

Transformation of a Curmudgeon

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Abstract

In this article, the author describes and reflects on the internal and external factors that led to his own transformation from an evolving “curmudgeon” to an enthusiastic participant in and advocate of learning communities, especially for “mature” faculty. The article concludes with a “12-Step Program” for faculty rejuvenation.

The scholarly literature pertaining to learning communities continues to expand as increasing numbers of universities and colleges across the nation explore new and more effective ways to improve the “first-year experience” of their students. Some of this literature is descriptive, offering case studies of how to create and implement a learning community. Other portions are more analytical, examining the strengths and weaknesses of existing communities and the determinants of their successes or failures. Whether descriptive or prescriptive, however, the preponderance of this literature has two striking characteristics. First, their authors, as in Levine (ed., 1999) *Learning Communities* are either administrators in their respective schools (i.e., deans, provosts, chairs) or active administrators in the learning community itself. To point this out is not to disparage the contributions of these women and men to what is a significant and important development in higher education today. It does, however, raise two questions regarding perspective: Would faculty whose participation in the learning community is limited to teaching analyze the learning community experience differently?

Second, the literature on learning communities is of necessity written by men and women who have been or are participants in the program. To the extent that such experience is a transforming one, as reported by Evenbeck, Jackson, and McGrew in *Learning Communities* (1999), does that literature resonate with faculty, especially in terms of recruiting new faculty, who have not yet participated in the program?

By raising these questions in the manner that I have, I clearly imply affirmative responses. Yes, I, at least, a senior faculty member who has participated in the learning community at my university, view the learning community experience with a different emphasis than do administrators. Furthermore, I view the learning community and its appeal differently, having had the experience of participating. I concur with the findings of my colleagues in the field that the learning community movement has been beneficial for students and has had a positive force in my development as a teacher. However, I believe that the learning community should be presented in a manner that responds to where prospective new faculty are in their own professional development,

rather than from where they may be once they have participated in the program. My purpose, therefore, is to discuss my learning community odyssey and to offer some suggestions to both faculty and administrators on why the former should and how the latter could induce more senior faculty to participate in learning communities. I believe this will benefit the students, the faculty members themselves, and the university at large.

By way of background, let me start by specifying that I am an older (I prefer “mature” or “experienced”) Anglo male professor of history at the University of Texas at San Antonio, a major metropolitan university with a diverse student population over 25,000. I am approaching 30 years of service to my university and profession as a teacher and published scholar, with my primary area of emphasis United States constitutional history. Often assumed mistakenly to be nearing retirement age, and usually the person with the longest tenure at department meetings or university functions, I found myself several years ago well on my way to becoming a curmudgeon, a frustrated faculty member often exasperated with both his students and colleagues, who complained too often about the new generation of both. Although I never publicly declared myself a curmudgeon, I suspect that my colleagues thought of me in those, or similar, terms. But I transformed my teaching, to a significant degree because of my participation in the learning community, and consider myself now a recovering curmudgeon. As such, I have some suggestions to offer faculty and administrators about the learning community.

First, however, I want to describe how I remade myself as a teacher, with the help of the learning community, and how learning community coordinators and other administrators may better engage faculty to become part of their program, for their own sake as well as that of their students and universities.

The literature on learning communities notes several factors that draw faculty into learning communities. Evenbeck, Jackson, and McGrew (Levine, ed., 1999) identify several factors that induce faculty to participate. Collaborative work across disciplines is a key appeal to many to join learning communities. The recognition that may result from learning community participation is also a factor, as are more traditional rewards including course load reductions, enhanced merit pay, and other forms of supplemental support. Of greater importance for some are the potential for deepened collegiality, the opportunity to become a more effective mentor to both faculty and students, and the occasion that learning community participation provides for reflection about one’s role as a teacher are all identifiable appeals of learning communities. Perhaps less overt, but potentially important nonetheless, are the positive impacts of participation on one’s own teaching and learning skills and prospects for professional presentations and publication.

From the point of view of my pre-learning community participation, many of these factors were either of no significance or actual deterrents to my participation. At least as I reflect back on my involvement in learning communities and my subsequent

transformation as a teacher, I was not induced into learning communities by these considerations (let me stipulate, herein, that this analysis of my outlook is in retrospect). Nor did I one day realize that I had become a curmudgeon and therefore consciously decide to reinvent myself as a college professor. What prompted my remaking of myself was a combination of administrative initiatives and personal happenstance.

First, and foremost, about seven years ago the UTSA administration instituted a program of faculty development grants focused on teaching. Several of my colleagues and I applied for and received one of these summer grants. Unbeknownst to me at the time, one of the conditions of the grant was that we attend a series of workshops designed to improve the quality and style of our teaching.

Two things should be noted here. First, the faculty development grant included a modest stipend to the faculty who participated. Such stipends, although traditional, are crucial in my mind; first, because these workshops take summer time away from research, writing, and other professional activities. In addition, no matter how modest, such grants imply that the administration is committed to the program.

Although I had taught 25 years, these teaching learning center workshops were the first formal training that many college faculty of my generation and I ever had. More importantly, the workshops caused me to think for the first time about the assumptions I made about how to teach, and to consider how effective those teaching strategies were in the classroom. I say “for the first time” because in point of fact when I began to prepare to teach my first class I focused solely on content. I gave no thought to my method of delivery, opting instead to do exactly what had been done to me as an undergraduate: *lectures*. These workshops then focused my thinking as an historian less on content and more on how I deliver that content in a way that I had not thought about throughout my career.

A second factor was more personal. My daughter began her college career at this same time. As a student, and throughout her career, she called home constantly and with one recurring refrain about how awful her teachers were. They sat in front of the class and just talked. They assigned far too many readings, which she and her friends often chose not to read. And, all of this at a school whose tuition and room and board ran in excess of \$25,000 a year. If this was the response of fulltime students to their professors at her school (and her professors sounded in my mind a lot like me) how could I possibly expect my students (many of whom were part-time and juggling jobs with school and family obligations) to respond to like stimuli (a professor standing in front of the room talking) differently or more constructively?

A third consideration centered on my reaction to the style of presentation of those teaching learning center workshops that I attended. Although mightily resistant at the outset to group learning and “all of that hands-on stuff” some of the presenters proposed, I quickly realized that when I was put in a classroom in a comfortable seat

and just had to listen, I often simply nodded off. Stand up lectures (which in all honesty I occasionally slept through as an undergraduate) were frankly no more stimulating or effective for this senior professor. The message proved crystal clear. It was time to rethink what I was trying to teach and how I was seeking to accomplish it.

And here is one of those instances in which happenstance came into play. The University of Texas at San Antonio issued a call for faculty to participate in a new learning community program. Unlike most of my tenured or tenure-track colleagues, I volunteered. In that, I am apparently relatively unusual. I am a full professor with tenure and I continue to do research and publish. Yet, as I recall it, several things prompted me to say yes when asked if I would teach a learning community seminar.

One reason had and continues to do with class size. Every year I teach a standard United States history survey class of 180 to 250 students and upper division classes of 40 to 60 each. I require essay examinations in all my classes, which I grade with little assistance. The size of the class prevents me from knowing many of my students by name and limits my contact with them. I think I hoped that in a small seminar on a topic of mutual interest that I could actually affect students more deeply — really teach them the process of historical analysis and have a more meaningful impact on their education.

There was also a financial consideration. The freshman seminar was an overload, which meant extra pay for a small class on a topic of my choice. The overload aspect then was for me a positive. Rather than have to prepare a new class as part of my regular semester with no additional compensation, I would actually receive extra pay for this additional work on my part.

I also recall hoping that the students in a smaller setting would recognize the quality of the course and evaluate me accordingly. For the first 20-plus years of my career I awaited the release of student evaluations with a mixture of optimism and fatalism. I knew that in most instances my students reported me as an average teacher by their annual student evaluations. I always found that to be a source of great frustration because I knew I was a better teacher than that. I hoped that the students in a small group would “get it” and that my evaluations would reflect their enhanced understanding.

In addition, my participation in the learning community counted as service in terms of my annual faculty evaluation and merit pay. And with my daughter’s annual tuition bill, the economic incentive was a real consideration.

Other factors that presumably draw people into the learning community were less of a consideration in my decision. For example, the collaborative character of the learning community had little appeal for me at the outset. I, like many academics, am somewhat of a loner. Collaboration in research or teaching had no appeal. I, like most academic historians who participated in sports as students, was a runner, not a team player.

Neither did my attitude about being part of a team initially change. The learning community staff created the first faculty teams. In my experience, that leads to teams from unrelated disciplines taught by faculty who did not know one another at the outset and had offices in different buildings. Only when the faculty formed the teams (which meant, in my case, with people I already knew in complementary disciplines and in the same building) did the collaboration and cooperation among the faculty become a positive aspect of my teaching.

Likewise, I did not consider the potential impact of my participation in the learning community on my relationships with my colleagues. If a learning community administrator had suggested that learning community participation might cause me to reflect and indeed fundamentally transform my teaching style, I am certain I would have chosen not to participate. I also certainly gave no thought to the possibility of presentations or publications evolving from my participation.

Now, my experiences may be atypical, but I think that is unlikely. In fact Smith, Macgregor, Mathews, and Gabelnick (2004) find that my experiences are similar to those of other senior faculty. The question then becomes how to induce more senior faculty to participate in learning communities.

The key to achieving that end is for learning community administrators to entice faculty, and especially senior faculty, to participate in learning communities through a range of positive inducements. Making participation voluntary, rewarded, and rewarding are the keys.

At my university, and I suspect at many across the United States and Canada, the faculty include a significant number of “mature” men and women with many years of service. In spite of their long careers, many older faculty anticipate continuing to teach into their late 60s or even 70s. Yet many of these faculty “burn out.” They become frustrated with the “new generation” of students and are often treated with disdain by their junior colleagues. Generally disinclined to change (“Why should I change after all these years?”), the question is how to induce an aging faculty to reinvent themselves.

First is the need for participation to be voluntary. As all of us know, *telling* faculty to do something is like trying to herd cats. Even if they participate, the level of commitment may be so low as to doom the chances of success. So recruit — no, *invite* — faculty and sell them on the advantages of participation.

One of those advantages, at my university at least, is class size. A freshman seminar is capped at 25 students. Few people (and I am not one of them) would prefer to teach 250 rather than 25 students, especially if all other things are equal in terms of workload, credits, status, and remuneration.

And all other things are not equal. In my university at least, learning community participation includes workshops and training, with modest compensation for the additional faculty effort. And it should. Two years ago in Indianapolis, I overheard a vice president for academic affairs comment that faculty should simply be told to participate in learning communities. After all, he said, it is their job to teach. No consideration that the learning community might require a new preparation, no recognition of the additional efforts necessitated, no positive reinforcement, and implicitly, *no respect*.

Finally, learning community participation should be rewarding. For me, and anecdotal data from colleagues suggest the same thing, I do enjoy learning community participation in both intangible and concrete ways. The intangibles are hardest to measure, but when I last taught the freshman seminar, I looked forward to the class. It was simply a very different and much more positive experience than my 250-plus student survey. Furthermore, because I was enjoying that class, and applying things I learned from the learning community training in it and my larger survey course, both classes went better. And I am proud to report that because of the learning community experience my teaching evaluations have moved me from a 50th percentile teacher to a 90th percentile one. I will admit I still have mixed feelings about student evaluations, but my optimism is probably better grounded now and my evaluations a reasonably accurate measure of the fact that I have become a better teacher.

The benefits of that transformation are manifest not only for me, but also for the students and the university at large. As a recovering curmudgeon, the qualitatively better experience students have in my classes may translate into higher quality learning and a generally higher level of student satisfaction. The result may be a higher student retention rate because of the qualitatively better experience of those students both in their learning community and other classes taught by learning community faculty. Faculty in turn may well become more positive in their outlook — less curmudgeonly — and more effective as teachers, scholars, and colleagues.

Now, all of this sounds, as I read it, a bit too prosaic. But I often want to say to my colleagues who mope around crying gloom and doom about their students, colleagues, and the administration, “Just get over it.” Toward that end I now offer my 12-step program for promoting faculty rejuvenation:

Twelve Steps to Faculty Rejuvenation Through Learning Communities

1. Acknowledge that you have a problem. Faculty, look in the mirror and look closely at what you see. Videotape one of your lectures and watch it. Or sit in on a colleague's lecture (one of your contemporaries) and see how you respond.
2. Administrators, acknowledge that you have a problem and admit that the solution is not simply to wait the faculty out, for that is simply a recipe for repeating the process with the next generation of faculty. Instead, commit to constructive solutions and support them.
3. Faculty, identify the resources available to you. Does your university have a teaching and learning center? What does the learning community offer in the way of support?
4. Decide to utilize those resources. Attend teaching and learning center workshops. Volunteer to participate in the learning community and follow through with action.
5. Take a look at your behaviors in the classroom and with your colleagues. Create new strategies to cope with the problems that precipitated your evolution toward curmudgeonly status in the first place.
6. Ask a trusted colleague to observe and evaluate your teaching and role in the department and *listen* to his or her feedback.
7. Let go of your current style or approach, i.e., give up on the idea that you are the fount of all knowledge that they **MUST** know.
8. Persist. When one strategy does not work, try another. Do not hesitate to admit when one strategy does not work, but do not assume from that that the only strategy that does work is the old tried and true, for that is what led to the situation we defined as "the problem" in Step 1.
9. Learn from the experience of others. Do not reinvent the wheel but instead borrow unmercifully from colleagues, presenters, conference papers, and the scholarly literature.
10. Having embraced change, be enthusiastic in sharing the new strategies with your colleagues.
11. Turn your rethinking into a conference paper or scholarly publication or both.
12. Become enthusiastic. Think about what motivated you to become a teacher in the first place. Renew your vows of idealism and set out on the path to become again what you aspired to be that first year out of graduate school.

And most of all, have fun, for that is the key to the whole process.

References

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