

Building Classroom Community in Elementary Literacy Methods Courses

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ABSTRACT

In this article, two elementary teacher educators provide a novel approach to building relationships and classroom community in their face to face elementary literacy methods courses. The authors present their classroom practice entitled “Tell Me Time” (TMT), mirroring morning meetings in K–12 settings, as the staple of building classroom community in their courses. They describe how TMT has been used to build student relationships with each other and with instructors through providing unique, personalized opportunities to socialize and connect through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Threaded throughout, the authors detail specific feedback from students and highlight how TMT has helped students find common ground with one another and made them feel comfortable, cared for, and respected by their instructors. The authors describe the reasons behind implementing TMT, outline specific TMT activities and examples that have been most effective with their students, provide insight into how to integrate technology with TMT, delineate specific steps for successfully implementing TMT, and describe lessons learned from the implementation of TMT.

KEYWORDS

classroom
community;
building
relationships;
elementary
literacy methods;
morning
meetings;
teacher
education;
teaching with
technology

***T**ell me time is by far my favorite part of this class. Thank you for getting to know us as individuals and not just a number and for allowing us to get to know one another in such fun and creative ways. I can't wait to do this with my own students when I get my own classroom!*

Several years ago, we were in conversation with a colleague of ours who shared a simple strategy that she uses at the start of her class sessions. She said at the beginning of each of her classes, she starts off with “tell me something good” and has a few students share ideas. Who knew that this brief conversation would inspire an idea for us that has become the heart of our classes that binds our students and us together? In our Language Arts Methods and Creative Arts and Children’s Literature Across the Curriculum classes, we begin each class session with what we call “Tell Me Time” (TMT). During these 5–7 minutes, we conduct short, literacy-based activities in which we build classroom community, get to know one another, and simply take a much needed brain break. While this concept as a whole is not new, it takes the form of activities such as “Morning Meetings” in K–12 classrooms (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2009), and we have evolved it to fit our literacy methods courses in teacher education. Starting our class sessions with TMT allows us to

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begin class sessions in a positive manner, and the feedback we received from the students is overwhelmingly positive. After seeking anonymous feedback on TMT through a Google Form, a recent student stated, “I think it’s something unique and I have never had a teacher or professor do something like this ever.” Frisby and Munoz (2021) stated, “For the well-being of both students and faculty it is important to have positive and healthy rapport” (p. 142). Our students agree and have shared, “I also enjoy tell me time because it gives us time to debrief and decompress from other classes that might be stressing us out” and “I think it is a great idea, and I really enjoy it. I think this should be in all classes to make students feel like they are being heard!” TMT has become a well-known part of these two courses we teach, and students look forward to it each session as we merge social and academic learning (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2009).

In this article, we will begin by delineating the research that supports the ways in which we build relationships and classroom community through TMT. We will provide samples of personalized feedback for TMT journal responses, as well as samples of how we use technology to enhance TMT through our students’ digital interactive journals. Next, we outline specific steps to successfully get started and implement TMT. The article concludes with lessons we have learned and final thoughts.

Building Relationships to Create Classroom Community

Shields-Lysiak et al. (2020) stated, “In a supportive classroom community, the teacher models how to show care, and encourages students to care for each other” (p. 43). TMT has provided us with the perfect opportunity to model how to create a caring classroom community where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences with each other and with us.

Noddings (2005) urges the public to take responsibility for raising “healthy, competent, and happy children” (p. 14), and she argues that academic achievement in schools is unobtainable when children are not provided with a caring environment. We take this stance and argue the importance of translating this belief and practice into our college courses; it is critical that we take care of our pre-service teachers before we can take care of our curricular goals and objectives. Our ultimate goal when implementing TMT is for students to begin to feel a sense of ease and joy when entering and learning in our courses, while simultaneously learning more about one another. While students are completing the TMT activity/prompt of the day, we walk around the room observing and informally commenting in order to make one-on-one connections to build and sustain relationships with our students. Once everyone has completed their TMT activity/response, we open the floor for volunteer share time as a whole class. This is where we truly build classroom community by modeling how to listen, connect, and build relationships through teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions. One student provided feedback on TMT and stated, “I love how much y’all try to get to know us!! It makes this class more enjoyable, and it makes me know how much y’all care about us!!” It is clear that students feel cared for and supported through the planned TMT interactions, responses, and discussions with their peers and instructors.

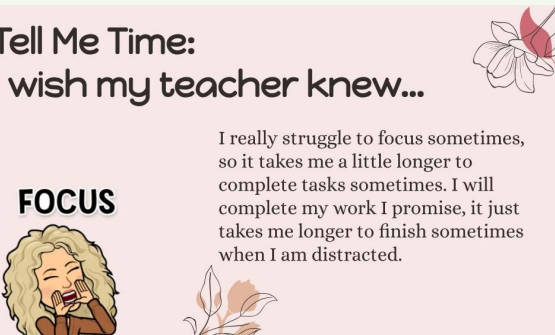
When we asked for feedback on TMT, one student stated, “The best part of it is getting to know my peers because in college it can be hard to connect with others.” When students are able to share their ideas and personal experiences with others, they often find out they have more in common with their peers than they originally thought, and this makes students feel included, rather than alone. TMT allows students to begin to build relationships with their peers in non-intimidating ways and results in connections with new classmates or new connections with current friends. Another student echoed this, saying, “It helps me to feel comfortable around my peers and get to know them a little better.” This comfortableness described allows us to create a safe space, where

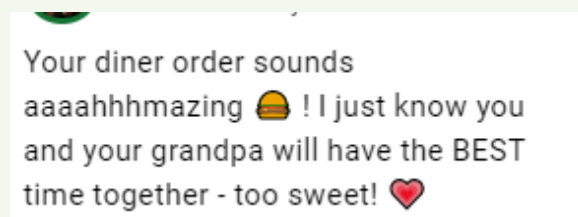
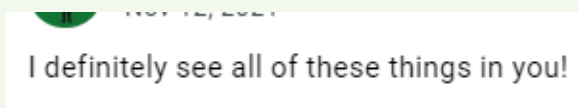
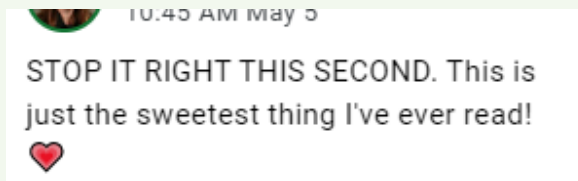
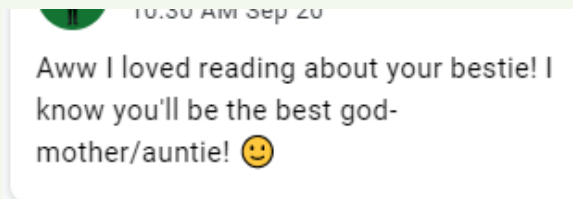
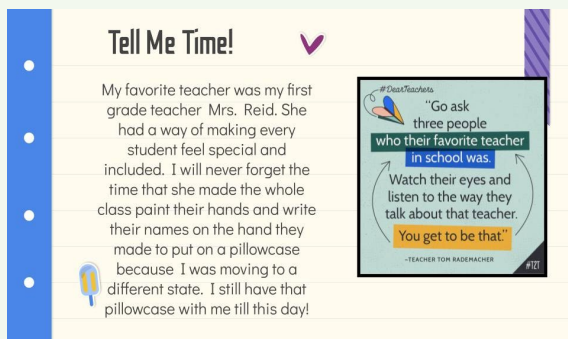
students share not only personal characteristics, but also previous academic experiences related to literacy.

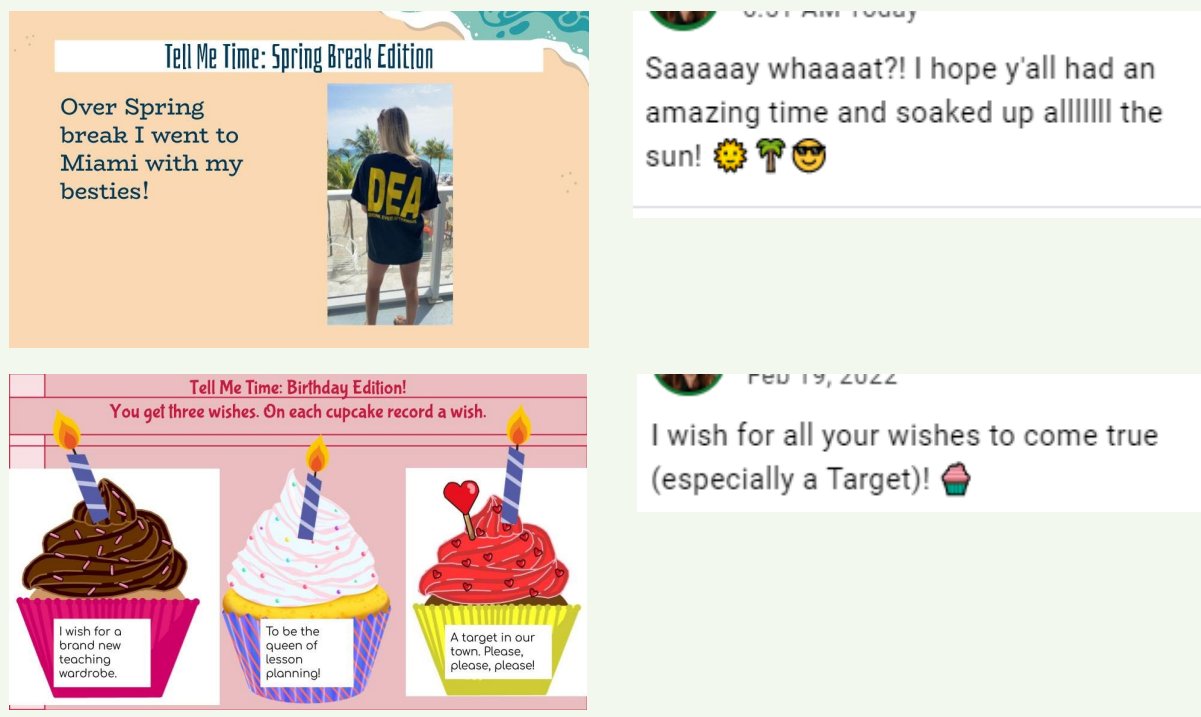
It has become critical to us, as instructors, to create these safe spaces for our students in order to provide a model of how teachers serve as facilitators and mentors, rather than authoritarian figures; hearing and respecting the voices of all of our students is central to our work during TMT. “In a learning community, the teacher is not all-knowing, all-powerful; students may and can contribute safely to the stock of classroom knowledge from their own experiences” (Cooper, 2003, pp. 87–88). When students have the opportunity to share with one another, they are able to apply their own listening and speaking skills to communicate in pairs, small groups, and whole group settings. When appropriate, we intentionally plan literacy focused TMT activities to relate to the content of the class session. During the share time, students contribute to the overall knowledge in the classroom through discussions of their literacy experiences from their own elementary days, as well as their current field placements. Alongside the stories told by our students, we as professors contribute our own classroom experiences through storytelling to deepen students’ understanding and perspectives. Kromka and Goodboy (2019) state, “While not specifically focused on narratives, recent research on effective teaching behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure, content relevance, humor) implies the potential benefits of using narratives as an effective teaching behavior” (p. 21). This practice serves as a model for the pre-service teachers to bridge these critical literacy skills that are sometimes underutilized in P–5 settings. Our ultimate goal is for our students to transfer this same student-directed, classroom community building practice into their own classrooms in order to personally connect with their students.

Another way we make meaningful connections with our students is through the feedback we provide on our students’ TMT entries in their daily digital interactive journal by using the commenting tool (Figure 1). This allows us to get to know our students on a deeper level, and we are able to make meaningful connections that are tailored to each individual student. “Feeling important and getting personalized feedback (that sounds more like text messages with my bestie!) in my interactive journal,” was cited by one student as one of their favorite parts of TMT. Google Slides, the platform our students use for their digital interactive journals, allows us to give feedback in real-time and allows us to make comments and pose questions to deepen our relationships. This also functions to give us insight and the ability to address any concerns or issues we may read in student entries; when concerns do arise, we are able to immediately reach out to students to conduct check-ins.

Figure 1: TMT Sample Personalized Feedback

Student Digital Journal TMT Entries	Sample Feedback to Students
Tell Me Time: I wish my teacher knew... FOCUS I really struggle to focus sometimes, so it takes me a little longer to complete tasks sometimes. I will complete my work I promise, it just takes me longer to finish sometimes when I am distracted. 	11:25 AM Today I completely understand - if you ever need me to slow down, please let me know! Also, it may help to give yourself some visual cues to remind yourself to go back and finish. Pro tip: Highlight things you need to go back to in bright yellow so it reminds you "hey, you didn't finish this!". 😊 Show less

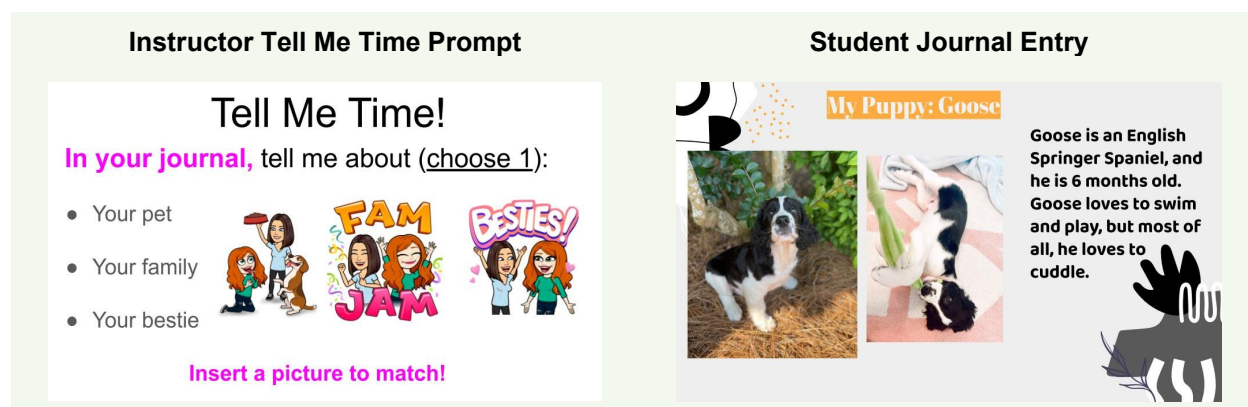




Technology and Tell Me Time

In our classes, TMTs are often captured in our students' digital interactive journals, which are used daily and, as stated above, completed in Google Slides. Students have the opportunity to digitally respond to prompts in writing and in images such as bitmojis, clipart, photographs, and gifs (Figure 2). The prompts of these TMTs often align with the content of our literacy classes, but, more often, are completely unrelated and allow us to simply make personal connections with our students and for our students to make personal connections with one another. It is easy for students to write their journal entries in their interactive journals and turn their laptop screens or tablets around to share their ideas and images with one another before sharing with the whole group. In addition to our students completing their TMT entries individually, students are also able to collaborate as a whole class or in small groups using tools such as Jamboard and Google Forms to respond to TMT prompts and activities.

Figure 2: Tell Me Time Instructor Prompts and Sample Student Journal Entries



**TELL ME TIME:
I WISH MY TEACHER KNEW EDITION**

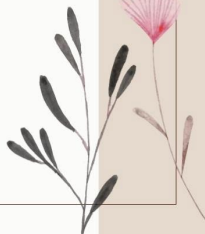
In your journal, complete this sentence:
I wish my teacher knew...

Do I need to know anything right now? If so, send me an email - like now. I got you!



Tell Me Time: I Wish My Teacher Knew

I wish my teacher knew that even though I am quiet in class I do enjoy what we are learning, I am just shy.



Tell Me Time: Fishbowl Edition



Click me to see the TikTok that inspired today's Tell Me Time!

Insert a fish and/or fishbowl into your journal, and write a question you have for me about teaching reading or writing.

Have an unrelated question? A funny question?

Ask away!

Let's Share!



Tell Me Time: Steps to Success

Our practices reflect the Responsive Classroom Model, as outlined in *Sample Morning Meetings in a Responsive Classroom* (2009). Each class session includes the following three components, slightly adapted and combined, in order to establish respectful learning and a trusting climate, motivate our students and fulfill our students' need for a sense of belonging in the classroom.

- **Greeting:** As students enter the classroom, we greet one another before the class session begins.
- **Activity and Sharing:** We post and describe the Tell Me Time prompt or activity in our Google Slides presentation. The students and us engage with one another in the prompt/activity and share ideas, thoughts, and feelings.
- **Morning Message:** We provide a brief overview of the class session's content and structure and provide time for students to ask questions before we begin.

Table 1 below outlines the steps to success for getting started with the implementation of TMT.

Table 1: Getting Started with Tell Me Time

Step 1	On the first day of class explain expectations and the purpose for TMT, and let students create class norms for the implementation and participation in TMT to ensure active, positive student engagement.
Step 2	Select an activity or prompt to be used for TMT (the content focus of the class session connection or click the following link for other TMT ideas for ways to connect with students personally) at the start of each class session. See this website for an example: bit.ly/3ZIEAj3
Step 3	At the start of class, explain the TMT activity/prompt, and allow students 5-7 minutes in order to process, complete, and discuss the activity/prompt.

Step 4	Once students have completed their TMT activity/prompt, allow time for students to share in pairs or small groups then open the floor for student volunteers to share with the whole group.
Step 5	Actively participate and share your personal responses to the TMT activity/prompt. During the sharing time, facilitate connections among students based on your responses and the responses of volunteers to create classroom community.
Step 6	During the current (and future!) class sessions, make personal connections in your content delivery and class activities to your students' ideas and experiences shared during TMT.
Step 7	Make explicit connections to how TMT can be transferred to your students' own classroom experiences in field placements and future classrooms.
Step 8	Add personalized feedback to your students' responses/activities that answers questions, makes personal or educational connections, or simply validates and values their responses. If you see a concern from a student's entry or response, reach out to the student and conduct a check-in.
Step 9	To ensure student engagement, vary the format of your TMTs. Students can simply turn and talk, reflect in writing or drawing (digitally or by hand), or use movement to express their thoughts, opinions, and experiences.
Step 10	Reflect. How are your students responding? Which TMT prompts or activities have students been most engaged with? Not sure? Survey your classes!

With each TMT implementation, we are evolving our TMT activities to best meet the needs of our students and model how this can be utilized in their future classrooms.

Lessons Learned

Our implementation of TMT is one that is constantly evolving based on our previous implementations, student feedback, and the ever-changing dynamics of the students in our courses. Over the last few years, we have implemented a variety of TMT activities, and we have loved, tweaked, and eliminated some based on our experiences and the voices of our students. When reflecting on the TMT activities/prompts we have adjusted or deleted, we compiled a list of ideas that we would not recommend for TMT:

- Time-consuming activities/prompts
- Physical materials or space needed
- Controversial, heavy, or emotionally charged topics
- Topics unrelated to literacy content and/or students' interests and personal experiences

We have also found that students enjoy a mixed balance of TMT activities that reflect both the content of the literacy courses, as well as fun, whimsical activities that allow students to simply unwind and engage with one another to start the class session off in a positive manner. As one student indicated, "I like that we all get to share and connect before class. Because we are all coming from different places, it is a good transition into opening class!" Students also appreciate the variety of ways in which to respond to TMT prompts and activities. They enjoy writing responses in their interactive journals and adding their own personal touches with images, bitmojis, and gifs. Students also appreciate and are engaged in times when they are able to get up and move around the classroom with "this or that" or "four corners" activities, or simply turning and talking with one another with their table groups. Perhaps the biggest lesson we have learned is making

each TMT relevant and meaningful for our teacher candidates, so they, in turn, see the power of this practice and can implement this with students of their own.

Final Thoughts

The use of TMT has provided us with an effective way to get to know our students, connect our class content with their personal and literacy experiences, and start class in a lively, carefree manner. While at first a random, barely planned out idea, TMT has become a now much more methodically designed staple applied at the beginning of each of our classes. TMTs have allowed us to help students see how to make meaningful connections, both personally and academically, to create a caring classroom community that our students can transfer to their own P-5 settings. Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) stated, “Teacher-student relationships allow teachers to bring life to their curricula, to be effective teachers, to capitalize on their own strengths in the classroom, and to share the wisdom of their experiences” (p. 55). TMT has allowed us to do just this; students feel energized and invested in the learning of literacy content because of the teacher-student and student-student relationships built through the activities and personalized feedback provided to students. Give it a try—you and your students will not be disappointed!

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