3.1.2 Introduction to Learning Communities

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Learning communities are innovative, effective structures that colleges are using to enhance student involvement, learning, growth, and academic success. Developed early in the 20th century, they have evolved in different ways among U.S. colleges and universities. They come in a variety of configurations, as documented by the National Learning Communities Project. Learning communities provide multiple benefits, including curricular alignment, faculty rejuvenation, and the overall enhancement of students’ educational experience. A blending of the academic and non-academic aspects of student life also unlocks opportunities for attaining a broader spectrum of learning outcomes. The most distinctive feature of vibrant learning communities is effective use of mentoring that has a major impact on the mentor as well as the mentee.

What is a Learning Community?

The term “learning community” has taken on many meanings since this instructional approach was initiated in the 1920s. For some, it means the “intentional restructuring of curriculum” around a cohort of courses. For others, it signifies a cooperative approach to instruction in which students engage in cooperative learning activities. Still others may define this approach in social or affective terms, stressing the emotional/psychological benefits. A variety of approaches have emerged, including those inventoried in Table 1 (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990).

The models in Table 1 define a learning community as a cohesive group of students taking two or more courses together, taught by faculty who are committed to a collaborative, student-centered learning environment that supports the achievement of shared learning outcomes. Learning communities foster deep connection to the course content as well as to effective learning behaviors. Curricular integration is reflected in coordinated syllabi, learning activities, assignments, and evaluations. Organizational innovation is often required to support interdisciplinary experiences that feature active learning (Geri, Kuehn, & MacGregor, 1999).

Historical Development

From the beginning, learning communities have been revolutionary in nature. In 1927, the University of Wisconsin implemented a radical approach to education by establishing the Experimental College with its emphasis on student engagement through a “living-learning community” (Meiklejohn, 1932). This effort put theories of John Dewey, Malcolm Knowles, and Benjamin Bloom into practice.

Though it faded from the educational scene for several decades, the learning community model reemerged in the form of “federated learning communities,” “integrating seminars,” and other formats in institutions such as UC Berkeley, SUNY Stony Brook, and LaGuardia Community College in the 1970s. In the 1980s Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, took the lead in reactivating, implementing, and formalizing the learning communities concept. This initiative has been formalized in the National Learning Communities Project: <learningcommons.evergreen.edu>.

Table 1  Common Learning Community Models

- **Team-Taught Paired or Linked Model:** A cohort of students enrolls in two different classes. The classes are linked by thematic connections between the disciplines or courses. However, instruction is done separately by each instructor.

- **Team-Taught Triads:** A cohort of students takes three courses each semester for a year. These courses are taught in a manner similar to the linked model.

- **Team-Taught Learning Community:** A cohort of students interacts with a group of two to four faculty who collaborate in teaching an integrated program, resulting in the blurring of boundaries between disciplines or courses in favor of a larger whole.

- **Learning Clusters:** A cohort of students takes three or more courses with syllabi coordinated around a common theme and linked assignments.

- **Federated Learning Communities:** A cohort of students registers for three “federated” courses that are linked by a common theme. The students also participate in a seminar that unites the three courses. The seminar leader serves as “Master Learner,” taking all courses with students and integrating ideas from them in seminar activities.

- **Freshman Interest Groups (FIG’s):** These are triads of courses offered around an area of interest, an interdisciplinary topic, or courses related to a specific major. These are typically peer-led and feature discussion groups as well as study groups around common courses. FIG’s often organize social gatherings and introduce students to campus resources.
Benefits of Learning Communities

Research shows that students involved in a learning community are “significantly more likely than their less involved peers to show growth in intellectual interest and values, and they are apparently more likely to get more out of their college education” (Cross, 1998). Significant gains in student retention, achievement, rates of degree completion, and intellectual development have also been reported (Gabelnick et al., 1990). By participating in learning communities, faculty can explore a wider repertoire of teaching approaches and new, more effective ways of relating to students and colleagues. Institutional effectiveness is also positively impacted through adoption of learning communities, as large groups of students and faculty become better aligned with institutional vision, mission, and culture.

Essential Elements

Learning communities are characterized by the following elements: absence of threat, mastery learning, immediate feedback, collaboration, meaningful content, freedom to make choices, and adequate time on task (Geri et al., 1999). They require the creation of a positive learning environment in which students find support, engage authentically in learning tasks, and relate course content to life experience. Ideally, the classroom also becomes an interactive place in which fear is minimized, and students become more responsive and willing to take risks. Table 2 describes a number of key features of learning communities.

Concluding Thoughts

Effective learning communities demand commitment from both learners and educators. They require a balance between structure and flexibility, a free-flowing give-and-take between student and professor. They also require the incorporation of new ideas and insights, strong leadership, and continued assessment of performance for all participants, including faculty. It is not enough simply to rewrite curriculum and include a few “enriching” activities, such as guest speakers, field trips, and visits to the campus library or labs. Launching learning communities requires a fair amount of courage, as well as a sense of adventure. It requires a spirit of “collective inquiry” in which the unique talents, abilities, and perspectives of all participants are honored and brought to fruition by a skilled mentor (Palmer, 1998). If your institution supports learning communities, get involved. If it does not, seek out other like-minded faculty and introduce them to the teaching and learning adventure offered by learning communities.

Table 2 Central Features of Learning Communities

- A culture of exploration, meaning that the course design and implementation, though grounded in solid principles, are constantly evolving in response to students’ learning needs
- Active, student-centered learning, using structured learning activities to construct and reconstruct knowledge at all levels in Bloom’s taxonomy
- A set of common, shared experiences, inside and outside of the classroom, serving to draw students out of isolation and bond them with faculty in the pursuit of meaningful learning
- A commitment to instructional innovation grounded in a willingness to challenge paradigms and investigate alternative methodologies that align better with program objectives and workplace requirements
- The use of collaboration to reach deeper meaning and, at times, consensus or synthesis of ideas;
- Dependence on a mentoring model in which individuals frequently switch between roles of learner and teacher
- Facilitating the growth and development of each student by regularly assessing progress and addressing skill development in the cognitive, social, affective, and psychomotor domains
- Responding to students’ diverse learning styles to ensure that educational and career opportunities remain open to all participants

References


