



Institute for Completion

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Learning Communities: An Overview

The term “learning community” is broadly understood to refer to two or more intentionally linked courses that enroll a common cohort of students. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), structured learning communities are often “thematically or substantively linked” (p.422) to promote both academic and social engagement; foster supportive peer groups and involvement in classroom learning; encourage greater integration of students’ academic and non-academic lives; and develop students’ “educational citizenship” defined as a sense of responsibility of others’ learning as well as their own learning” (p.423).ⁱ

Faculty often elect to cluster a learning community around an interdisciplinary theme or problem and may “restructure the curricular material entirely so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning.”ⁱⁱ Learning communities are found to be dynamic, collaborative, and intellectual and, when pedagogies of active engagement and reflection are evident, student outcomes are enhanced.

Central Benefits of Learning Communities

Considered a high-impact practice, learning communities help ease students’ transition to college particularly for traditionally underserved students who may not have fully developed their identities as college students.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Brownell and Swaner (2009), learning communities are also linked with more robust intellectual development, integrative thinking, civic engagement, and development of values and ethics. The literature suggests that students who participate in learning communities indicate increased satisfaction with the college and report greater use of student support services.^{iv}

The structure of learning communities reorganizes students’ time and experiences, intentionally providing an arrangement for students to participate in rich educational environments while creating connections with peers and faculty that make a difference in student success and persistence.^v Learning communities naturally provide students with a supportive social and intellectual community and critical opportunities for interdisciplinary thinking. Moreover, research indicates that for LatinX students, learning communities have the potential to limit the acculturative stress that occurs when students enter a college culture built on mainstream values and beliefs.^{vi}

Effective learning communities involve close collaboration between faculty members, often involving shared time in

classroom settings. Faculty may benefit from learning communities via the enhanced interpersonal relationships.^{vii} Faculty collaboration can lead to innovation, creativity, and rejuvenation and, many faculty cite learning communities as having improved the quality of interpersonal relations with peers and the “highlight of their careers” (Jackson et al., p.5).

Potential Drawbacks to Learning Communities

Qualitative research has identified some perceived drawbacks to the learning community experience including more limited opportunity to connect with the larger college community and hyperbonding among classmates.^{viii} VanOra’s research showed that a small percentage of students may not fit into the learning community and feel relief when the learning community classes concluded. Jaffee (2007) argues that in freshmen learning communities the “extended association...among post-adolescent freshman-age students taking a cluster of classes together can recreate a mutually reinforcing high-school like environment with the associated demeanors and behaviors.”^{ix}

When faculty have widely divergent perspectives on teaching and learning, learning community partnerships can be strained in a way that may lead to territorialism and have a negative impact on students.^x

Core Practices for Learning Communities

While the first consideration for a new learning community will certainly be on curricular structure, the literature emphasizes that it is equally important to consider the learning environment as merely scheduling students together in two or more courses does not stimulate learning or guarantee engagement and collaboration.^{xi}

Smith et al (2004), outline five core complementary and interrelated practices important to bear in mind when building a learning community. These include community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflection/assessment.

Community: In learning communities “identified as successful by both students and faculty, learning and community have been highly interrelated” (p.98). Smith et al (2004) argue that community is multi-faceted and encompasses four dimensions—communities of inclusion, communities of collaboration and interdependence, community as a focus for study and learning, and communities of practice for faculty.

Communities of inclusion: Extensive literature on college student socialization describe community as a sense of belonging and academic and social connectedness. Tinto (1987) asserts that relationships are key to student retention, especially for students who commute.^{xii} Structuring activities that encourage validation of all class members and foster a positive sense of shared identity help to build communities of inclusion.

Communities of Collaboration and Interdependence: In addition to working together to make meaning, debate issues, solve problems, and understand learning tasks, collaborative learning allows students an opportunity to practice articulating their perspectives and listening to others.

Community as a Focus for Study and Learning: Many learning communities focus on the study of or work in the surrounding community which provides opportunity for students to develop “deeper multi-cultural understanding, knowledge of public issues and democratic processes, engagement in the civic life of surrounding communities, linking of theory and practice with real-world problems, and the development of motivation, skills, and commitment” to work collectively to make the world a better place (Smith et al, 2004, p. 103).

Diversity: Learning communities make ideal places to approach diversity on multiple fronts: to reach particular groups of students, to design a more inclusive curriculum, and to develop pedagogical practices that support diverse learners.^{xiii}

Communities of Practice for Teachers: When faculty share with one another and learn from each other in communities of practice (CoP), the culture of teaching on

campus can be stimulated and, opportunities to build and regenerate professional relationships emerge (p. 106).

Integration: A productive learning community ensures individual course curricula is integrated into a whole. Integration does not “abandon or ignore subject matter or skill development, but it sets the two into the context of significant themes and asks students and faculty to understand those themes and communicate about them.” Integration provides students will opportunities to “make connections, use higher-order reasoning skills, and develop capacities for deeper learning” (Smith et al, 2004, p.115).

Active Learning: Decades of research on learning processes reinforce the need to utilize active learning pedagogies to help students construct new meaning. Active learning is not one thing – the umbrella term encompasses a range of strategies which can take place inside or outside the classroom. Among the strategies are project and problem-based learning, service learning, research and field work, productive struggle, etc. and typically include interactive and interdependent activity.

Reflection/Assessment: Smith et al (2004) in their review of the research, frame reflection and assessment as learning and assert that as faculty assess students’ knowledge, abilities, and understandings, there is an inherent opportunity for faculty to glean immediate information for “shaping and reshaping their teaching” (124). Ensuring students have chances to reflect about the learning process, “builds their habits of monitoring their prior knowledge and their learning” connecting new ideas to what they already know, identifying what is perplexing and “applying critical, creative, applied thinking about the academic content” (p. 125).

ⁱ Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P.T. (2005). *How College Affects Students: A third decade of research, Vol 2.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

ⁱⁱ Frank, D.G., Beasley, S., Kroll, S. (2001). Learning communities for excellence: Opportunities for collaborative excellence: What learning communities offer. *College & Research Libraries News*, [S.I.], v. 62, n. 10, p. 1008-1011,

ⁱⁱⁱ Brownell, J.E., & Swaner, L.E. (2009). High-impact practices: Applying the learning outcomes literature to the development of successful campus programs. *Peer Review*,11(2).

^{iv} Bourdon, C., & Carducci, R. (2002). What works in the community colleges: A synthesis of literature on best practices. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Graduate School of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED471397).

^v Gersten, B.M. (2019). Learning communities and early student success. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 8(6-A)(E).

^{vi} Gonzales, S.M. (2019). Cultivating familismo: Belonging and inclusion in one Latina/o learning community. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(9), 937-949.

^{vii} Jackson, D.M., Stebleton, M.J., and Santos Laanan, F. (2017). The experience of community college faculty involved in a learning community program. *Community College Review* 41(1) 3–19

^{viii} VanOra, J.P. (2019). The impact of learning communities on the experiences of developmental students in community colleges: A qualitative study. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 7(1), Article 2.

^{ix} Jaffee, D. (2007). Peer cohorts and the unintended consequences of freshmen learning communities. *College Teaching*, 55(2), 65-71.

^x Kirby, M.D., Fitzgerald, F.M., Marable, R., Eason, A.L., Nicholson, S, & Arroyo, A.T. (2019). Student learning communities: An avenue to academic affairs and student affairs partnerships at historically black colleges and universities. *New Directions for Student Services*, 167, 11-21.

^{xi} Smith, B.L., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R.S., & Gabelnick, F. (2004). *Learning communities: Reforming undergraduate education.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

^{xii} Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures for student attrition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

^{xiii} Lardner, E. (2002). Approaching diversity through learning communities. Occasional paper No 2. Olympia: Washington Center for Undergraduate Education, The Evergreen State College.