Opportunities for collaborative excellence

What learning communities offer

by Donald G. Frank, Sarah Beasley, and Susan Kroll

In the September 2001 issue of *C&RL News*, ACRL President Mary Reichel states that the learning community "captures the shift that has occurred in the last decade in higher education from teaching to learning." She also asserts that, "Learning is both an individual and collaborative experience, which takes individual effort and collective support."[1]

Academic librarians are emphasizing student learning and are collaborating with colleagues on campuses to create and refine learning communities. This article builds on Reichel's presidential theme, which focuses on learning communities and excellence in academic libraries.

A review of the relevant literature indicates that learning communities are being discussed, cultivated, and adapted in a variety of institutions, including colleges and universities as well as various primary and secondary schools. Several articles describe learning communities in nations such as Canada, England, Scotland, and Namibia.

However the number of articles that include the academic library as a key element of the learning community is surprisingly small. With a few exceptions, articles in *Library Literature* focus on learning communities in primary and secondary schools and in community colleges. The results of a discussion group conducted by ACRL's University Libraries Section in 1997 are noted in an article in *College & Research Libraries News*.[2] More articles on learning communities appear in indexes, such as *ERIC* and *Education Abstracts*, but few are focused on academic libraries. Search engines provide numerous sites on learning communities and *new* learning communities in academe. Excellent bibliographies on learning communities, including historical influences, current practices, and assessment, are available at the Web sites of Temple University and Evergreen College.[3]

A classic definition of learning communities was formulated a decade ago in *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*:

A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding

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and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.[4]

Five models of learning communities are identified, including linked courses, learning clusters, interest groups for first-year students, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies.

Learning communities are developed for various purposes. For example, students may enroll in one or more content courses as well as a specific skills-based course (e.g., computer or writing skills). The courses are coordinated or linked, with the faculty communicating on desired goals. A common theme usually underscores the courses. Interest groups for first-year students provide opportunities for students enrolled in several courses to meet in seminars or small groups on a regular (usually weekly) basis. Students have opportunities to build connections among their courses, enhancing the learning process. In coordinated studies programs, small groups of students and scholars from several disciplines focus on interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Team teaching underscores activities in these small groups.[5]

Effective learning communities share several features:

• Learning communities organize students and scholars into smaller groups, providing atmospheres or environments that are more casual or "intimate." Students are more likely to ask questions, challenge the status quo, build logical ties among disciplines, and learn.

• Learning communities facilitate student socialization. Students in the smaller groups that characterize learning communities tend to be more comfortable or relaxed and, as a result, become more familiar with the behaviors and practices needed to succeed.

• Learning communities "provide an ideal setting for new . . . students to develop a sense of student responsibility." Students are essentially responsible for the group or learning community. They focus on community learning as well as individual learning, necessitating preparations for the sessions as well as the importance of contributing to the overall discussions. A sense of responsibility is cultivated and refined.

• Learning communities challenge traditional instructional methodologies and the ways students usually learn. Courses are clustered and conducted to facilitate the creation of intellectual connections among disciplines and skills, providing opportunities to look at content from creative or innovative perspectives. Students and scholars are challenged to examine issues critically and to add value to content. Communities of learning are basically "curricular structures that allow faculty to teach, and students to learn in more interdisciplinary, intellectually stimulating, and challenging ways."[6]

Selected examples of learning communities

Several examples of learning communities illustrate the scope and variety of these innovative educational initiatives:

• The Collaboratory is a learning community developed at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in the mid-1990s.[7] This initiative integrates the expertise and skills of students and professionals in museums, universities, and secondary schools. Students in secondary schools in several nations are participating on teams to create exhibits that are linked on the Internet. The museums are essentially virtual communities in which students are able to view exhibits and, collaborating with scholars and other students, develop innovative exhibits.

• Incoming students at the University of Washington have the opportunity to participate in learning communities via *UWired*.[8] This is a collaboration of the University Libraries, Computing & Communications, and the Office of Undergraduate Education.

Students enroll in a cluster of thematically linked courses with other students who have similar interests. They also participate in an information and technology seminar that introduces students to available information and computing resources; demonstrates the use of e-mail, discussion lists, and Internet strategies; and provides opportunities to confer with scholars in informal settings.

The seminar has actually evolved into a formal two-credit course in which students, librarians, peer advisors, and computer spe-

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cialists participate. *"UWired* works with faculty in a wide range of disciplines to integrate information and technology literacy into specific courses."

Professors, librarians, and computing professionals are collaborating to integrate the effective use or application of information and technologies into the students' day-to-day activities, facilitating student learning as well as student retention.

• Learning communities are interconnected via a three-semester sequence of courses at GateWay Community College, one of the Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona.[9]

STARS, the initial course, focuses on student needs and, in particular, on the students who fall into the at-risk category. The STARS community is concerned with academic success and student retention. Expertise, skills, the content of two development courses (Literature and Reading), and a Success Orientation Seminar are combined to create a supportive community or network.

CLOUT, the second community, emphasizes important commonalities in the speaking, reading, and writing processes and promotes critical thinking skills. Courses in Human Communication, Critical and Evaluative Reading, and First-Year Composition are combined to provide an interactive forum for students, scholars, and practitioners.

The LINK community integrates specific instructional skills into content courses. As students become familiar with the content in a psychology course, for example, they are simultaneously developing reading and writing skills. Additionally, as reading and writing skills are developed, students are able to transfer these skills to the content of other courses.

• First-year students at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI)

have the opportunity to enroll in special seminars or learning communities. Collaborations of faculty, staff, librarians, and administrators provide information on the culture and context of the university; the ability to view issues and information critically; technology (including access to information resources); the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information via information literacy skills; and the ability to communicate effectively. Ways to develop practical skills, including time and stress management, are reviewed.

Additionally, academic advising and the IUPUI Principles of Undergraduate Education are discussed in the seminars. Students are challenged to learn in "classroom climates of cooperation and collaboration in an effort to foster an environment of active learning."[10]

Importance and impact of learning communities

Learning communities are dynamic and are continually evolving, integrating academic and social elements into flexible communities of students, scholars, and practitioners. This integration influences curricular changes as well as strategic priorities. The learning community model crosses institutional lines and boundaries, allowing students to focus on *content* in ways that are more meaningful.

The benefits of learning communities for students are numerous. First-year students, in particular, become more familiar with the organization and culture of the institution. They are exposed to critically important issues and topics associated with information and technology. Combinations of content and skills facilitate opportunities to succeed. Students extend their network of support and learning by meeting and collaborating with librarians and other important people on the campus. A sense of community is generated for the students. Critical thinking, tolerance for other points of view, and the ability or willingness to become involved in the analysis and integration of ideas and concepts are some of the skills that are cultivated in learning communities. Overall, student learning and retention are affected positively.[11]

Faculty have opportunities to relate to students as collaborators and co-learners in learning communities. They are also relat-

ing to other faculty from different disciplines, creating opportunities for research and publication on issues of teaching and learning.[12]

Participating in learning communities on campuses can contribute to success in academic libraries. Mary Reichel's article underscores the importance of this participation. She discusses several outcomes of the current emphasis on learning.

- An emphasis on learning "puts teaching into perspective in the sense that good teaching has to result in learning."
- Different learning styles are recognized by effective teaching.
- An appropriate balance between the content being learned and the processes of learning is considered. "Information literacy also focuses on the learner and the process of learning as well as the ideas, knowledge, and facts to be learned."
- Learning is an individual as well as a collaborative experience, necessitating individual effort and collective support. To "tie learning with community provides meaning for the higher education experience."[13]

Concluding comments

A significant number of academic libraries are actively involved in learning communities. The results of these initiatives have not been generally reported in the literature. Activities and initiatives that have been successful as well as those that have not been particularly successful need to be recorded.

Learning communities are dynamic, collaborative, intellectual, and exciting. "Libraries, Scholarship, and Technology" is an innovative course developed for a learning community at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. The course received the ACRL Instruction Section's Innovation in Instruction Award in 2001.[14]

The pedagogical and organizational objectives addressed by the learning community model provide unprecedented opportunities to integrate librarians and libraries effectively into the scholarly community, elevating the position and status of academic librarians. Collegiate experiences become more meaningful for students in communities of learning. Collective expertise is applied to solve realistic problems. Lifelong learning is facilitated. Learning communities provide excellent opportunities to demonstrate and promote the library's ongoing relevance in the academy.

Notes

1. Mary Reichel, "ACRL: The learning community for excellence in academic libraries," *College & Research Libraries News* 62, no. 8 (2001): 818–21.

2. Anne O. Garrison, Paula M. Walker, and Linda K. TerHaar, "ULS discusses new learning communities," *College & Research Libraries News* 58, no. 4 (1997): 242–43+.

3. The Temple University site is at: http://www.temple.edu/university_studies/lc_publications.html. The Evergreen College site is at: http://www.evergreen.edu/user/washcntr/LCBibliography.shtm.

4. Faith Gabelnick, Jean MacGregor, Roberta S. Matthews, and Barbara Leigh Smith, *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines* (*New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 41, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990): 19.

5. Ibid. Also, see http://www.temple.edu/university_studies/general_info.html.

6. Nancy S. Shapiro and J. H. Levine, *Creating Learning Communities: A Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organizing for Change, and Implementing Programs* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999). Also, see http://www.temple.edu/university_studies/general_info.html.

7. See http://www.isoc.org/HMP/PAPER/198/abst.html.

8. See http://www.washington.edu/uwired/. Also, see *UWired: Technology, Teamwork, Transformation*, University of Washington, 1997.

9. See http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/ilc/.

10. See http://www.universitycollege.iupui.edu/LC/.

11. Reichel, "ACRL: The learning community for excellence in academic libraries."

12. Ashley Williams, "Learning Communities: An Overview," *INVENTIO* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2000). Also, see http://www.doiiit.gmu.edu/Archives/fall00/index.html.

13. Ibid.

14. See http://libweb.hawaii.edu/uhmlib/news/lis100.html. ∎