At the Boundaries, in the Trenches: Curriculum Development and Implementation in Learning Communities at an Urban Commuter College

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Abstract

One of the greatest difficulties facing learning community programs at urban non-residential colleges and universities is the challenge of promoting communication and collaboration among faculty from different disciplines. In this article, the authors, a learning communities coordinator and a learning communities faculty team member, describe and reflect on the outcomes of a semester-long faculty development seminar designed to facilitate the exploration of common learning goals and the development of integrative learning activities and assignments.

Introduction

In their article, "An Introduction to Learning Communities," Anne Mahoney and Judith Flynn (2005) argue that "learning communities are particularly important for urban and suburban metropolitan universities or community colleges serving commuter students, two places where students frequently do not feel a part of the campus life. These institutions often have a greater diversity of student backgrounds and competitors for student time. Unlike a 'traditional' campus with students who live in dorms and who rarely need to leave the campus, urban institutions often struggle to keep students on campus longer than it takes to park and attend class" (Mahoney and Flynn 2005, 11). These remarks resonate with those of us involved in learning communities at Brooklyn College, a comprehensive public urban non-residential college offering bachelor's and master's degrees to a culturally and ethnically diverse student body of some twelve thousand undergraduates and thirty-eight hundred graduate students. They could equally be used to describe a similar need for community and engagement among learning community faculty who are asked to partner with colleagues across disciplinary and departmental boundaries. In this article, we offer an account of an effort to promote communication and collaboration among teams of learning community faculty by means of a semester-long faculty development seminar.

Learning Community History and Context

Learning communities were inaugurated at Brooklyn College in 1995 in response to statistics showing that only 50 percent of first-time freshmen were still registered after three semesters. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Vincent Tinto and Uri Treisman, which indicated a strong correlation between students' engagement with their institution and academic success, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the Director of Freshman Year College developed a program of linked or clustered courses for first-year students. First-semester students were voluntarily registered for learning communities consisting of sections of English Composition I and two Core courses, second-semester students for sections of English Composition II and one Core course. Although the logistical challenges of creating learning communities for the initial cohorts meant that many faculty were only informed at the last minute that they were teaching in a learning community, the expectation was that the benefits to students could still be significant. The work of our esteemed Brooklyn College colleague Kenneth A. Bruffee persuaded us that for students like ours successful adjustment to college life and work is a process of reacculturation into new "knowledge communities" and that this process is best accomplished if students work collaboratively in "transition groups" made up of "understanding peers" with whom they can "go through the risky process of becoming new members of the knowledge communities [they] are trying to join" (1993, 7-8).

The initial experiment succeeded even beyond the college's expectations. Attendance and course completion among learning community students exceeded that of comparable non-learning community cohorts, and the retention rate for learning community students after three semesters rose to 75 percent. Interestingly, the retention of their non-learning community counterparts also increased, although by a much smaller percentage (from 50 percent to 59 percent). The improvement among the non-learning community students is apparently attributable, at least in part, to the implementation of other strategies, such as mandatory registration advisement for all first-year students. Since 1995 the upward trend has continued more or less steadily, with the 2006 learning community cohort being retained at the highest rate (82 percent) to date.

In the 2007-2008 academic year, Brooklyn College offered twenty-three learning communities for approximately seven hundred first-year students, staffed by approximately fifty full-time and part-time faculty members. Four designated Writing Fellows and six writing tutors were also assigned to work with the learning community faculty and students.

The Challenge of Faculty Collaboration and Engagement

Despite these encouraging results, one important element of successful learning communities continued to prove elusive. As described by Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, "Learning communities aim to foster a sense of community

and shared purpose among learners and their teachers. They attempt to create curricular coherence and connections among courses and ideas, and to teach skills in meaningful contexts. They aspire to develop students' capacity to make both academic and social connections as maturing college learners" (2004b, 68). An explicit goal of the learning community initiative at Brooklyn College is to enable students to integrate and synthesize learning across the boundaries of individual courses. Experience shows that most students are unlikely to do this intellectual work on their own. The role of the faculty in helping students discover these connections is self-evident. Yet this goal of the learning community initiative has remained more aspirational than actual. There have been a number of instances of faculty collaboration to "create curricular coherence and connections among courses and ideas," but they have been more serendipitous than intentional, and they remain the exception rather than the rule.

At colleges like ours, many factors actively militate against systematic and sustained learning community faculty collaboration. At Brooklyn College, as elsewhere in the City University of New York and across the U.S., academic departments rely heavily on part-time faculty for the staffing of composition and Core courses. These part-time instructors often find it necessary to teach classes at several different colleges in order to earn a living wage; they have little energy and less time to attend meetings or to reconfigure syllabi and assignments each time they teach the same course. Because of budget considerations and other factors, staffing assignments for part-time instructors are often made or changed at the last minute, again making it difficult for faculty to engage in meaningful and timely curriculum development. Even among full-time learning community faculty, overcrowded offices, shared computers, a heavy teaching load, and a dearth of spaces where faculty can meet create a commuter environment similar to the conditions experienced by our students.

Phase 1: At the Boundaries: The "Transformations" Faculty Development Seminar

In response to these challenges, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the Learning Communities Coordinator decided to use the Dean's annual "Transformations" faculty development seminar to bring together a small group of faculty from a variety of disciplines who would take part in team-building and learning community curriculum development and who would then put their work into practice in the classroom the following semester. The expectation for the seminar was that participants would engage in what Bruffee describes as "the kind of negotiation that occurs when we construct knowledge. . . at the boundaries between different communities of knowledgeable peers" (1993, 70). All faculty who teach composition or Core courses were invited to apply for the seminar, which provided a course release for full-time faculty and a stipend for part-time faculty during the semester of participation. Preference was given to full-time faculty applicants, but the organizers also invited applications from part-time faculty whose chairs recommended them for the seminar and indicated that they were likely to be teaching at the college for several semesters. The idea, of course, was to create teams that would regularly teach together in learning

communities and that would also serve as ambassadors and mentors for other learning community faculty.

Eight faculty members, representing the Department of Biology, Classics, English, Geology, and Music, were ultimately selected for the seminar; six were full-time faculty. The Dean and the Learning Communities Coordinator served as co-facilitators. The seminar met bi-weekly throughout the semester. Remembering Virginia Woolf's wise observation that "a good dinner is of great importance to good talk" (1929, 18), we made sure that our mid-day sessions included lunch.

At the initial organizational meeting, the faculty tentatively sorted themselves into two three-person teams who would create their own learning communities, each consisting of a section of composition, a section of the Classics Core course, and a section of either the Geology Core or the Music Core. The two remaining faculty members worked on special curriculum development projects directly related to the learning communities program.

Seminar readings

We began with a series of readings about learning communities and issues related to student development and student success. Emily Lardner's "The Heart of Education" provided us with a brief overview of various learning community models and helped us understand how learning communities "create educational opportunities for developing the habits of mind necessary to participate effectively and collaboratively in a pluralistic and democratic society" (2005, 28). Chapters from Richard Light's *Making the Most of College* highlighted educational practices and experiences that students themselves identified as having contributed to their success as learners. In *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education* we reviewed the history of learning communities and explored learning community goals and principal curricular structures (Smith et al. 2004a, 2005b, 24-96). Essays by Roberta S. Matthews and David J. Lynch and by Jodi Levine Laufgraben provided additional perspectives on the purposes, structures, and advantages of learning communities. An essay by Bette LaSere Erickson and Diane W. Strommer offered a number of pedagogical strategies for making the first-year classroom "conducive to learning" (2004, 249). Richard Guarasci's "Community-Based Learning and Intercultural Citizenship" and Edward Zlotkowski's "Service-Learning and the First-Year Student" underscored the benefits of experiential and service-learning. Each of the faculty participants was assigned to "present" one of the readings and to lead the group in a discussion of its issues and insights.

Guest speakers

As Mahoney and Flynn point out, "college instructors have begun to see the advantage of creating and working with what is often called a 'learning team'" made up not only of course instructors but also of members of the administration, professional staff, and student body (2005, 15). The importance of helping first-year students take advantage of co-curricular activities and support services has been well documented, and the

learning community experience seemed to offer a natural venue for introducing students to the many campus resources that can contribute to their success. For this reason, the seminar also featured visits and presentations by representatives of the Learning Center, the Center for Career Development and Internships, and the Student Affairs division. A research librarian gave a presentation on information resources and designing effective research assignments. The Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning talked to us about using technology as a tool for communication among faculty as well as among faculty and students. The Directors of the Writing Across the Curriculum program discussed the opportunity for faculty to work with two designated Writing Fellows (doctoral students at the CUNY Graduate Center) who had been trained to assist faculty in using writing as a tool for learning.

Faculty dialogue and team presentations

As seminar participants learning about the national conversation about learning communities through our readings and about the local conversation about strategies for helping students succeed through encounters with members of the college administration and support staff, we also engaged in extended dialogue with one another. Some of this good talk was about our individual experiences with our students and with peer collaboration. There were also some very practical discussions about logistics—coordinating class schedules to facilitate team teaching and field trips in back to back classes; coordinating syllabi to make sure students weren't taking three midterms or handing in three papers on the same day; dealing with "what ifs" such as a student's unofficially dropping out of one of the learning community classes. But the most sustained and intellectually rewarding conversations, which occurred both in the seminar meetings and in separate meetings of the individual learning community teams, were the conversations that took place "at the boundaries," as faculty engaged with one another about the nature of their disciplines, the content of their specific courses, and the learning goals for their students.

We began with an exercise adapted from two workshops developed by the National Learning Communities Project at the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education (http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/LChour/lchour.htm).First, we asked the instructors to set aside the specific syllabus they had developed for their Core or composition courses and to zero in on the most important things they wanted their students to be able to know and to do. Next, we invited them to identify student learning goals that their courses had in common and to connect these goals with issues and themes that might serve as common threads in their learning community classes. We then asked them to develop integrative learning activities and assignments that would enable their students to explore these issues and themes and to demonstrate their newly acquired or enhanced knowledge and skills.

As the faculty engaged with their colleagues, identifying, explaining, and even defending the learning goals about which they were most passionate, a new dialectic emerged. Seemingly irreconcilable differences and incongruities were aired, challenged, negotiated. Unexpected commonalities began to emerge. There were

maneuvers, concessions, and "Eureka" moments. Temporarily freed from the necessity of staking out what needed to be "covered" in their courses, the faculty began talking more and more substantively about core issues and skills. The scientists challenged the humanities and arts people to define what they meant by the term "culture." There were spirited debates about the origins of the pronouncements of the Delphic oracle and about the purposes of community service-leaning. At the final sessions of the seminar, the faculty teams presented—as works in progress—their plans for integrative learning activities and assignments in their learning community classes. The other seminar participants asked questions and offered constructive criticism. Both teams planned to continue refining their assignments and curricula over the summer.

Phase 2: In the Trenches: Implementation

In September 2008 each of the two teams that had prepared to work together had undergone a staffing change. In one case, a part-time faculty member had left the college for a full-time job at another school; in the other, a full-time faculty member had been tapped to serve as our Acting Provost. Yet, despite these setbacks, each of the newly reconstituted teams proved to be agile in making the necessary adjustments and integrating the new faculty team member into the group. What follows is one faculty member's account of the experience of implementing the plans developed as a result of the "Transformations" faculty development seminar.

Reporting from the trenches: A faculty member's reflections on the challenges of creating interdisciplinary syllabi for three courses

In the spring semester of 2007, I joined the "Transformations" faculty development seminar, which focused on curriculum development for learning communities in fall 2007. Seminar readings were informative and interesting, and they explained the history, value, and benefits of learning communities, the key elements of which—to me—seemed to be keeping students centered and creating opportunities for learning across the curriculum. Excitement and engagement were evident among the faculty, with presentations, lively discussions, and occasional banter. Several faculty members from different disciplines worked together toward a common goal: creating integrative learning activities as teams of three instructors who would form the nucleus of two first-year learning communities the following fall. There were, however, a few snags along the way.

Faculty and scheduling

The first challenge presented itself in the creation of a faculty team. When three people from three different disciplines—in our case, one from English, one from Classics, and one from Music—came together to meet in the seminar, with the expectation that they would work together the following semester, they needed to find ways of working together, putting aside personal preferences, personality, and so on. We would expect no less professional behavior in team associations in any other vocation; so, too, from

an academic and mentoring standpoint, learning community leaders needed to work well together to present a unified, enhanced learning experience for their students.
The second challenge came in the guise of professional preparedness. Most instructors, having taught a given course for a time, have a standard syllabus for it—they are used to teaching certain materials from certain texts. This practice presents a problem when trying to create interdisciplinary syllabi, as faculty come to the meeting with the expectation that they can continue to use their regular syllabus and that the other faculty members will be able to coordinate with them.
Then there were scheduling difficulties: our Music Department colleague, due to other obligations, was unable to make the first few meetings of the seminar, so we were unable to collaborate with her as we might have liked. As a solution, our group decided to meet over spring break, at which time our Classics Department colleague came down with pneumonia. We moved our meeting to the first week after the break, and I came down with the flu at that time, missing both our group meeting and the seminar that week.

Steps forward

Despite these difficulties, at our first meeting we exchanged contact information, syllabi, and some of our standard assignments. This meeting did not feel useful; it was difficult for us to connect because we were each clinging to our "usual" syllabi, which we exchanged for later study.

After the first meeting, I spent some time considering what my department's goals and objectives for English 1 students are:

- Write essays with thesis
- See writing as a process
- Reason, think critically, evaluate, use evidence, make judgments, identify purpose and audience of readings
- Write clearly and imaginatively in/for a variety of forms, purposes, and audiences

I then tried to figure out how to reach my goals via the materials I had been given by my colleagues, and I came up with a list of various themes and materials I thought might work with their classes. In our second meeting everyone was more prepared; we discussed crossover points in our central themes:

- Connections to classicism across Art, Music, and Literature
- Revenge and destruction
- Identity/self-identification
- The hero and his quest
- The role of women in society

We also explored the possibility of some assignments any one of us could give to our students that would connect with what the students were learning in their other two classes.

Collaborative assignments

CC 1.3: Music: Its Language, History, and Culture

- Concert review
- Descriptive/analytical essay on scene in movie about musician/composer
- Essays or stories inspired by music (Our freshman reading for the fall semester of 2007, Jonathan Lethem's *The Disappointment Artist*, referenced several musical pieces.)
- Reading essays in English 1 which reference music
- Write about a favorite piece of music; analyze lyrics

CC 1.1: Classical Cultures

- Descriptive/analytical essay on advertisements—look for classical references and images
- Narrative essay on identity and self-identification as they relate to *Trojan Women* and *Persians*
- Compare/contrast essay on identity (as above) in Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue," Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," Gloria Naylor's "The Meanings of a Word," Emily Tsao's "Thoughts of an Oriental Girl," and other works
- Reading and responding to how selections from Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in English 1 connect with *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*

Further personnel conflicts and solutions

And then there were further setbacks. Over the summer our partner from the Music Department was asked to serve as Acting Provost—and so my Classics colleague and I were notified in mid-August that we would be working with another instructor, who was on vacation until a day or two before the fall semester would begin. At this time we also found out that the English instructor from the other "Transformations" seminar cohort—which had created a beautiful theme-oriented integrated syllabus with English 1, Classics, and Geology—had accepted a position elsewhere, so their team had to make adjustments with a new instructor as well.

Despite these obstacles, my Classics and Music colleagues and I determined that even if we could not boast of a fully integrated syllabus, we would, above all, stay student centered. For us, this meant first of all staying connected with one another by adjusting dates on our syllabi for essays and exams to lessen pressure on the students. For example, knowing I had a paper due around mid-terms, my Classics partner moved her mid-term up by a week, and our colleague from Music scheduled his mid-term for the week afterward. We also met once a month to discuss our assignments, discuss students, and consider extracurricular crossover material such as the "Borough as Classroom" program.

Discuss our assignments

- Our Classics colleague sent her writing assignments to both of us.
- The Music instructor asked students to set music to narrative essays from my textbook, including Annie Dillard's "The Chase" and "Snow" by Julia Alvarez.
- I shared Jamaica Kinkaid's "Girl" and Judy Brady's "I Want a Wife" with the Classics instructor as she jumped into an excerpt from Xenophon called "How to Train a Wife," and shared her discussion questions on it with me.

Discuss students

- Student A sits in the back left corner in all three classes; he was seen sneaking his headphones on, or holding them out, or picking up a call during a group activity.
- I thought Student B needed writing tutoring, and the others agreed. I referred her to the Learning Center.
- We all agreed that Student C was a good writer and student. We suggested she consider an honors program.
- Student D is often involved in class discussion in one class. Really? She never talks in mine!
- Did you know that Student Z speaks Icelandic?

Consider extracurricular crossover material, such as the "Borough as Classroom" program:

- Brooklyn Academy of Music—A piece called "The Gate" deals with themes of death, love, resurrection, and judgment of three tragic heroines including Shakespeare's Juliet and Yu-ji of *Farewell My Concubine*. Composed by Tan Dun (Academy Award-winning film score for "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"), it links all three of our classes in an amalgam of themes, cultures, languages, and literature.
- Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts—The Iceland Dance Company was mentioned to the student who speaks Icelandic.

Difficulties vs. Benefits

In sum, what we each discovered was that although creating integrative learning activities required more work (or should I say flexibility?) for each instructor, the sustained contact, attention to students, and dedication we were able to devote to the smaller classes clearly benefited the students and outweighed the negative aspects:
Difficulties for instructors

- Reading new and/or foreign materials
- Finding readings and integrating homework assignments that link objectives for all three courses
- The ever-present conflict with teaching another section of the same course concurrently—outside the learning community (Without any context for the students, the instructor must teach completely different materials in other sections.)

Benefits for students

- Gives readings cross-curriculum context, while promoting learning across the curriculum, creating interest and synergy in the students' knowledge (As a result, students have a frame of reference, which makes it more likely that they will take part in class discussions.)
- Discussions are more lively, inclusive, and informed. (However, a colleague complained that her students were too in-tune with one another or—to use a phrase I heard at the IUPUI learning community conference—that they had "hyper-bonded" in such a way that their social interactions were more a distraction than an indicator of the comfort level that facilitates class discussion.)
- My Classics Department colleague noted that (while, as she said, this may be coincidence because the sample size is too small to draw any statistically significant conclusions) last semester's learning community section of CC 1.1 had the highest aggregate average grade of ANY section she has taught at Brooklyn College. She remarked that she often finds that about 30 percent of the students earn what she would consider a low grade (a C or below). Last semester, this number was much lower. We find this very suggestive as to the benefits of a learning community for students.

Retention

- In three out of the four classes I taught that semester, I had at least two students in each class who were one absence away from failing the course due to excessive absenteeism. The class that did not have that problem was the learning community class.
- Students from the course reported enjoying the level of familiarity and friendships they had developed as a result of the learning community experience, indicating their feeling that their academic success in the first semester was due at least in part to their participation in the learning community.

Instructor/student benefits

- Normally, when CC 1.3 (the Music course linked with my English 1) is included in a learning community, it is paired with two sections of its partner course since maximum enrollment in CC 1.3 is fifty students, while the typical English 1 course has no more than twenty-five. In this trial, however, CC 1.3 was limited to only twenty-five students. It is interesting to note that CC 1.1 (the linked Classics course) normally has thirty-five students and was also limited to twenty-five in this case.
- Freshman-only sections also demand more individual attention from the instructor, a practical impossibility in large classes, especially when one factors in heavy CUNY teaching loads. In a class of twenty-five it was possible for both the Music and Classics Department instructors to get to know each of the students individually. They each reported that the fall of 2007 was the first time that they felt able to give each student in these classes the amount of attention that they needed.
- Furthermore, my Classics department colleague noted that normally in other sections of this course, there are about thirty-five people who run the gamut from freshman to super-senior, and their skills are just as widely divergent. Since she knew that all of

the learning community students were taking these other classes—and, therefore, were acquiring the same basic knowledge and skill sets at the same time—it was much easier to plan effective assignments and activities for this particular class.

Reflections on Thematically-Based Syllabi

In terms of the difficulty of finding a single common theme for all three classes, I found myself wondering if it would make more sense to create integrated syllabi for Classics or Music with Brooklyn College's English Composition 2 course instead, as that class focuses on a theme chosen by the instructor, and the end goal for that class also involves writing a research paper. Thematically linked courses work well for research assignments, but across two historical "tour" courses the themes could be too broad. English 2 is usually paired with just one other course in the spring semester of the first year, and that is probably as it should be. I understand that such pairings are currently offered and that the faculty teams are also encouraged to develop integrated syllabi for their courses.

In that vein, the most successful collaborative syllabi I heard of during my attendance at the November 2007 12th Annual National Learning Communities Conference at IUPUI seemed contingent upon the instructors' sharing a common interest or cross-curricular application of their specialties. One example would be that of "Music and Language: Writing About What You Hear," co-taught by Mike Warren, an English instructor who is also a music reviewer, and Jim Murray, who teaches a writing-intensive music appreciation course at Metropolitan Community College-Maple Woods in Kansas City, Missouri. Another example would be that of Ted Hazelgrove and James Gould, respectively English and philosophy instructors at McHenry County College in Crystal Lake, Illinois, who discovered common ground in their appreciation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series, using examples such as Boromir's attempted theft of the Ring as a demonstration of Socrates' teachings on moral failure due to ignorance. These types of pairings seem ideal—where the academic material itself is shared between two classes, and the instructors have that common ground to reference across the curriculum.

That said, from everything I read during the seminar to what I've seen from my learning community students to what I heard about and saw demonstrated at the national learning communities conference, creating linked syllabi and integrated coursework is absolutely worthwhile. However, I think it is difficult to realize without full involvement, cooperation, and flexibility from each would-be learning community faculty member. Despite our personnel and scheduling obstacles, my learning community team achieved workable compromises and managed to create meaningful integrated assignments; however, on reflection, I admit seeing potential for much more. I also see my own reluctance to part with my usual content and course materials—which increased when I was given a second class of English 1 outside the learning community—as having been a hindrance to creating more fully integrated syllabi for the three courses.

It is clear that learning community faculty attempting to create interdisciplinary syllabi benefit from organizational structures (such as the seminar I attended) that facilitate discussion of learning community objectives, as well as from having ample opportunities for collaboration across the curriculum well in advance of the actual dates of the projected learning community classes.

Conclusion

Our experience with the faculty development seminar and the implementation of the learning community curricula developed by the participants reaffirms the fact that faculty from different disciplines can indeed find common ground on which to build collaborations that enhance student learning and student success. As demonstrated by both the historical record and the recent experiences recounted in this essay, learning communities lead to marked improvement in instructor-student interaction and student retention. They can also be intellectually rewarding and revitalizing for the faculty themselves.

The question is: How can we institutionalize the salient features of the faculty development program in order to ensure the future success of the learning community initiative? One insight provided by the seminar is that institutions that are serious about the value of learning communities need to find ways of providing the time, space, and structure for faculty to work together on planning their courses and developing integrative learning activities and assignments. This will require the logistical, budgetary, and moral support of college administrators and academic departments. Such support might take the form of faculty development seminars, or it might be provided through day-long workshops or retreats. It should also be reflected in the faculty hiring process and in the criteria for reappointment, tenure, and promotion. Once learning community instructors have worked together as a team, special efforts should be made to enable them to sustain their collaboration in subsequent semesters. This might be facilitated by the appointment of designated learning community faculty, whether on a full-time or part-time basis. More broadly, colleges and universities should create multiple incentives and strategies to foster cooperation and social interaction among faculty from different academic disciplines and departments, thus developing professional relationships that generate interest, excitement, and follow-through for collaborative teaching and learning.

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