Bonding in the ELT Classroom: Genuine Interest and People-Centricity

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Introduction
At a recent dinner with a friend, one of the topics of conversation touched on a mutual acquaintance who we agreed is sociable but does not seem to build deep connections with others. As we were reflecting on the reason, the dinner friend’s analysis was that this mutual acquaintance appears to lack a sincere and genuine interest in people except for very few selected ones. The key indicator that gives others this perception is that he does not appear keen to listen to what others have to offer but is more interested in presenting or advancing his opinion. Because of this disinterested stance, those around him sense a lack of sincerity and conclude that even though he socializes and interacts, the impression he gives is that he is “impersonal” and lacking in people-centricity.

There are two very powerful perceptions in this reflection that resonate with the concept of bonding within a community, namely genuine interest and people-centricity. If bonding refers to the minimization of social distance, specifically in a classroom context where there is an inherent power dynamic at play between students and the teacher, at least two elements must be present for bonding to happen and to be sustained. First, both the teacher and students must show a good degree of sincerity in wanting to develop a positive teaching/learning relationship and an enabling teaching/learning environment. Second, sincere and genuine interest is in fact reflective of a people-centric approach. The implication to the teacher is that conscious, concerted and purposeful effort is necessary to create a teaching/learning climate that facilitates or strengthens bonding, which in turn leads to the intended learning outcome of an engaged classroom.

Focus of paper
In this paper, I would like to focus on two simple yet effective strategies that I use as a teacher to establish and maintain connections with my students. In discussing these strategies, I will draw upon my experience of teaching two very different writing and communication modules to illustrate how these strategies have worked despite the differences in (a) the
profile and motivation level of students, and (b) the purposes and intended outcomes of the modules.

**Brief overview of modules**
The two modules cited in this discussion are a writing and communication module developed for undergraduate music students and a writing and presentation module designed for graduate students from the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering. There are two key similarities between both modules. First, based on Hyland’s definition (2006) of types of language courses, both are English for Academic Purposes (Specific) modules. The second similarity concerns the level of intrinsic motivation among students, which may not be initially apparent as there are no modular credits for both modules.

In terms of differences, both modules vary in the intended learning outcomes and levels of language competence. While the music module addresses the basic language and communication needs of music students, the engineering module focuses on advancing and enhancing electrical and computer engineering graduate students’ skills in leveraging on linguistic and rhetorical structure for precise, clear and coherent publications in discipline-specific journals and presentations at academic conferences. Another key difference pertains to the language competency of these two groups of students: The music module caters to students who have not met the threshold competency as required by the Conservatory and the University, whereas students in the engineering module are proficient users of the language. Therefore, the design, methodology and approach used for these two modules are different.

**Bonding strategies**
Despite the differences, my approach to bonding is similar for both groups of students. It centres on addressing motivational and relevancy issues through an understanding of and an appreciation for individuals. The strategies demand commitment from the teacher to be consistent, persistent and perhaps to have a good degree of ingenuity in employing the appropriate “dosage” at the right time.

**Personalizing interactions**
As a language teacher at the National University of Singapore, I am privileged to have enjoyed a small tutorial group size where the ratio between teacher and students is one to an
average of 15. This has allowed me to be able to know all the names of my students by the second tutorial session. The small group size has also afforded me the time for students in my class to get to know each other a bit better.

In addition to the usual first-lesson introductions, I make conscious effort to allow for time in each subsequent lesson for students to find out more about individuals who are in this same learning community. As names are the most fundamental element identifying an individual, I incorporate many opportunities and occasions in my classes that require students to make use of names. A simple technique involves calling out of names. Several three to five-minute activities include the following:

a) Getting students to call out names of students who are seated before them during the first few lessons. Seating arrangement could be in a circle or in a theatre format. The first person will introduce his/her name. The second person will repeat the first person’s name and then introduce his/her name. The third person will repeat the first two persons’ names followed by his/her name. This continues until the last student has called out everyone’s name. In short, if there are 15 students in the class, the one whose name is called out first will have had his/her name called 15 times when the activity is done.

b) Recording of attendance could be done by different students in every tutorial session. While tutorial attendance is optional, teachers are still required to keep a record of it. What I request the student who records attendance to do besides doing this mechanical administrative work is to at least greet and engage in a few minutes of small talk. At the initial stage, this may create some discomfort, but I have observed that over time, students do get used to it and seem to enjoy the interaction.

c) Volunteering another person to respond is another technique that has been effective. This usually starts with the teacher asking for volunteers to make a response. In the context where I teach, there are usually not many students who are keen to volunteer. There could be a cultural explanation for this. Therefore, in the case where no other volunteers are forthcoming besides the usual few, the person who currently responds is requested to suggest another classmate to contribute his/her thoughts.
The activities described above may not be novel. In addition, teachers may have other even more exciting and interesting five-minute activities for bonding purposes that have been effectively and successfully implemented. Nonetheless, what is crucial is that the concept and benefits of personalizing interactions and learning from one another in a community are clearly articulated to the students. Those who are convinced will treat such seemingly trivial activities with a greater degree of enthusiasm and engagement. If done consistently and in the right spirit, a friendly classroom climate which is conducive to sharing and learning will develop.

To better understand the impact of constant reinforcement of these simple and easy to implement activities, let me take the specific modules as examples. In the music module, where students have a low competency in language and communication, they are most used to one-on-one tutorial sessions with their major teachers, and there are issues of motivation, most of the students would rather remain passive in class. To get them to open up and warm up to the idea of interacting with others beyond those in the same ensemble or instrument class, I look for a “champion.” At the same time, I identify a few very reluctant students. Through informal chat, email or other social media platforms, I encourage the “champion” to initiate communication and allow others to have their turns. As for the very few reluctant students, in talking to them individually, I would have had a good sense of some of their interests and strengths. Separately, out of class, I prepare these students, in particular if I intend to ask them to take attendance and make small talk with the rest or if I plan to ask them to volunteer to give response. With constant encouraging feedback and prompting, these students develop a good level of confidence and openness in sharing. The result can be heartening as evident at the end of the semester when these students are reluctant to say goodbye at the last tutorial class.

In the engineering module, as the students are mature and are competent users of the English language, the difficulty is not in getting them to interact but to make them see the relevance of sharing and connecting with the other students in the class. While in this module all of the graduate students are from the same department, their research areas could still be vastly different as there are many sub-disciplines within the same field. As such, it is a common phenomenon that a student studying about antennae may not know very much about another sub-discipline, take for instance, solar power. Similar to the music module, there are limited
opportunities for most of the graduate students to interact with others in a more structured learning environment except for in department seminars. Instead, they focus mainly on their lab experiments and they discuss their progress and their work mainly with their supervisor(s). At the initial stage of my class, these students are usually sceptical about the relevance of these activities which they term as social and not intellectual or academic. To some of them, it is not content-based, insignificant and does not contribute to their studies. However, as they get to know more about the specific research areas of one another, my observation is that most are genuinely interested in research conducted by their peers and share insightful feedback with their peers. Although it would have been even more encouraging if these students eventually collaborate with one another in inter- or multi-disciplinary research, such observation is not readily available within the constraint of the module and may require a longitudinal study approach to explore indicators of impact.

In summary, what is of significance for relationship-building in these activities is not merely the activities but how the teacher choreographs them, intervenes at the appropriate junctures to capture teachable moments, and negotiates with individuals in the classroom to bring forth intended learning outcomes.

**Personalising lessons**

Besides this first level of getting-to-know activities, a deeper engagement involves the teacher’s designing tasks and responding to students’ work in ways that facilitate teamwork and enhance bonding. I would like to refer to this deeper engagement as personalising lessons.

Like many teachers, I believe that for sustained learning to take place, one’s learning experience must not be limited only to intellectual pursuits. Such pursuits must be complemented by interpersonal and social aspects of learning. In fact, constructivists (Bruner, 1960; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) have long talked about knowledge making, which is influenced by one’s schemata and one’s conversation with others in the same community. This concept is closely related to the idea of scaffolding (Bruffee, 1993; Lipponen, 2002) and the creation of success milestones in one’s learning journey.

I am aware that there is a set of planned syllabi and materials in the modules and programmes that we teach. In addition, in most of our teaching contexts, it is impractical and unrealistic to
have personalised lessons. What I am referring to is not one-on-one tutoring but a conscious effort by the teacher to incorporate requirements in the tasks that heighten students’ sense of inquiry and curiosity in their own work or the work of others. The requirement could be an explicit criterion in the tasks requesting them to broaden the discussion beyond their areas of specialization or it could be built into the peer and teacher feedback mechanism.

Let me use the following two very specific examples to illustrate what I mean. In the engineering module that I teach, one of the tasks requires students to do a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the use of tenses in established journal articles in their respective sub-fields. Once they are ready with their analysis, students are invited to share their observations with their peers. In sharing the conventions in their sub-fields, the students discover peculiarities in some journals. In sharing about the established journals, one of the pleasant surprises that I find the students appreciate is there is potential for them to make contributions to many unlikely titles that they may otherwise have missed. Conversations about such matters continue beyond the class, extending academic pursuits to the interpersonal and social sphere.

In the music module, students are requested to attend one another’s recital and write a review on the performance. The review is not about the technical aspects of the performance but about how individual musicians convey the piece and connect with the audience. Some students take this exercise rather seriously by going beyond what is required for the module. Instead of seeking those who play the same family of instruments for feedback, the students begin to reach out to others. While the impact of this bonding may be subtle in a language and communication classroom, its significance can be felt when students perform as a team in a quartet, ensemble or orchestra.

In terms of response and feedback from the teacher, personalising lessons refers to knowing each student enough to give apt response or feedback at the right time. This may mean going beyond completing the usual appraisal/feedback forms that teachers use. In the context of the music module, this may mean attending students’ recitals or performance; for the engineering module, it may mean participating in students’ seminars or acquainting with the journal articles and papers students are likely to read and write about.
Whichever the case may be, bonds are developed and strengthened when parties involved are perceived to give as much as they take. Activities become purposeful when everyone involved feels that they have a part in enhancing the learning experience of others. In addition, students must recognize that their success milestones in academic pursuits are as much a reflection of their intellectual capability as they are a result of their engagement with others in a shared community.

**Concluding remarks**
I have endeavoured to illustrate that for bonding in the classroom to take place, those intimately involved in this environment must recognize the significance of learning within a community. This entails conscious effort in connecting with people. In short, sustained learning and sense making are enhanced when contextualized within a community where members demonstrate genuine interest in one another and what they do.

*Going back to the brief topic of conversation with my dinner friend, we figured that if we were keen to pursue a stronger relationship with this mutual acquaintance, perhaps we might want to make the effort to connect with him. After all, bonding is two-way.*

**References**


About the author

KC Lee is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for English Language Communication. She has a keen interest in the use of computer and technology in the language and communication classroom. Her current research interest is in the application of social network sites in enhancing teaching and learning. At present, KC coordinates and teaches a module that prepares engineering graduate students for publication and paper presentations.