

Building Social Networks in the Classroom

by Blaire Willson Toso



Humans are social creatures and therefore usually need human interaction. In fact, having someone to talk to or go to for advice lessens symptoms of depression. A social network refers to friends, family, co-workers, and people we can turn to for both emotional and material support.



Rini Templeton

Social networks are key to helping us have a positive outlook on life. They support us emotionally, financially, socially, and politically.

The adult education classroom can play an important role in helping students build stronger and larger networks. Classrooms provide opportunities for students and staff to access important resources of friendship, skills, and contacts beyond their immediate communities. Many students prize the social interaction of the classroom even more than the educational opportunities. Students often describe their classroom experience as expanding their sense of family and enhancing their self-esteem, which, when combined with increased literacy skills, help students take more chances in pursuing their goals.

As students acquire more education, their world view evolves, and their location within their old network shifts. This shift can be unsettling for both the learner and his/her network. Other learners and staff will understand the tension between staying with the familiar and moving toward the unknown. Fellow students can help each other negotiate this changing identity.

Intentional classroom activities on network-building (see p. 50) can create meaningful, supportive, and resource-rich relationships among students and staff.

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Some examples of network-building activities are:

- Take time for sharing information on particular topics or problems in students' lives. Learners have a great deal of information that is of value to others in the classroom. Allow students to learn who in the class may serve as a resource in a particular situation.
- Set up groups that research solutions for issues affecting learners' daily lives (e.g., finding day care, transportation, jobs, or housing). These groups must go beyond the discussion level. Students should have the opportunity to research together and come up with possible solutions. These groups acknowledge learner expertise, allow relationships to deepen, and develop the students' self-directed learning skills.
- Create opportunities for students to simply listen to each other. Emotional stress can hinder learning; sharing can alleviate stress. Having someone listen (without necessarily offering solutions), can be very helpful.
- Offer mentor or tutor opportunities, as well as field trips, that connect students with politicians, businesspeople, museum curators, restaurant owners, etc. These experiences familiarize learners with situations and people not readily accessible to them, and they will have the chance to see themselves as explorers of the world, as people that make the world.
- Plan classroom – or community-based projects that encourage students to negotiate with one another and rely on one another, increasing the opportunity for their interactions to extend beyond the classroom setting. The projects should require students to actively engage with one another, crossing boundaries of language, culture, community, and class, exposing all students to differences of opinions and experiences, making the unknown less intimidating, particularly once they notice how a network can be built out of a group of strangers.
- Sponsor public readings of written works or arrange other public speaking opportunities. Public speaking gives students a chance to be heard by the wider community. In preparation for the event and the collective risk-taking that is involved, the group typically becomes more supportive, forming bonds and building confidence.

Read Further

For first-hand accounts of students using network-building activities such as those described here, see: “Transit Cuts: Coming to a City Near You?” by Alex Dow on p. 14, “Making Connections with Other Students” by Pierre-Line Janvier on p. 43, “Students Helping Students by Getting Involved” by Bruce Larson on p. 24, and “I Won’t Quit” by Sandra Martineau on p. 19.