

6-4-2014

Response to Julie Watts' Examination of Hyperbonding: What Might a Focus on Learning Have to Offer?

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Recommended Citation

Wiedenhaupt, S. (2014). Response to Julie Watts' Examination of Hyperbonding: What Might a Focus on Learning Have to Offer?. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 2(1), Article 8.
Available at: <http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol2/iss1/8>

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Abstract

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Keywords

learning, classroom management, hyperbonding, student agency, group work, complex instruction, interdependence, group worthy tasks, mindset

After reading Julie Watts' "Why Hyperbonding Occurs in the Learning Community Classroom and What To Do About It," I started thinking about why it is that students sometimes seem unengaged in my classes. The concept of hyperbonding itself is new to me and not one that I have used to make sense of why lessons haven't worked. Rather, in my sixteen years of teaching, I have gauged the success of learning communities by how *well* the students have bonded and how much they lean into each other for the purpose of learning.

Problems such as "off-task conversations during lecture or lab time, inappropriate dominance over class discussions, and other unruly behaviors" may indeed stem from issues of power as the author suggested—but perhaps they also have to do with how the class is structured to invite participation, reveal learners' worth, nurture perceived capacities for learning, and create access to learning. In short, rather than managing student behavior, I wonder what strategies that focus on engaging students have to offer. Several strategies the author suggested for classroom management could become effective pedagogical tools for accomplishing this goal (i.e. community agreements, group work, building relationships, reflection and portfolios).

Take group work, for example. In their pedagogy of *Complex Instruction*, Elizabeth Cohen and her colleagues developed a framework for purposefully structuring group work to deepen engagement (Cohen, 1994; Lotan, 2003). One feature of the framework also attends to issues of power, but in the form of status issues that come from insufficiently scaffolded or structured group work. These issues can be readily seen by attending to who is facing whom, who gets to speak, whose ideas are seen as valuable, and who is in control of the materials and decisions. In response, these educational researchers provide a set of guidelines for structuring group work based on an unambiguous need for everyone's contributions, thus increasing the chances that group members will be aware of each other's assets.. Another feature of the framework has to do with noticing whether the work we ask students to do is *group worthy*, that is whether the task itself (1) is complex enough to require group effort; (2) is open ended enough that it would benefit from the use of different kinds of thinking and problem solving approaches; and (3) builds in both individual and group accountability for learning and participation.

Another possible explanation for the unproductive participation Julie Watts describes may be that students are avoiding engagement rather than resisting or competing for power. Carol Dweck's work on what students believe about their intelligence suggests that students avoid challenging tasks or stop trying when they think their efforts have no bearing on the development of their abilities (Dweck, 2000). The tools Julie Watts recommends—such as reflection, self-assessment and portfolios—can become powerful means for developing student

agency when they are used for the purpose of helping students assume responsibility for their learning.

My professional goal as a teacher and teacher-educator has long been to learn how to build a climate in which student agency and productive interdependence flourish. I too think about the classroom as a social body and, as a result, how I exercise my power to effect student behavior. My response to this article is that bonding—if it is around learning—can be not only productive but also necessary for learning. Ultimately, the question is how we use our power as teachers to create social spaces that help students rethink their ideas, value each other, and discover how their contributions can matter in the learning community and the world.

References

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