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A New Era in Learning-Community Work: Why The Pedagogy of Intentional Integration Matters

 by *Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich*

Everyone is entitled to an education of quality.

 —*Greater Expectations*, AAC&U Report, 2002

Each January, the Washington Center at The Evergreen State College has preliminary talks with campus teams that have been accepted for our [National Summer Institute on Learning Communities](#) in June. We look forward to these conversations, because from them we discover a lot about learning communities on very different campuses. Without exception, wherever hardworking faculty, staff, and administrators organize learning communities and students come, the reward is gratifying and immediate: The student retention rate goes up, just as the literature predicts. Institutional attention then shifts to scaling-up the work.

The pressure is on at that point to offer technical advice and an appropriate model for this scaling-up. But we resist this pressure. Instead, we now respond to teams' applications by asking another set of questions: Which students will be included? Why these courses? What kind of learning do you want students to experience? And so on. In other words, we deliberately shift attention away from the creation of learning-community models to the generation of learning.

While improved retention is a welcome consequence of learning-community work, it has never been its aim. In the push to improve student retention, it is easy to overlook what research tells us: Students persist in their studies if the learning they experience is meaningful, deeply engaging, and relevant to their lives. We know from campus visits—especially sitting in on classes—that if institutional energy goes to designing models and organizational structures without a similar attentiveness to teaching and learning, opportunities are squandered. The camaraderie of co-enrollment may help students stay in school longer, but learning communities can offer more: curricular coherence; integrative, high-quality learning; collaborative knowledge-construction; and skills and knowledge relevant to living in a complex, messy, diverse world.

In this article, we discuss this transition in the agenda for learning communities. We report on developments in the field with this question in mind: How can we best organize and teach for high-quality learning for all students?

Alert readers will note how this reference—"for all students"—ties effective learning-community work to an agenda for educational equity. Re-framing the Washington Center's support and advocacy for learning communities to include support for the academic achievement of all college students has led to a recasting of taken-for-granted approaches. In this sense, we are in accord with the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) 2007 report, *College Learning in the New Global Century*, which asserts that in the 21st century, we need to retool the elitist 20th-century liberal-education curriculum to be a "liberating education" for all: "Every student—not just the fortunate few—will need wide-ranging and cross-disciplinary knowledge, higher-level skills, an active sense of personal and social responsibility, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge to complex problems."

Key practices characterize this next iteration of learning-community work. We expect that every learning community will design and implement integrative assignments for their student cohort; we think this practice is as foundational to learning-community work as teaching for active, collaborative learning. So we now introduce learning communities to a new generation of educators by inviting them to design integrative assignments with their colleagues; we encourage them to try these "assignment links" even with students whom they do not share, so that more students will experience integrative learning.

And in our National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities, we look at student work for evidence of the integrative learning that learning communities claim as both organizational and pedagogical justification. We also appreciate that the pedagogy of intentional integration entails a new direction for faculty development.

Learning-community work done well thus requires a skillful balancing of two moves: one structural, the other pedagogical and cross-disciplinary. When a campus gets it right, enriched integrative learning is the result. When a campus doesn't, retention data improves, at least in the short run, but the substantive, multi-faceted, and deep learning that learning communities can engender too often remains underdeveloped.

To describe this new era in learning-community work, we took a close look at the applications campuses have submitted for the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities, looking for changes over time. Our hypothesis was that an analysis of team applications might reveal advances in learning-community practice, as well as indicating directions we need to pursue.

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How are Campuses Thinking About Learning Communities?

To answer this question, we compared the applications for the institute of the 2004 group (the first cohort to pay the full costs of the institute since it began in 1998) and those received in 2008. As we analyzed the applications for these two cohorts, we noticed several shifts in the way campuses approach learning communities.

First, in 2008 most campuses appear comfortable using data to make decisions about instructional programs. Second, many of the 2008 campuses claim that they have an explicit goal to increase student engagement, with over half the campuses using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to help them track their progress toward this goal. Finally, more campuses (though still less than half) are making a strong connection between their desire to implement learning communities and their vision of the kind of learning experiences they want students to have. We examine each of these shifts in more detail below.

Using data to make decisions about instructional programs

Only one campus team in 2004 explicitly linked its proposed learning-community program to improving academic achievement. More typical was "project-it-is," the tendency to launch projects as ends in themselves rather than as means for institutional transformation. Campus teams in 2004 typically wanted to pick, and learn how to implement, particular learning-community models (one campus had five different models, and its goal was to create an administrative structure to manage them all).

Teams attending the 2008 institute appear more interested in using data to make decisions about the purposes of their learning communities, from which they will derive their structures. This may be due in part to the fact that the application for the institute itself has changed: Whereas in 2004 we asked teams to describe the goals for their programs, in 2008 we asked first for information about campus demographics, student academic preparedness, and student success, as well as faculty and staff awareness about this information. We also asked teams to discuss what their institutional data suggested about curricular trouble-spots and whether the data had changed over time.

All campuses provided this information, and all but two directly connected their campus data with their goals for their learning-community programs. The most prevalent new task is related to the equity agenda mentioned earlier: to direct the disciplinary expertise, ingenuity, and pedagogical prowess of teaching teams to sites in the curriculum where students struggle the most and/or where the deep understanding of a key idea will reveal connections that compartmentalized learning leaves undiscovered.

For example, Fayetteville State University started a [learning-community program](#) several years ago to support the academic achievement of African-American men. That program's success has led to several related learning communities designed for other cohorts. Meanwhile, South Plains College has used its Title V grant to increase the retention of Hispanic students. Having analyzed what might lead to such an increase, they want to develop learning communities around courses that are especially difficult for academically under-prepared students. And Augustana College has used the Collegiate Learning Assessment to assess students' critical thinking; they want to improve their already strong results by using a learning-community component in their first-year liberal studies courses.

On campuses with longstanding programs, the task of connecting the program with institutional data is more complicated. Having developed their learning communities before they collected data, those institutions now need to retro-fit these communities. The once-common practice of two or more faculty members getting together to plan a learning community based on their own interests—quite apart from an explicit set of learning goals and/or students' learning needs in relation to those goals—has to change. Disaggregated data about access, persistence, and graduation for different groups of students needs to be discussed and understood before teaching partnerships are established.

Focusing on student engagement

Another shift evident in our analysis of team applications is the increase in the number of campuses using either the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) or the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Both ask students whether they have had experiences that the research suggests promote and strengthen high-level learning, persistence, and retention. Campus results examined in relation to those of peer institutions raise the question, "How good is good enough?"

The CCSSE focuses on active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners. The NSSE examines two components of engagement: what students do and what institutions do. Students answer questions related to the time and effort spent on educationally purposeful activities. Their responses are clustered under five benchmarks of effective practice: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment.

One out of the 17 campuses attending the institute in 2004 reported using either the CCSSE or the NSSE; 14 out of 24 teams coming to the institute in 2008 report using one or the other. The one team in 2004 that was using the CCSSE had an unusual focus for that time; rather than making a learning-community model central to its plan, the team concentrated on helping faculty create integrative assignments, whether they were teaching the same cohort of students or not.

This explicit emphasis on engagement across the curriculum led to a watershed moment at the 2004 institute. The team's approach generated resistance from some long-time learning-community consultants because they felt that the campus was not proposing a "real" learning community. Heated discussion ensued. The conflict illuminated the challenge of moving away from a learning-community "project" model—where developing learning communities for students is an end in itself—to an institutional-improvement approach, where learning communities become a means for improving students' academic achievement through engaged learning.

In nearly all the applications for 2008, teams write that their goal is to increase student retention,

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student engagement, and academic achievement, and they want to find ways to design learning communities to help this happen. They are less concerned with doing learning communities "right" and more about student success.

Focusing on the quality of students' learning

Research undertaken in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Australia has led to a distinction between deep and surface learning. According to Noel Entwistle, in a surface approach students cope with course requirements in a minimalist way, skim texts to spot test questions, understand only what is needed to pass tests, and reduce course content to discrete bits of knowledge. In a deep approach, students try to understand ideas for themselves, seek out patterns and underlying principles, examine evidence in relation to conclusions, and critically appraise the logic of arguments.

For faculty who want students to become deep learners, learning communities are an attractive option. However, integrative learning cannot happen if "coverage" is the aim. Abilities-based education—an emphasis on what we want students to know and be able to do within the context of a course, a discipline, and their entire undergraduate education—is an alternative to designing a curriculum based on lists of topics.

This emphasis on deep learning is becoming increasingly widespread. In *College Learning in the New Global Century*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities has this to say: "It is the quality of learning, not the possession of a diploma, that will make all the difference—to individuals, to an economy dependent on innovation, and to the integrity of the democracy we create together." Four essential learning outcomes for all graduating students are associated with a high-quality collegiate education. One is integrative learning. The other three—personal and social responsibility, intellectual and practical skills, and knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world—also represent learning beyond the expected professional, technical, and disciplinary expertise.

In 2004, only one of the teams attending the institute mentioned the kind of learning they wanted students to gain from their learning-community program. In 2008, close to one third of the teams—though still less than half—did so. For instance, the Malcolm X College team wrote that their learning-community program "will encourage student engagement in learning and will be taught actively, using problem-based teaching and learning." The intended outcomes for the program—increased student engagement, retention, and success—will be achieved at Malcolm X by deepening the learning experience, developing community, and adopting research-based practices for teaching reading, writing, and math.

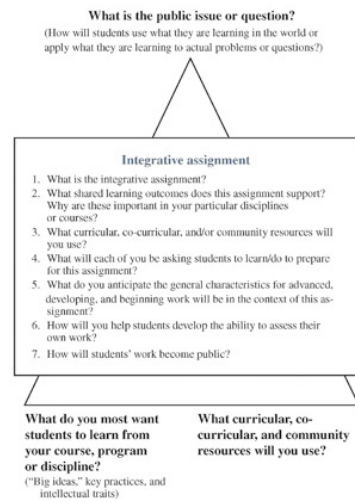
The Flagler College team is planning a learning-community program aimed at "cultivating deep learning" and increasing the "sense of connectedness that first-year students feel toward their college, their peers and their faculty." Texas A&M International's team writes that the intent of their proposed learning-community program is "to make learning relevant so that students see the purpose in their study. We want students to experience interdisciplinary connections so they can bring multiple perspectives to problem solving and improve their critical thinking skills. We trust that if this occurs, students will be more motivated to study and pursue their dreams."

How Can the Washington Center Help Campuses Focus on Learning?

The heuristic

Just as we note a shift in campus teams' approaches to learning communities, so too has our own approach shifted. In 2001, we first began to advocate that teams use a heuristic that we developed to design integrative assignments, which has gradually become a core practice at the summer institute.

The Designing Integrative and Purposeful Assignments heuristic (see Figure 1) is about assignments—both as invitations to learn and as evidence of learning. It suggests three steps in designing learning experiences for students.

FIGURE 1. DESIGNING INTEGRATIVE AND PURPOSEFUL ASSIGNMENTS

Although the end product will be a jointly designed assignment, the first step is an individual one. We typically begin by posing this question to individual faculty members: What do you want students to know and be able to do, in the context of the course you are contributing to the learning community? All participants generate a succession of post-it notes on the big ideas, abilities, habits of mind, and attitudes they want students to acquire; this ensures that everyone participating has the opportunity to describe the learning that matters most from their point of view. Then, with individual stacks of post-it notes in hand, teams compare what they have written with the aim of finding common ground.

The next step, making a public issue the subject of learning-community inquiry, emphasizes using knowledge in the world. The intent is to engage students in substantive work, which includes learning how to integrate knowledge from different disciplines and fields of study, multiple perspectives, and conflicting interests. As students' understanding of an issue evolves, they also practice the kinds of learning identified in the first step. Skills are contextualized, as are habits of mind and attitudes. Students who are new to academic work learn to do research, theorize, read, write, reason quantitatively, and listen and speak respectfully—all skills essential to collaborative learning.

The third step emphasizes the resources that learning communities have to draw on to enrich student learning. Often they build in attendance at campus lecture series or book festivals. They may also draw on community resources, creating opportunities to connect classroom learning with out-of-class experiences.

Workshops then yield suggestive examples for integrative assignments. For instance, a faculty team at American River College used the question, “Can students, faculty, and staff eat a ‘heart-healthy’ diet on campus?” to foster both reading skills and knowledge of anatomy and physiology. The assignment required students to learn about the structure and function of the heart, a “heart-healthy” diet, and the consequences of a poor diet on the heart, along with how to read charts and graphs and to craft questions. Resources included the RDA's food guide pyramid; American Heart Association journal articles; and campus resources such as the health center, food services, and the library.

Faculty report that using the heuristic in a workshop setting allows them to collaborate more effectively; the social negotiations attendant with team-teaching are simplified by the focus on designing an assignment. Moreover, the steps in the heuristic—identifying important learning outcomes, connecting them with a public issue, and drawing on campus resources—ground faculty work in good pedagogical practices. More frequently than we might expect, faculty also report that they value the experience of actually drafting assignments in advance, leaving time for revision and clarification.

The heuristic has been adapted to serve campus needs in more specific ways as well. The first step lends itself to conversations about the ideas and practices students struggle to understand in specific courses, including mathematics. Houston Community College, for example, is piloting a series of learning communities linking developmental math and college-success courses. To plan the integrative assignments, the math faculty listed the handful of topics students most need to understand in order to succeed in subsequent math courses. The college-success teachers did the same, and then teams used the heuristic to design integrative assignments that would lead to important outcomes.

Experienced campus teams also use the heuristic to articulate what exactly students are being asked to integrate. Campuses participating in the [Washington Center's National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities](#) discovered the need to be more explicit in assignment design when they used a protocol adapted from Veronica Boix-Mansilla's work on interdisciplinarity to review student work together. In spite of the strong belief that learning communities were promoting integrative work, these examinations of students' work raised questions about whether we have sufficient evidence to support these claims and led to conversations about what grounding in a discipline or field of study looks like. Without such grounding, there is little interdisciplinary leveraging—places

where insights from more than one field are brought together to reveal new understandings. This line of inquiry led teams back to the first step of the protocol—what we want students to learn in our courses and what this learning will look like.

For instance, Lynn Dunlap and Larry Sult from Skagit Valley College used the heuristic to revise a popular assignment for a learning community called Grand Illusion that combined political science and film studies. Student panels discussed one film in front of the class, which assessed their performance. In a second iteration of this fishbowl assignment, the rubric given to students to assess the panels had changed—“strength of analysis” carried more weight than “effectiveness of presentation,” and students were expected to use specific concepts and techniques from political science and film studies in their discussion of the films. With the revised rubric more focused on disciplinary grounding and on the value of interdisciplinary leveraging, students were able to discuss the film Osama using ideas from Hobbes and Machiavelli to understand loyalty to the Taliban while rejecting that thinking for themselves.

Not only do we introduce the heuristic at the summer institutes, but we have also substantively revised the assignments teams work on there. By 2006, we were asking them to focus on students' experiences of learning and to incorporate plans for using the heuristic in faculty development workshops once they returned home.

Using research to develop learning-community programs

In 2007, we developed a focused pedagogical plan informed by Catherine Engstrom and Vincent Tinto's 2007 report, *Pathways to Student Success: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Success of Academically Under-Prepared College Students*, which usefully describes what learning-community programs do and don't do. For example, they report that students typically don't see their academic counselors after their learning communities end; consequently, we invite teams to develop a plan that helps ensure that students will do this.

Beginning in 2007, we also began asking teams to reflect on the essential learning outcomes and principles of excellence from *College Learning for the New Global Century* as a way to think through the kind of learning they want students to gain in their programs. We are revising the pedagogical plan once again in 2008 to incorporate the recommendations from the NSSE 2007 report. We will encourage teams to explicitly embed other highly effective practices in their programs—for example, making the learning community writing-intensive or including community-based learning.

We are mindful that research on effective learning communities is not conclusive. In its March 2008 report on the [Opening Doors](#) project at Kingsborough Community College, MDRC researchers remind us that while their study is a “strong test of the structural features of a learning-community program (linked courses, blocked scheduling, etc.),” the variations in class size and content and the degree of integration among courses means that the study may not fully test the impacts of the curricula. Like all educational initiatives, learning communities are complex and variable phenomena. Nonetheless, evolving research and institutional practices are creating the necessary conditions for them to serve as intervention strategies supporting the learning of all students.

Fewer faculty than we expected are knowledgeable about how people learn best and what this suggests for teaching practice. But faculty can hardly be faulted for the problems inherent in a system where not enough value is assigned to the intellectual work of teaching and where too many enrichment programs are underfunded. The lack of resources for faculty development undermines learning in every classroom circumstance, not only in learning communities.

The best materials we know of for high-quality faculty learning can be found in the research reports on student engagement and success previously cited. For instance, all the benchmarks of effective educational practice in the NSSE—including the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, and student-faculty interaction—are presented in these reports and publications with brief snapshots that summarize related research. The snapshots are backed by accessible landmark studies on teaching and learning, and these studies are illustrated by accounts of noteworthy practices on campuses.

We invite colleagues to create a faculty-development program that is a learning community for faculty. The core strategy is powerful: Notice what needs work, pay attention to research, try out new ways of working in the company of supportive peers, share insights, refine, and revise. If this approach to faculty development is tied to questions raised by using the heuristic, developing a pedagogical plan, and looking at student work, it will surely have an impact, not just on learning communities but on the pursuit of our collective aim: a high-quality education for every student.

Resources

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