how to transfer those practices into the virtual classroom, that was the challenge.

Spolin called her work 'Kindergarten for the 21st century'. She felt that the essence of play, for both actors and audience, creates true community. In the theatre classroom, the players take turns being actors or audience. Spolin believed in shedding the ills of authoritarian teaching and rote learning. She called that type of teaching the Approval/Disapproval Syndrome.^[1] I had to stop a moment and think about this aspect. I started to realise that my students were not only feeling the stresses of the pandemic itself and the lockdown but their exposure in the virtual classroom had just sparked the Approval/Disapproval Syndrome they experience with social media. Whether they wanted it or not, even more of their life was exposed. They did not have the option of how much they shared if their camera was on – their entire class was *in their bedroom*, or dining room, or whatever room they used for school in this new normal. Granted they were not counting likes or dislikes on a posting, but they were still exposed in a totally different way than in the physical classroom.

Here I am wanting students to play and have fun but they are all worried about 'the other' looking at them and judging them. I decided I needed to give them a problem to solve.

Point of concentration

In my in-person classes, I begin the year with an exercise based on Spolin's work on the Point of Concentration. It is the practice of giving problems to solve problems. By investing in solving the problem the student's focus is off of themselves and on the task of solving of the problem.

So, on Monday, I gave my class a problem they needed to help me solve. I began class with the announcement that since we were in a new learning environment, we needed *new classroom agreements*. I asked where we should start, what did they want to see in the new virtual classroom. What made them comfortable in the virtual classroom and what made them uncomfortable?

Some examples of the new agreements written by students were:

- o Do not eat breakfast on-screen – turn off your camera, please.
- o Make sure to mute if you are not talking.
- o Close the window blinds behind your head or we won't be able to see your face.
- o Be respectful when someone is talking – don't roll your eyes *we can see you*.
- o Pay attention and do not play video games during class. Ms. Nordleaf can see the lights flashing on your face.
- o **Do not** use the chat in Zoom for friend conversations – we can all read it.
- o **Do use** the chat in Zoom when you have a question, especially if your microphone isn't working, we want to know what you are thinking.
- o Rename yourself with personal pronouns in front of your name.
- o People can see you on camera – remember to dress for learning.
- o **Follow the original class communication guidelines:**

- o When you get feedback from a classmate remember to
- o Be genuine
- o Be accepting
- o Be empathetic
- o Be honest

My teacher requests for the new class agreements were:

- Be present. Each class will be packed, so prepare yourself to be engaged throughout.
- Listen carefully to whoever is speaking in the virtual room.
- Try not to interrupt, and if you do, apologise.
- Make space, take space.
- Be open to learning.
- Be comfortable with being uncomfortable.
- We start on time and end on time.
- Message someone in class or email the teacher if you are having trouble getting into the Zoom room.
- I expect your full engagement and participation in class.

One way to co-create norms is to ask students how we need to engage to foster a respectful, creative, rigorous classroom community: you can invite them to brainstorm in these four 'directions': student to student, student to professor, professor to student, and student to self. They will have a lot of good ideas, and if they co-create the agreements, they will be more accountable to them.

The daily check-in

I use openers and check-ins at the beginning of my classes. I discovered that in my virtual teaching this was to become THE MOST IMPORTANT time for my students. Yes, it can take time – but the support to the social and emotional wellbeing of my students was more important than the content I was supposed to be covering at that point.

I started out with the opener of **roses and thorns**. This is a quick activity where students participate by sharing roses - something positive going on for them that day - and thorns, which are negative, or at least less than positive.

Students can choose their level of vulnerability e.g. a rose can simply be 'the weather is nice today'. A low-stakes thorn might be 'I feel tired'. Yet many students choose to share more personal items: 'My rose is that even though I'm stressed out, I got all my homework done' or 'My thorn is that my dog is sick and I'm really worried about her'.

Going around the virtual classroom, each student stated one rose and one thorn. I shared mine as well. The whole process takes five minutes or less. Even though this fast activity may seem simple, the rose and thorn check-in, became an essential part of my classroom community-building.

Keep in mind – this was not a time to solve a personal problem – to comment on a student’s thoughts or events. Once the student shared, I would say thank you and move on to the next student. If something did come up that seemed serious, I connected with that student outside of class.

In order to build community and trust, you have to begin by building the foundation. I discovered that in many instances this was the only time a student was being asked about what is on their mind. I could actually see a sense of relief come over them as their shoulders relaxed after we finished the check-in. I also had the student that gave a silly answer every day or a one-word answer. That was totally fine. If they were not at a place where they could share yet that told me a tremendous amount about where they were at in trusting the group. It was also a signal for me that something else was going on in that student’s world and I probably needed to meet with them outside of class to check-in.

I incorporated different check-in activities as the quarter progressed – Soup to nuts or What’s your number.

Soup to nuts

I learned this activity as a student in my own high school. My history teacher opened every class, every day with the question: ‘Does anyone have anything from soup to nuts?’.

This was a time where students would share an announcement about a club activity or sporting event happening in the school community, or a question about a new school rule, or a question/comment about student activities, or you could bring in a current event – a newspaper clipping or magazine article.

When our teacher invited us to start the conversation, we felt important because one) he asked what was on our minds and two) he truly listened to what was important to us in that moment whether it was the issue of voting for the theme for a dance or that it was unfair that members of the student body who wanted to attend an away sporting event could not ride the athletic bus. Inevitably, through the *soup to nuts* discussion, we found out what the important issues were for each other as students, what our interests and passions were, and in his classroom, the student comments were all respected and valued. Talk about feeling empowered as a student. We learned early on that rolling our eyes or making remarks under our breath sent a message to the speaker and was not acceptable.

How does Soup to nuts work in my classroom?

I ask: ‘Does anyone have anything from soup to nuts?’. Then students raise their hand to share about a new movie that is coming out on Netflix, that their dog got sick all over their shoes, that they get to go snow skiing for the weekend and actually leave their house, and the list goes on.

Initially, this check-in activity failed with fireworks. There were all these faces in boxes looking at me like I had horns growing out of my head. So, I started the check-in. I said: 'Hey, has anyone seen the photos of the new baby Orca that was born in the Puget Sound?'. Several students shook their heads, and I shared my screen with a photo of the new Orca. This was an example of something news-related that was not political nor was it about Covid. Then someone said they had had an incredible takeout dinner and they shared their experience with a new restaurant in the area. These were low-stakes personal shares. As the quarter progressed, we learned about new animals that had joined families through pet adoption, new house projects their family was undertaking, fears about parent job loss, and the fears that maybe someone in their family had been exposed to Covid. I slowly saw my students' willingness to be vulnerable and to share, increase.

Using this specific opener in my virtual classroom has made a tremendous difference for my students and for myself as a teacher this year. I have gotten to know a different dimension of my students.

What's your number?

I learned this version of What's your number from a student at Pacific Lutheran University. He was leading an improv workshop for my students and he said: 'Okay – I need to know your number for today. This will tell me the level of involvement you want to embrace while we play. If you are 1 it means "I just want to watch" if your number is a 5 it means "Sure, I'll play" and if you are a 10 it means "Huzzah! I love this! Let's do improv!"'

I use What's your number not only for theatre games but I also use a version that is more like taking a student's temperature. I might ask: 'I'm asking your number today to find out how your week is going. 1 being "It's horrible" and 10 being, "My life is going great!"'

I have used What's your number to find out how students feel about a lesson in terms of their understanding. Sometimes I look at my students' faces, and I know they want to understand but perhaps my lesson did not translate as well as virtually as I thought it did. So, when I ask their number for understanding I might get: 1 as in 'I have no idea what you just said' and 10 as in 'Yes! I got it – let's go'. If I get a majority of 5s I know I need to reteach the lesson.

Additional **Check-ins** you might consider is to ask your student to engage in building community are:

- Represent your week in an emoji or hashtag.
- Share how you are doing in the form of a weather pattern or forecast (raining, cloudy, sunny).
- Fist to five (fist being a ranking of zero, up to all five fingers) on how you are doing and explain why.
- What is one joyful practice that is energising you (as a student or human in the world)?

- You may also invite announcements or celebrations - these are things students usually share with each other in person as they walk into a classroom, so it can be good to make intentional space for them.
- Just because you are online does not mean you can't do things like mindfulness practices to centre the class.
- Take time for students to share appreciations with one another at the end of class, for anything big or small, related to the class or not. Again, this helps in fostering community when you are not in person.
- Ask students to all use the video (if they can) to help to maintain human connection. In an online environment, we can still connect through body language and eye contact, though limited.

Reflections

I assign reflections based on the level of the student and the work we are studying in class. In my virtual classroom for 9th grade Introduction to Theatre, I had students write a paragraph reflection on each day. I gave them basic questions as prompts that they answered in their reflection journal. For older students, I give them more freedom to reflect on the work of the day. If they are working in small groups I might have them reflect on the week's work. My IB DP students write in their journals at will but I do require a weekly journal reflection that is published on their personal websites that they create at the beginning of Year 1. This reflection journal is based on the work they are doing in class and I ask that they explain their work. Students are always allowed to draw or include pictures in their journals.

Reading student reflections was in fact another way of checking in. We all know the student who is the reluctant one to share verbally. Sometimes the stakes are too high. But just assigning a paragraph reflection in Google classroom allows students to write, reflect, submit that Google doc and release the energy of that experience for now.

Equitable participation

As members of the teaching vocation in the past year and a half, we have all experienced the challenges of equitable participation for our students. Whether students had issues with connectivity to the internet, coming to class on a smartphone, a camera not working, a microphone not working, or having to be completely asynchronous because there was no device to use for online school – it has all been a continuous puzzle to solve.

I found that being transparent, genuine and honest with my students on this issue was a must. They can see their peers struggling. They know when a peer is forced into an asynchronous learning situation because they cannot attend the hybrid schedule and in-person learning. They know when someone cannot use their camera due to connectivity issues. They want to help their peers, so my rule of thumb is - do not be afraid to start the conversation. Students use empathy in real-time to help them solve the problem.

By starting the conversation students will find solutions *with* you. A student could not use their camera and stay connected to the virtual class. So I started the conversation with the class community and explained my concerns and asked them for help. The students were incredible. They discovered ways for classmates to participate in theatre games through sound when their cameras weren't functioning, and they invented ways that a student who does not have a working microphone can participate through gestures and using the chat. When my 9th grade Intro to Theatre class worked on a devising project, they made sure that everyone in the group participated. They supported each other and recognised strengths in each other the group could draw from.

Lessons along the way

I learned very early on this road trip to virtual teaching, that as a teacher, I had to summon a higher amount of energy to demonstrate my excitement and engagement in the class. Authenticity transfers across the digital platform and it changes the tone and environment in the classroom. If you are not having fun neither is the rest of the community. I have always practiced co-learning and being transparent with students when I am in the classroom. This is just as important, if not more, in the virtual classroom. It is okay to say: 'I don't know' or 'Well, I made a mistake...'. I have found my students respect me when I share my human side. And - it is so much more enjoyable when you can just be yourself and get to know your students.

^[1] *Improvisation for the Theatre*, Viola Spolin, 1963, p20.

Gretchen Nordleaf-Nelson has enjoyed working and learning with students for over 30 years. She has taught in suburban, urban and independent school settings in four different states. Over the course of her teaching tenure, she has taught English (9-12), IB Theatre, IB Language and Literature, Media Design as an IB Visual Art, Journalism, ELL Literature and History, Art History and Holistic Health. Drawing on her background in theatre and Dorothy Heathcote's work she has also developed and taught professional development courses for teachers: Drama Methods for the Classroom Teacher and The Teacher as Actor. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education from Western Washington University and a Master of Arts in Theatre from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.