

Teaching the Theme of Community

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As two community college teachers of English/humanities and business/computer information systems, we had worked together for many years on incorporating cooperative learning and service-learning into the individual curriculum of every course we taught. Connecting our students to each other in the classroom, as well as to the community in which we were preparing them to serve, had always been at the heart of our teaching philosophies. When we had the opportunity to team teach, combine our courses, and create a new curriculum for a first-year experience, “community” was the only theme we ever considered. Therefore, we titled our learning community, “Creating Community in a Changing World.”

Students enrolled in First-Year Composition (three credits), Film and Literature (three credits), and Internet (one credit) in the fall, then the second part of First-Year Composition (three credits), World Literature (three credits) and PowerPoint (one credit) in the spring, for a total of fourteen credits during the year. A Monday and Wednesday cohort of forty-five students met from 9:00 a.m. to 12:50 p.m., and a second cohort of an additional forty-five students met in the same time block on Tuesday and Thursday. Many students remained each afternoon to work in groups on their assignments in our computer classroom. As one student, Marci Alderman, explained it, “Each semester, we had a four-hour block and it wasn’t like we had to study for three separate classes each semester. It was cool how everything was integrated and intertwined with one another. It was easier to learn that way.”

In addition, our students were required to serve throughout the year at the House of Refuge East, a transitional housing program for formerly homeless families with children, located on our campus. Over the course of the year, the service-learning experience would prove to be one of the most powerful components of building community within our community of learners. This service-experience would expand our students’ understanding of the theme of community as they moved out of the classroom to explore issues firsthand that relate to homeless families, including poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, and single parenthood.

This combination of courses allowed students to complete all of their required composition and humanities courses, as well as gain competence in the use of computers, including word processing, multimedia presentations, web-based research skills, and website creation and maintenance. By the end of the year, this very diverse group of students of all ages, backgrounds, abilities, and skills had posted the evidence of their year’s accomplishments in composition and humanities on their individual websites or as we called them, their “webfolios.”

Curriculum

The theme “Creating Community in a Changing World” provided the coherence for the curriculum. Our purpose was to help our students develop a better understanding of themselves as individuals and as members of a diverse commu-

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Chandler-Gilbert Community College (CGCC), founded in 1985, is one of the ten Maricopa Community Colleges in metropolitan Phoenix. CGCC serves approximately 7,500 students at three campus locations. The learning community described here was located at CGCC’s Williams Campus, a former U.S. Air Force base, which is shared by Arizona State University East (ASU East). Many community college and university students live in residential housing while others commute. Freshmen and sophomores take general education coursework together in a unique arrangement called the Partnership in Baccalaureate Education. The former base is also shared with a variety of other partner organizations, including the Williams Gateway Airport Authority, the Air Force Research Labs, Gila River Indian Community, and a transitional housing shelter called the House of Refuge East (HRE).

Marybeth Mason, an English and humanities teacher, and Maria Hesse, then a teacher of business and computer information systems, were both instrumental in establishing CGCC’s college-wide service-learning program, which began in 1991 and has grown to involve dozens of faculty and thousands of students each year. CGCC’s learning communities program began in 1995 and each year involves hundreds of students in linked, team-taught, and cross-disciplinary learning communities.

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nity. Our students came to campus from a wide range of regions around the country as well as around the state of Arizona. Many were traditional freshmen, others were reentry students—mothers and fathers with children of their own—representing a variety of races, ethnicities, cultures, and communities. We hoped that the study of the theme of community would better prepare these students to function and succeed in a variety of communities, including their home community, their classroom community, their campus community, and a more global community.

We began by looking closely at individuals, families, and neighborhoods of many cultures in a variety of books, poetry, short stories, essays, and films. We used, for example, Sandra Cisneros' novel, *The House on Mango Street*, Amy Tan's memoir, "Fish Cheeks," Jon Singleton's film, *Boyz N the Hood*, and Leslie Silko's short story, "Lullaby." Students did background research on the Internet about the literature, films, authors, related themes, and social issues. They wrote about their own family traditions and customs, as well as those of characters from a wide variety of cultures, including South Central Los Angeles, the Navajo Reservation, a Chicago barrio, and the gay community, analyzing themes of poverty, prejudice, despair, hope, and survival. In addition, they researched and wrote about relevant social issues, such as immigration, homelessness, addiction, unemployment, discrimination, AIDS, and domestic violence. Students kept a portfolio of all their writing, and each created an individual website to showcase what they felt was their best work in their "webfolio."

Second semester, we expanded our look at the global community in World Literature, and as students researched and wrote essays, they presented an abstract of each composition to the class in the form of a PowerPoint presentation and continued to add their best work to their "webfolios." Student Kyra Peterson described the course sequence, "We started with just ourselves and memories from childhood, our family and neighborhoods. Then we looked at our families and communities in our cultures in the United States. Second semester, we moved to a global perspective, analyzing families on many continents." We kicked off the semester with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and moved on to works by Wole Soyinka, Isabel Allende, Pablo Neruda, Mulk Raj Anand, Mohandas Gandhi, and Patricia Grace, among others. We explored themes of war, nonviolence, isolation, oppression, rebellion, sacrifice, freedom, and the inevitable conflict that exists between individual needs and those of the larger community. Much of the students' research centered around the history and politics of the struggle of nations for freedom and independence, and the heroic efforts of common individuals who chose to make a difference in their communities.

Building Community

In addition to the overriding theme and content of the course, a number of factors contributed to the students connecting with each other as a learning community. We used a wide variety of active learning techniques and sharing to encourage a sense of community among the students and us. From the first day,

we started with “getting to know you” activities that set a tone that we were going to get to know each other better than students typically do in classes. In every class period we designed activities that encouraged teamwork and sharing to create a learning environment that was safe and inviting for studying cultures and communities. We shared on a personal and meaningful level in order to connect more closely as people. Students’ initial reading and viewing logs, written in response to the literature and films, expressed their personal thoughts and reactions to the works. As they shared these with each other in small groups and often read them out loud to the whole class, they began to listen and learn about one another. As instructors, we also wrote and shared our writing with the students.

Students met regularly in writing groups throughout the year to discuss the films and literature and to help each other with revising and editing their essays. As they worked together to improve their writing, they took pride not only in their own work, but in that of their classmates, creating a very special bond. When they posted their writing in their webfolios, the audience for their writing grew beyond that of the classroom. Soon they were writing for parents, friends, and others around the world who could find their work on the web, heightening their awareness of their place in a much larger global community.

Viewing feature-length films in their entirety on a big screen in the student union while snacking on microwave popcorn, also served as an important community builder. In addition, we booked a series of speakers throughout the academic year to coordinate with the literature and films we were studying. For example, after viewing the Gregory Nava film *El Norte* and reading Luis Urrea’s essay, “Border Stories,” we invited a panel of Latino speakers to discuss various Latin American and U.S. immigration issues. Listening to personal stories and experts in the field enhanced the students’ interpretation of the related literature and film, and fueled many fervent discussions. One student shared, “You know you can get so much out of books and reading, but once you get a real-life example, it’s like ‘Wow!’ and you step back and think about it for a while and the meaning becomes so much greater.”

We also used technology to create community, teaching students to correspond using e-mail accounts, posting thoughts on discussion boards, and sharing their writings, photographs, and other personal and creative work on their websites. Students spent seemingly endless hours together in the computer lab on afternoons, evenings, and even Saturdays, fashioning their web pages with customized backgrounds, graphics, and animations to impress any browser who would visit their websites. Those students who had the most sophisticated technology skills taught others, with incredible patience. Technology takes time, and the students were devoted to helping each other create products they could post proudly.

Matt Pearce, who came to college in Arizona from Illinois, explained, “As far as the theme of community, for me on a personal level, our own classroom was a community. We hung out and did things together, and it was not just the theme of the literature. It was brought out into my life too, as I connected with others in the class.”

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Service-Learning

Service-learning had been a passion of ours for ten years. Our college has been committed to supporting service-learning in courses across the curriculum. We knew service-learning could benefit our students by making their studies more relevant, while making a valuable contribution to the community. In addition to engaging students in real-world problem-solving to promote genuine learning, we felt that service-learning in our learning community program would provide a powerful experiential mechanism for our students to explore moral and ethical issues, clarify values, promote social development, cultivate community involvement, and prepare for life in a diverse world.

When we learned that our campus, a former U.S. Air Force base, had a portion of its housing designated for homeless families, we became committed to having our students serve this unique population who shared our campus community. Our students, as it turned out, shared that commitment. Two hundred and fifty residents inhabit the eighty houses designated as the House of Refuge East (HRE). As we began to build a relationship with the staff and families of the HRE, we and our students were astonished to learn that approximately 60 percent (150) of those residents were children. After reading works by Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, and researching the needs of the homeless, and homeless children in particular, our students came to some startling realizations. Children represent the largest and fastest growing population of homeless in the United States. The second largest population is that of single mothers, who often have no family or community to help support them through extremely difficult times. Many cannot support a family on minimum wage; others are forced to flee domestic violence. Consequently, the children in these situations suffer the most.

As our students began to work with the HRE director and caseworkers, they discovered that the housing project lacked any after-school or weekend recreational or educational activities for the children, so they decided to provide them. They scheduled a calendar of events each month, which included soccer, kickball, football, homework help, and arts and crafts. They also arranged to take the children on a number of field trips, including a hike to the Superstition Mountains and trips to an African art exhibit and a roller skating rink. In addition, students helped the children plant a garden and planned an all-day carnival and barbecue with a petting zoo with horses, cows, chickens, and rabbits.

The time outside of class engaged in service-learning experiences helped the students directly relate the literary themes, character analyses, and research from the classroom to the real needs of their immediate community, and to make a personal connection and contribution to that community. One student, Morgan, said, "Most people think, 'Oh well, we have these social issues in our community, these problems in our communities, but what can I do? I'm just one person.' But after working at HRE, it really brought home the point to me, that one person can make a difference in their community." Jenny Dolezal, who organized the Christmas angel tree program, wrote, "I actually felt I had done something to improve someone's life, even if it was only for a short time."

At the end of the first year, we reflected on our own experience as teachers in the learning community and on the role of service-learning within it. We saw how

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students had made connections in their writing between their lives and the literature, research, and needs of the community. Their experience working with the HRE connected them to the kids and their families who were struggling to survive, living on the same campus that they were. They recognized the wide range of diversity in this unique campus community. To coexist and to better understand each other, they needed to reach out and interact in the community, to make a commitment to others.

The children of HRE reminded us all that families around the world in every culture have similar needs. Marci Alderman noted in her service reflection, “At first, when we start talking with someone we presume differences. Then soon, we are learning from each other and we realize that we are more alike than we are different.” Deanna Lara described the process she went through, “Before you can start to contribute to the community, you have to first learn about yourself. You have to see what you can contribute. In the classroom, we learned to interact with one another, which helped us outside the classroom when we went to HRE to work with the kids on different activities.”

As students shared their service-learning reflections and worked together to shape their initial drafts into more thoughtfully developed essays, we watched them develop as writers, community members, critical thinkers, and social activists. Although there were times when students would say, “Are we ever going to stop reflecting? We’re reflecting on our reflecting,” by the end of the semester they could articulate the importance of reflection and the need to look back, to make sure to take the time to stop and be able to make the connections between all they had read, viewed, researched, and experienced. Student Pam Akina explained, “That’s when we learn—when we look back. We can step back from what we’ve done and learn through evaluation of ourselves. Often when we were asked to write about how something pertained to us, that’s where we got the learning—when we applied it to ourselves.” Kyra Peterson mentioned that she liked it “when we read all of our reflections that we had done individually and shared them with one another.” She noted that it created special bonds and helped her to appreciate all the different ways in which the students made meaning of their experiences. “We just found that everything we learned affected us so much. I had no idea that what we learned in this class was going to have such an impact on me . . . I can remember having a group discussion and literally crying because it touched me so much.”

Deanna Lara shared, “It’s not just about what happens in the classroom anymore. It’s about how you affect other people, like working with the kids in HRE. I think we really made a difference in their lives.” One student, Arin Cummings, explained, “On a personal level, community was created through all of the special bonds and relationships formed between all of the students in the learning community. People of completely different backgrounds and experiences were coming together to learn and serve. When we worked together outside the classroom at HRE, we left on a mission to serve the community rather than ourselves and returned with a stronger sense of community among us.”

At the end of each major service-learning event, parents, their children, and social workers from HRE delivered thank you notes in appreciation for all our students had given. One HRE mother came to class to personally express her

gratitude for what students had provided for her children, an important affirmation that our students' contributions had made a difference.

Community as a Theme

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From the perspective of the teachers, the chance to plan a curriculum that integrated our subjects together, to create a communal classroom environment, and then to team teach in it, revitalized our enthusiasm and love for teaching. Inspired and amazed by what we saw our students accomplish as readers, writers, researchers, and computer users each week, our own creativity in the classroom seemed to increase exponentially. We watched and learned from them as they challenged us and motivated us to teach in new and creative ways. The theme of community, and the various methods we used to create that theme, connected us to our students in a unique way. A genuine sense of camaraderie, team spirit, sincere concern for one another, and friendship developed among us.

As instructors, we realized that to a great extent we were simply facilitators for the students who determined and directed their own learning in ways we had never even considered. As the year came to a close and we held final reflective conversations with the students, we realized how many students were transformed by their learning community experience. As student Bill McKean observed, "We were committed to all working together toward the same goal, like a team." Joe Mason shared that he would describe the learning community to other potential students like this, "It's probably not going to be like any other class you've taken because it's much more. It gets underneath your skin. You don't just have to write a paper and not think about it—it makes you think about it, and think about yourself, and think about the world around you."

Augie Barajas spoke about the sense of developing his own community through the experience of the learning community and his reflection on the theme. "When I first came here, I thought my community was back home, but as the class went on everything switched and now my community is this campus. I've got my friends here—I have Sean, I have Alan, I have Matt, I have Jeremy, I have Deanna—and that's my community now." Another student, Bob Karp, explained the impact on his overall college experience, "The learning community was like an extended family, and the friends that I made here became the most important reason for me to come to class and to continue with my college education."

Nick Carlen noted, "The benefit of the thematic emphasis on community is that the students realize that we all need to work together to succeed and when we do, we learn that we all have something in common: we are all human beings with common feelings, wants, and needs." Angela Mitchell commented, "I have come out of my shell and begun to speak out, read my writings, and share my opinions. The theme of community has expanded my own community from my small housing development in Queen Creek, Arizona, to include a much larger global community. Nothing will ever change that."

Challenges

By the end of the year, we were all exhausted from the intensity of the year's worth of community-building activities both inside and outside the classroom. As instructors, we had not fully realized how much time would be consumed in building a new curriculum, coordinating the many service-learning events with a community-based organization, planning and supervising field trips, securing transportation, contacting and hosting guest speakers, arranging for food and refreshments for special events, and mentoring 90 freshmen throughout their first year of college. The technology components of the course had taken an enormous amount of time, particularly structuring and supporting the course website. Team teaching was also challenging and, although we had worked together on other projects in previous years, it took intensive planning and constant communication after class each day to shape a curriculum that was truly integrated around our theme.

Marketing the learning community to ensure enrollment each semester meant meeting with advisors to be sure they were knowledgeable enough to recruit students, "sell" them on our learning community, and register them in the appropriate sections. We had seen many faculty plan learning communities that never made their expected enrollments, the result of lack of understanding and support by advisement. We didn't ever want to suffer that disappointment, so we diligently worked with student services staff to be sure our learning community had the enrollment necessary to make our teaching loads.

Despite our exhaustion, as teachers we knew we had created and been a part of a very special educational community, which inspired us to look ahead to the next fall when we could make the experience even better for our students. We knew we wanted to improve the technology component by securing a high-end workstation for students with a CD burner, scanner, color printer, and digital video capability. We began working on opening a branch of the Boys and Girls Club at the Williams Campus, which is now up and running for all of the children who live on campus, including those living at the HRE. We produced a video from photos and videotape collected throughout the year, which has helped recruit both students and faculty into learning communities at our college. There are always ways to improve, but no other teaching experience will ever compare to that first year of "Creating Community in a Changing World."

In her final reflection, Stephanie West wrote, "I began this course with the knowledge that I had failed English 101 two times previously, and it had been five years since I had been in a classroom. . . . Looking back on those thoughts now, I giggle aloud. I have completed English 101 and 102, my humanities requirement, and I have no doubt I will complete all courses necessary for my degree. I am ready for anything."

Many thanks to all of our students who taught us so much through their dedication to the learning community and their willingness to share their reflections with others.