

Building Classroom Community Through Theatre-Inspired Practices

by Aren A. Morris, Fine Arts Specialist, Halifax Regional Centre for Education

As a Fine Arts Specialist with Halifax Regional Arts, I have the privilege of being invited into classrooms to work with teachers and students every day. In those shared spaces, I see teachers taking relationship-building seriously; they know who is in front of them and offer the best they can to each learner.

At the same time, I recognize the complexity, fatigue, and increasing strain present in many classroom environments. Educators are navigating significant demands—adapting to diverse learner needs, implementing individualized approaches, and supporting positive behaviour—while ensuring meaningful learning still takes place.

Why Community Building Matters

This is where community building becomes invaluable. It goes beyond strengthening relationships between teacher and student—it creates intentional opportunities for students to build relationships with *one another*. It is social-emotional frontloading; fostering spaces where students know, trust, cooperate with, and empathize with each other.

In my 15 years teaching Drama and Dance at the secondary level—spaces where students must take positive risks—I found that community building minimized behaviour concerns and anxiety while maximizing creative and academic output. When students feel they belong, they are less likely to act out; instead, they reach out for support.

In my current role, I've spent the past eight years adapting ensemble-building techniques used in theatre for cast cohesion into everyday classroom use from Primary through Grade 12. These techniques help students (and teachers) better understand, support, and care for one another as they work and learn together.

"Building a strong community was paramount to having a successful year together in our classroom. Students felt comfortable to take risks with their learning and always felt like we all had each other's back all year."

– Grade 5 Teacher, Grosvenor Wentworth Park School

What Is Ensemble-Building?

In theatre, an ensemble is a group of performers who listen deeply, respond thoughtfully, and collaborate toward a shared goal. Though the context is artistic, the skills are universal: trust, communication, cooperation, and empathy. These same capacities allow classrooms to function as safe, thriving learning communities.

"Community and ensemble building [...] helped me develop confidence in leading communication workshop activities and helped my students come together as a classroom community. It enriched my speaking and listening curriculum and gave my students communication and public speaking tools that served them throughout the year."

– Grade 8 Teacher, Clayton Park Junior High



Techniques for Classrooms

Over the years, I've developed a simple formula: **GATHER, SHARE, PLAY**. I use this almost daily when working with students, and regardless of age, learners benefit from each component.

GATHER refers to the ways you bring the group together to acknowledge shared time and space. These are short, fun activities that help students learn names, collaborate, and build reliance and trust—icebreakers, cooperation games, or simple grounding practices. In any grade or subject, something as small as a name game or a one-word check-in communicates: *You matter. We notice when you're here. We're happy to work together.*

SHARE provides consistent opportunities for students to learn about one another, discovering commonalities and celebrating differences. A circle, a simple “Question of the Day,” and a Talking Object can transform a room. I increasingly turn to questions that move beyond favourites and into culturally responsive prompts such as: *What food do you share when celebrating with loved ones?* or *Tell us the story of your name.* Invite participation—but always allow a pass.

PLAY is an invitation to engage in something simply for enjoyment. All learners—five, fifteen, or forty-five—need play. And if you must connect play to curriculum, there are countless ways to do it. Can your class gather in a circle and “Pass the Energy” while practicing eye contact, non-verbal communication and group awareness? Can students devise short, improvised scenes to model lab safety? If students know you value “serious fun,” they are more likely to focus during challenging tasks. Play teaches listening, collaboration, and support—skills essential whether solving a math problem or creating a scene.

“We often hear about the importance of building classroom community however sometimes it is hard to know the ‘how’. The games, discussions and activities introduced were fun, engaging and targeted the goal of building classroom community.”

– School Counsellor, West Bedford School



Practical Tips

Here are a few easy entry points for building community in your space:

Start small. Offer short daily or weekly ensemble-building activities. Keep them consistent and make them a priority.

Be a role model. If you expect openness, respect, and positive risk-taking from students, demonstrate those qualities yourself—and play alongside them.

Be consistent. Community building isn't a one-off activity. Pair the work with nurturing routines and return to it throughout the year.

Celebrate progress. Acknowledge the changes you see, big and small.

Take time to reflect. Reflection strengthens the ensemble. Ask: *What helped our work today? Where did we struggle? How did we support each other?*

Community building is an ongoing process, even once your classroom feels solid. Keep returning to **GATHER, SHARE, PLAY**, and remember you don't need to be a drama teacher to use these theatre-inspired techniques. A few minutes of intentional community building invites students to experience learning as part of a supportive collective—transforming the classroom from a group of individuals into a community with a shared purpose.

Aren A. Morris is an author, educator, theatre maker, producer, typewriter enthusiast, and a gatherer of creative folk. She serves 12 schools in HRCE, working for Halifax Regional Arts as a Fine Arts Specialist with a focus on Drama, Dance and Movement. Find her on Insta at @aren_a_morris.