

How can we build community in the union classroom?

We want union activists and members to be “ambassadors” for our union, to spread the good word about what we do. It’s important for the survival and growth of the labour movement.

But this is easier said than done. Many of us are reluctant to talk to members who are outside our social circles. We’re hesitant to talk to members whose opinions may differ from our own. And we absolutely want to avoid talking to members whom we know will criticize the union.

There are a few reasons for our reluctance to talk to others. Conditions of life and work are stretching us thin. We have less energy to deal with anything other than hearing our own views echoed back to us. Second, we might be afraid that we’ll get a hostile response or afraid of being asked something we don’t know how to answer. Finally, we used to live in stable, long-term communities where our survival depended on maintaining relationships with neighbours who we didn’t always like or resemble. That’s changed now. And we’ve become “deskilled” in the diplomatic and conversational skills needed to build relationships and community.

The union movement in Canada has started to address this issue of rebuilding relationships in the workplace. USW’s FAIRNESS WORKS initiative and its counterparts in other unions are critical programs. They require us to support, over the long-term, the reskilling of our members to listen to and talk with each other.

What can we, as union educators, do to build community before and after class and during breaks?

Start by being aware of how you feel when you enter a room full of strangers. Now imagine that course participants probably have the same kinds of anxieties, especially on the first day of a course.

Here are a couple of steps you can take to help ease the discomfort:

- Introduce yourself to participants as they arrive.
- If a participant isn’t sure where to sit, encourage them to take a seat next to someone else and introduce them to one another.
- Try to spend coffee and lunch breaks mingling with participants.
- Organize a group outing for participants who don’t want to eat supper alone but might be too shy to invite others.

- Never skip over opening activities that allow participants to meet others in the room.
- If there's a "glitch" in the agenda — a delay waiting for people or materials to arrive, a break-down in technology — lead the group in a brief roundtable discussion or other activity that aims to better acquaint each with the others.

What can union educators do to build community during the class itself?

What we do during the course can help build a stronger union community. When a participant disagrees or raises a difficult issue, our response will affect whether that participant feels like he or she belongs in the classroom. We can model good, community-building responses, or responses that exclude and push members away.

Here's a real-life example:

In a stewards' course, participants were practising talking with members who were angry with the union. One steward put up his hand and said, "I know we have to do this, but I'd really rather talk with my supervisor than my members. She's smarter and doesn't give me nearly as much grief. Between us, we can get things sorted out."

The facilitators could have told this steward he was wrong and given the "correct" answer. Or they could have tried to sidestep his extremely inconvenient remark. But that would likely have made the participant feel stupid, and damaged his sense of belonging in our union.

So instead the facilitators took a deep breath, and asked the group some questions: What exactly happens when stewards try to talk to unhappy members? What impact does this kind of reaction have on the stewards? What might members think if they see the steward talking only with the supervisor?

They talked further and dug deeper. One of the most important questions was: Which of the members' criticisms, if any, might be true? The facilitators asked the group for suggestions of what else this steward could have done. Even if no one had any answers at that moment, at least the facilitators have given participants space to voice their true feelings and have made the classroom a safe place to discuss real issues. Naming the problem in a clear and honest way is one of the first steps to finding solutions.

(Modified from "Taking back our locals, one conversation at a time", by Adriane Paavo and Barb Thomas, Our Times, March/April 2015.)