

LEARNING COMMUNITIES, COLLABORATIVE LEARNING, AND THE PEDAGOGY OF EDUCATIONAL CITIZENSHIP

Issues of citizenship and national service are once more a primary theme of our national discourse. Young people are being urged, as they were some thirty years ago, to think of what they can do for their country rather than what their country can do for them. For our part, we have filled our campuses with messages of service and the need to build inclusive, supportive communities for all students.

Laudatory as these goals may be, serious questions remain about the willingness of young people to engage in service and to work together on our campuses. Of course, there will always be students who value service and understand that responsibilities as well as rights come with citizenship. But most youth grow up learning to place personal gain and career interests first. Few have confronted the many ways their interests and the interests of the larger community are inextricably intertwined.

What can be done to promote citizenship among our students? . . . to shape their willingness to take some degree of responsibility for the welfare of others, . . . to join in an inclusive community life, . . . to become citizens first and workers second?

This, of course, is not a new question. For years, the themes of community, service, and citizenship have been a consistent thread in conversations about collegiate education. But those conversations have been severely limited in scope. They've spoken of the education of citizens as if meeting that goal were primarily



Vincent Tinto is a professor of education and sociology at Syracuse University, 350 Huntington Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244-2340.

by Vincent Tinto

a matter of content, of course material.

In this and other ways, we have failed to do all we could. We lecture about citizenship, but we do little to promote teaching and learning environments that themselves could develop in students the norms and dispositions of citizenship. The recent popularity of service-learning aside, we've seldom turned to approaches that would enact a pedagogy of citizenship.

Yet we know that our actions speak louder than our words, and that students learn as much, if not more, from the norms implicit in the structure of action than from the words overlaying that structure. If anything, the con-

traditions that arise from the clash of norms implicit in content vs. structure yield among our students a sense of the system's hypocrisy. They come to see the system as preaching one thing while doing another.

This does not mean that higher education has been totally devoid of pedagogies that promote citizenship. The history of higher education is dotted with "distinctive" colleges whose pedagogical practices were consciously constructed with the notion of citizenship in mind . . . Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College at Wisconsin (1928-30) is the most famous example. But such colleges have almost always been small, served the upper middle class, and had short life spans.

Most important, the sense of citizenship that they sought to imbue in their students never found its way into the collegiate experience generally. Just the opposite is more usually the case. For most students, college is still characterized by independent, often isolating, learning set in a highly competitive context that all but ignores the norms that underlie the concepts of service and citizenship.

Learning Communities

Today, happily, a number of innovations in pedagogy and practice exist with the potential to change our approach to the development of citizenship in our students. Chief among these are the use of *learning communities* and *collaborative teaching strategies*. While these efforts may vary in character, they all emphasize shared or connected learning, pos-

itive interdependence, and collaboration between students and faculty in the learning-teaching process. And most require students to become actively involved both in their own learning and in that of their peers.

What led me to this connection — between these pedagogic strategies and learning the disposition of citizenship — was a series of studies of learning communities in higher education I directed recently for Syracuse University and the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching,

yielded evidence of program impact.

Separate qualitative observations and interviews of the program students during the year further helped us to understand the effects of program participation and gave us insight into the possible sources of those effects. These allowed us to discover changes in student views over the course of the program, and to better understand the comparisons the students made between their experiences in the program and their prior expe-

responsibility for their own learning (as well as that of their peers) was seen as critical for their continuation in college:

The more I talk with other people, the more I'm actually learning. . . . I get [more] out of the subject because my brain is getting more, because I'm getting more involved with the students. I'm getting more involved with the class.

We also found that a number of students who participated in collaborative learning programs, especially those in the Coordi-

We lecture about citizenship, but we do little to promote teaching and learning environments that themselves could develop in students the norms and dispositions of citizenship.

Learning, and Assessment (NCTLA).

Two of these studies focused on the academic and social experiences of beginning college students in two different learning community programs: the Learning Community program at LaGuardia Community College, in New York City; and the Coordinated Studies Programs at Seattle Central Community College. Though somewhat different in structure, these programs were similar in their emphasis on the utilization of collaborative teaching strategies within the learning communities — with the Coordinated Studies Programs being the most consciously collaborative in nature.

Our research sought to answer two basic questions about these programs. Do collaborative learning programs make a difference in student learning and persistence? And, if so, how?

We used two forms of inquiry, quantitative and qualitative, to study the experiences of a sample of program and nonprogram first-year students. With survey questionnaires we studied the students' academic and social behaviors, perceptions of academic experiences, perceptions of intellectual gain, and academic performance and persistence during their first year. Comparative statistical analyses of this data

riences in more-traditional learning settings.

First, and by way of context, let me share our findings on the influences of learning communities on student learning and attainment. What really struck me in our data, however — and what led me to this focus on what we came to refer to as “educational citizenship” — were findings we had *not* sought out; namely, that for many participants, the learning community experience seemed to have developed in them an understanding of the nature and importance of mutual interdependence in shared learning endeavors.

Findings

Consistent with our expectations, we found that students in the two learning community programs were more involved in a range of learning activities, learned more, and eventually persisted at a higher rate than did similar students in more traditional learning settings. In being part of a shared learning experience, the students found academic and social support for their learning among their peers and they became actively involved in learning. For many students, especially those in the urban community college settings, that support and the sense of empowerment arising from taking

nated Studies Programs at Seattle Central (see box), expressed a deepened appreciation for the importance of inclusive, supportive community in their lives. And they seemed to have awakened to the important notion that their own educational well-being was dependent on that of other members of the learning community, and it was in their own educational interest to be concerned with the educational needs of others:

[In the beginning of class], I just felt there was a lot of conflict, a lot of people were afraid to really actually say what they really felt. A lot of the white students were, because they felt intimidated. But as we started to learn more about them and they learned more about us, [it was better].

So you are constantly having to think, rethink, and even re-rethink what's going on in light of all the feedback you're getting from all these different points of view; what it does is shape and mold your own point of view to a much finer degree and gives you a much broader base to look from, I think, than you would [get] from just the traditional teacher/pupil situation.

Implications for Campus Communities

This view of the educational value of diversity and of one's obligations to one's peers, which is part of what I'm calling educational citizenship, is only a step or two away from the concept of citizenship as generally understood. Indeed the former may be a necessary precursor to the latter. What I am suggesting is that the promotion of learning communities and collaborative learning in higher education may serve to promote not only enhanced learning and persistence but also the development of citizenship in its broadest sense.

Of more immediate concern is the potential impact such pedagogies can have on campus climates and the construction of campus communities that bring people together. Carefully structured learning communities can promote respect for difference — in race, sexual orientation, class — among students and faculty and a deeper appreciation of the ways in which diversity enriches the entire community.

The pedagogies also can reinforce the development of positive intergroup affiliations. By requiring students to work together in mutually positive ways, they help overcome the many stereotypes that unfortunately often shape campus intergroup relations. By embracing collaborative teaching and learning, we promote forms of educational citizenship that prepare students to be effective citizens in an increasingly diverse America.

It is also likely that the promotion of learning communities and collaborative pedagogies on campus will have a substantial positive impact on the willingness of students to volunteer for community and campus service. Take, for instance, the report of directors of freshman learning communities who use peer mentors in their programs — they tell me that past learning community participants are invariably the first to volunteer to become peer mentors in the following years.

Thinking of the current popularity of service-learning, let me

add that we should not restrict service to "service" courses or only to students who find that work of interest. We should ask all students to give something of value back to their community and/or campus, whether as peer mentoring, tutoring, or another form of service. We should hold service to be a principle of institutional membership.

Concluding Comments

As a researcher, of course, I can think of a dozen questions we have yet to answer. We don't yet know how complex or fully developed those norms are after only a semester. What else would have to take place in college for those norms to take root? Nor do we know to what degree these norms extend beyond the classrooms of the learning community. Are they peer-group specific, or do they influence behaviors beyond the program?

As to service-learning, one can ask whether an experience of it might reinforce or strengthen the experience of a collaborative learning community? Or, to what degree would the experience of service-learning be enhanced when set in the collaborative learning community environment?

More generally, to what degree need content and structure be

linked? Can we achieve the same appreciation of mutual interdependence in math classrooms as in classrooms that focus specifically on issues of citizenship?

Finally, we need to understand more fully how these issues play out in racially and socially diverse collegiate settings. In such settings, how does the experience of learning communities shape one's view of mutual interdependence and benefit?

There are many more questions that one can pose about the impacts of learning communities and collaborative learning, and many particulars that are still unclear. What *is* clear is the need for us to construct a pedagogy, not simply a curriculum, that will build, not undermine, the norms of citizenship we seek to promote. To that end, there is already good reason to recommend the rapid development of learning communities and the collaborative learning strategies that undergird them. ■

Note

This article was adapted from a presentation to the Joint Program, Council on Academic Affairs and Council on Student Affairs at the annual conference of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, November 7, 1994, Chicago, IL.

One case study

Coordinated Studies Programs Seattle Central Community College

The Coordinated Studies Programs (CSPs) at Seattle Central typically consist of two to four thematically linked courses whose 40-100 students meet together as one large learning community, team-taught by two to four instructors. The themes of the CSPs cut across disciplinary areas; though usually based in the Humanities Division, they may extend to the Math-Science or Professional-Technical Divisions. CSPs typically meet for 11 to 18 hours a week, in blocks of 4 to 6 hours over two to four days. Generally, all instructors are present and active in all class meetings. For most of the week, the entire community meets together, but once or twice a week the large class splits into smaller seminar sessions.

The use of cross-disciplinary topics, team-teaching, continuous class meeting times, and regular small-group activities creates a collaborative learning environment that consciously seeks to engage its students as full participants in the construction of knowledge.