

THE HEART OF EDUCATION: TRANSLATING DIVERSITY INTO EQUITY

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Achieving educational equity ultimately depends on changing conditions beyond school, including the factors that influence who is able to participate in postsecondary education. Learning communities can create powerful educational experiences for those who arrive at higher education, including the opportunity to develop the skills necessary for addressing social issues, including patterns of participation in postsecondary education. In 1927, John Dewey observed that “the public” has no hands—only individuals do. Consequently, only individuals acting together can address public problems. In Dewey’s view, the aim of education in a democratic society is to help individuals develop the capacities to work together to solve public problems (104). Martin Luther King, Jr. makes a similar case, noting that addressing the complex issues facing our society requires stamina, persistence, and the determination to think problems through together, envisioning alternatives to the status quo (Washington 1986). As an exciting reform effort, learning communities provide a model of collaborative inquiry that students can use the rest of their lives. Throughout the curriculum, learning communities create opportunities for integrating learning across disciplines and developing knowledge and skills that can be used out in the world.

The term *learning communities* is used in widely different contexts, and learning communities serve a range of educational purposes. The term refers to a curricular reform strategy in postsecondary education aimed at creating or deepening students’ experiences of being part of both a social and an academic community. Learning communities represent an alternative to the practice of taking a set of discrete courses taught by faculty who rarely know what their students are learning beyond the boundaries of the courses they are teaching. The assumption behind the discrete course model is that students will synthesize their own learning—for themselves and usually by themselves. Learning communities aim to make this process of integration an explicit part of students’ experience. As well, in learning communities, students have opportunities to learn with and from others, so that they experience learning as a social, rather than an individual, process.

The spread of learning communities to more than 500 colleges and universities—two-year, four-year, public, and independent—is attributable in part to their widely documented effect on student retention and persistence (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo 1993; Taylor, et al. 2003). Learning communities are recognized as sites where student engagement can be fostered through a variety of means, including collaborative learning, community-based learning, and problem-based learning (Smith, MacGregor, et al. 2004; Levine Laufgraben, Shapiro, and Associates 2004; Eaton, MacGregor, and Schoem 2003; Smith 2001). As these writers point out, learning communities at their best represent a holistic response to developing more effective educational practices. Well-designed learning communities embody an analysis of the need to integrate learning, a theory of learning based on current research, a commitment to putting students at the center of our work in higher education, and a commitment to community as a necessary condition for learning (2004, 22). Because of the strong correlation between participating in learning communities and high levels of engagement, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), now includes “participating in a learning community” as one of the standard questions on the survey that goes to both first-year students and seniors.¹

The advantages of encouraging students to make connections among the courses they are taking have been widely recognized. Capstone, thesis, and synthesis projects, and a host of other interdisciplinary projects are all intended to help students synthesize their learning. In *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1992), Gerald Graff argues that integrating learning across courses (and between the curriculum and the co-curriculum) is a powerful strategy for energizing students and faculty. Integration can occur, Graff notes, not only through formal learning communities, but also in a range of less formal practices. “Designing Integrated Learning” by Gillies Malnarich and Emily Lardner (2003), describes a methodology for helping faculty design integrated learning experiences regardless of the degree of connection among courses. Malnarich and Lardner outline a process to create a single linked assignment reflecting important shared learning outcomes. In many cases, students working on a linked assignment are not enrolled in the same courses but their professors create an opportunity for them to work with students in another course. Successful linked assignments frequently become the basis for more robust collaborations. Structured learning communities, with more formal links among courses, build upon these initial integrated assignments.

Although learning communities take different forms on different campuses, in general they refer to the practice of enrolling a group of students in two or more linked or clustered courses usually organized around an interdisciplinary theme or question. Currently, the most common learning community pattern on campuses is one where a cohort of students enrolls in a set of larger (usually unchanged) courses together, plus an additional integrative seminar. A second common pattern is that of linking or clustering courses. The same set of students enrolls in two or three courses, and the curriculum of the courses is integrated. Links or clusters are not usually fully team-taught. The third basic pattern is that of the coordinated studies program, in which a group of students enrolls in a set of fully integrated courses which are team-taught. A more detailed description of these three basic types of learning communities follows:

Small cohorts of students enroll in large courses together, as well as in a small integrative seminar. The cluster model is often the easiest form of learning community to implement because most of the curriculum does not change. What changes are the patterns of student enrollment, cohorts of students enrolled in larger classes, and in an additional seminar. The integrative seminar may be taught by experienced peers, by faculty, by academic advisors, by librarians, or by residence hall staff in the case of living/learning communities. The benefit for students, particularly first-term students, is that they become part of a social group that shares academic experiences, and they have an opportunity in the small seminar to practice integrating learning.

In *Radical Equations*, a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) offered at Western Washington University in 2003, a cohort of students enrolled in American history, college algebra, and a small seminar. Students in the seminar read selections from *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*, by Robert Moses and Charles Cobb, Jr. (2001), and discussed connections between history and mathematics. FIG students gave a presentation to the history course on the radical phase of the Civil Rights movement and according to the history instructor, the benefits of being part of the FIG were evident in the quality of students' presentations.²

Linked or clustered courses. In these learning communities, the students in both (or all three) courses are the same. Faculty teaching the courses plan integrative assignments, decide on shared or common readings, and develop other strategies to help students make both social and academic connections. Under the best circumstances, linked or

clustered courses are scheduled so that they can be taught back-to-back, allowing flexibility for teachers and students, and faculty are supported in developing strategies for integrating content.

For instance, *Civil Rights: History and Criminal Justice* is a sixteen-week, six-credit learning community at Penn Valley Community College that links Introduction to Criminal Justice and American History. The learning community provides a historical and philosophical backdrop for the Civil Rights activities of the 1950s and 60s.³ Taught by Greg Sanford and Karen Curls, the *Civil Rights* learning community examines U.S. laws within their historical context. The same group of students enrolls in both courses. At the end of the course, students and community members have the option to join their two faculty on a bus trip to Atlanta, Birmingham, Memphis, Montgomery, Selma, and Tuskegee to visit landmarks of the Civil Rights Movement.

Coordinated studies programs. Students enroll in a set of courses that have been fully integrated into a single program. Faculty and students do the work of the learning community as their full credit load, or as most of their load. Coordinated studies programs are typically designed so that students meet in a mix of small and large groups—including whole-program lectures, and smaller group meetings for seminars, workshops, and/or labs. The integrated nature of the program means that all the students and all faculty can be present together for extended periods of time. Some coordinated studies program last for more than one quarter, and the work students do in those programs reflects this.

The Folk: Power of an Image was a three-quarter interdisciplinary studies program created by Babacar M'Baye, Pat Krafcik, and Michael Pfeifer at The Evergreen State College, as a cross-cultural exploration of folk material—including tensions between the reality of folk life and the transforming of this reality into art, and the degree to which these transformations accurately convey the experience of folk culture or manipulate or distort it in Africa, Russia, and the United States.

The earliest documented experiment with learning communities in U.S. postsecondary education is Alexander Meikeljohn's Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. Founded in 1927, the Experimental College was based in a residential college. The curriculum was organized as a single program rather than as a set of discrete courses, and the aim was to help students develop flexible thinking and good judgment. Faculty in the program were known as advisors, rather than as professors (Smith, MacGregor, et al. 2004).

The Experimental College lasted five years, but its key features—curriculum organized as a program rather than as discrete courses, purposeful connections between the curriculum and the co-curriculum, and student/faculty relationships focused on collaborative learning rather than on hierarchy and competition—are found in many learning communities today.

The intention behind the development of learning communities resonates with the much older tradition of indigenous education as described by Greg Cajete (1994). According to Cajete, indigenous education draws upon the rich contexts of spirituality, mythology, community, ecology, and art that are part of a holistic way of learning and knowing. Indigenous education aims to honor the whole person, and to remind learners that they are part of a rich and extensive social, historical, and natural world. Playing on the Latin root of education, *educare*, meaning to draw out, Cajete writes, “the goals of wholeness, self-knowledge, and wisdom are held in common by all the traditional educational philosophies around the world” (1994, 209). At heart, the learning community reform effort is rooted in similar goals. Most learning community faculty are, however, graduates of higher education in the United States, which is marked by its own history of exclusion and segregation based on race and ethnicity, and also income. Learning community faculty may aspire to values similar to the ones described by Cajete, but most have had educational experiences at odds with those values. As Paulo Freire (1998) points out, the conundrum educators find ourselves in is that at every moment, we are shaped by our histories—our particular genetic, socioeconomic, and historical circumstances—at the same time that we are actively engaged in a process of making history. The result is a perpetual play. In order to move immediately toward justice and educational equity, we must first acknowledge the impact of our individual and collective histories, how each has shaped how we think about the world. Then, we must consider how we can best work with others to change the path of those histories.

The Persistence of Inequities and the Implications for Educators

At a recent National Summer Institute on Learning Communities workshop, faculty, staff, and administrators were asked to describe the critical issues around diversity emerging on their campuses.⁴ Among the observations shared by participants were the following:

White faculty, staff, and students are turned off by any mention of diversity and there is lots of polarization around issues of

diversity, making it hard to move forward on anything. It's hard to get beyond the view that "I'm not prejudiced, I just have a problem with the way she presents herself" to a more systemic understanding of racism.

We often have a situation where there are one or two or three students of color in predominantly white classes.

When issues of bias and racism come up, students of color may not feel or actually be safe.

White students and campus employees are put off by what they perceive to be "self segregation" among students of color on campus.

On campuses with populations of immigrants and refugees, the needs of African students may be addressed while those of low-income African American students are ignored.

There is the widespread assumption that a campus is *not* diverse because people look alike.

Issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are not being addressed, even in the presence of overt homophobia.

Students bring disparate skills to the classroom.

Students of color sometimes simply disappear from class.

The concerns raised by learning community practitioners in this workshop are similar to those voiced around the country. Many educators sense that conversations about diversity too often lead to more entrenched and polarized positions; the result: no action is taken on behalf of anyone. The emphasis in these conversations seems to shift quickly to feelings of anger, guilt, and defensiveness. We lose the chance to focus on an outcome that holds promise for reshaping the future. In Freire's terms, what is missing in many conversations, especially among whites, is an ability to account for history, for the socioeconomic forces that have been and are at play in shaping our present circumstances. As a result, conversations across significant differences—including race, socioeconomic class, nationality, and gender—are difficult and too infrequently arrive at a focus on justice.

Instead, campus conversations more often operate from a charity-based model, one that intends to create better circumstances within the limits of the status quo—without necessarily questioning what has

enabled the very status quo that gives rise to the need for change. Many educators share an uneasy awareness that people's experiences differ in a number of ways—not just in terms of race, but also in terms of class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and nationality. Sometimes opportunities are created to give voice to some of those differences. While the impulse is good, the practice can go awry. On campuses where the majority of students are white, for instance, students of color are often asked to speak as if on behalf of a larger group, becoming in the process the “token” representative of an alternative perspective. This practice of inviting a member of a minority group to educate members of a majority group reinforces the dominance of the status quo—the minority perspective is typically offered as “enrichment” rather than as a contradiction requiring the rethinking of fundamental assumptions about the nature of our collective reality. At the same time, mindful of the limits of such practices, many faculty are working hard to figure out how to use the diverse experiences of students in their classes as a collective resource for learning. Educators have a growing awareness that the presence of diversity does not translate automatically into equity; many educators also realize that the hope of achieving equity lies in honoring and building upon the diverse perspective embodied by their students.

The challenge of translating diversity into equity has long been recognized, as has the powerful possibility of dialogue across real differences. In his now classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) laments the lack of opportunity for social exchanges across racial lines. The consequences of the lack of opportunity for genuine exchange are described in that collection of essays, which lays out the staggering effects of grinding institutionalized racism on African American individuals, families, and communities. Du Bois believes that only through conversations between blacks and whites will whites, who hold all the political power, develop the insight and the collective will leading to the public policy decisions necessary to achieve racial equality. The repeal of the 1875 Civil Rights Act effectively halts the process of reconstruction, and Du Bois observes that as a result, “there is almost no community of intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of others” (149). Consequently, he notes, “the very representatives of the two races who ought to be in complete understanding and sympathy for the welfare of the land and mutual benefit are so far strangers that one side thinks all whites are narrow and prejudiced and the other thinks educated

Negroes are dangerous and insolent” (149). When social conditions prohibit collaborative conversations across diverse perspectives, equity is not possible.

In an address to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1932, John Dewey, the educational reformer who helped shape the progressive education movement from which our contemporary learning community reform movement descends, argues a similar point: the problem facing ordinary people, especially people of color, is the lack of opportunity to discuss common problems and aspirations with others in similar circumstances. Instead, because of the economic, industrial, and financial systems, the interests of working people of all races are pitted against each other. What was needed—in 1932 and today—are opportunities for all repressed and oppressed minority groups to organize around their shared community of interest and to “discover remedies for the conditions that control (their collective) economic welfare” (1932, 228). With Du Bois, Dewey believed that the strategy for moving from diversity to equity lies in genuine exchange and collaboration across differences.

Dewey and Du Bois were both members of the Progressive Party, founded in 1912 by activists working for women’s suffrage, racial equality, citizenship for Native Americans, tax reform, election reform, labor rights, conservation of natural resources, safe working conditions, and an end to child labor. As educators (Dewey at the University of Chicago and Columbia, Du Bois at Harvard, the University of Berlin, and Atlanta University) and activists, Dewey and Du Bois agreed on the critical role of education in helping develop citizens who would recognize how their individual interests were and are inexorably wrapped up in a larger collective practice. They lamented the lack of opportunity for exchange across significant differences aimed at shaping a common future. Noting that much of what is called selfishness is simply the outcome of limited observation coupled with limited imagination, Dewey argues that the primary purpose of education is to provide opportunities for “associated living,” experiences in which an individual comes to understand how his/her actions affect others, and how the actions of others affect him/her (1927). Over time, Dewey writes, echoing Du Bois, the practice of conscious association will break down barriers based on race, class, and national origin, “widening the area of shared concerns, and (resulting in) the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities (1916, 87).

Dewey and Du Bois agree on the possibilities of education: through a genuine exchange across differences, people can come to recognize

their common stake in a shared future, and develop strategies together for working toward a common good. The promise of this practice of education, however, is offset by the historical circumstances within the United States. As James Banks (2002) and others point out, educators in this country face the perpetual challenge of reconciling the ideals of inclusivity and democracy with a long history of institutionalized racism and inequality. The 1819 “Civilization Act,” which aimed to assimilate Native Americans to dominant white culture; the 1830 Indian Removal Act; the 1831–38 Trail of Tears that forced resettlement of Indians to the west; the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ceded Mexican territory in the southwest to the U.S. government; the 1882 ten-year prohibition of Chinese immigrants, which became an indefinite prohibition in 1902; the 1883 Supreme Court decision that struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875 (the legal basis for Reconstruction after emancipation), claiming that the government could not regulate behavior of private individuals on matters of race relations; the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision affirming the doctrine of “separate but equal”; and the 1942 Japanese American Internment Act, are all examples of institutionalized racism and inequality. The legacies of these decisions and others affect even those who have the opportunity to participate in postsecondary education in the United States, let alone those who participate in conversations aimed at addressing common issues.

To achieve educational equity, we need to notice the present patterns of participation and understand their history, analyze the factors that make it hard for these patterns to change, and then work collectively to make the necessary changes. This is an ambitious project, beyond the scope of the learning community reform movement alone. Income, race, and ethnicity have always influenced who participates in higher education, and these factors continue to affect patterns of participation in postsecondary education. The establishment of minority-serving institutions reflects the longstanding effort to address differential access to postsecondary education, including differential access to hospitable learning environments. Most of the 103 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) were founded in the late nineteenth century to serve African Americans who were legally prohibited from attending white higher education institutions in southern and border states. Even when states opened public HBCU’s, the funding for them was always lower than that designated for white institutions: there was no pretense of equality (O’Brien and Zudak 1998). Most of the thirty-one tribal colleges established in the past thirty years by American Indian tribes

provide affordable and culturally responsive education to tribal members. These tribal colleges have been developed as a marked alternative to predominantly white institutions, with their attendant history of pushing assimilation. About a fifth of all Native American students in postsecondary education in the United States are now enrolled in tribal colleges. The most recent development in minority serving institutions are the designated Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI's), which currently number around 125. The HSI designation comes not from a particular intention to serve a particular population, but from having the equivalent of 25 percent full time equivalent Hispanic enrollment. HSI's are colleges and universities located in close geographic proximity to large Hispanic communities. Currently, about 42 percent of all Hispanic students are enrolled in HSI's. As such, HSI's reflect larger patterns of segregated housing across the United States (*ibid*).

Participation in higher education has always been tied to income. Since the 1970s, the PELL Grant and state initiatives have helped millions of lower- and middle-income students pursue postsecondary education, but this is changing. The GI Bill provided assistance for millions of veterans to attend universities, community colleges, and vocational schools after World War II and the Korean War. Today, however, the education and training benefits for American military personnel are much more modest than they were in the initial GI Bill. The combination of rising tuition, the declining value of individual PELL Grants, and state budget cuts have made higher education less affordable to veterans and non-veterans alike (American Political Science Association 2004). The 2005 federal spending bill will cause 90,000 low-income students to lose their PELL Grant eligibility, more than one million additional students face reductions in their PELL Grant awards, and the maximum Pell Grant is frozen at \$4,050. At the same time, tuitions at four-year public institutions are 10.5 percent higher than they were in 2003.⁵ Recent studies indicate that poor families spent 25 percent of their annual incomes in 2000 for education at a four-year college as compared with 13 percent in 1980, while middle-class families spent 7 percent in 2000 as compared with 4 percent in 1980. The wealthiest families continue to spend just 2 percent of their annual income on tuition (Rossides 2004). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 41 percent of African American students, 41 percent of American Indian students, and 38 percent of Hispanic students attending college come from families in

the lowest income quartile, compared with 19 percent of white students who come from families in the lowest income quartile (1998).

As federal financial aid shrinks, differences in access to higher education are intensified. Although diversity does not lead to educational equity, the participation of diverse students in higher education is a necessary precursor to achieving equity. Maintaining the diversity of student enrollments achieved in the past few decades is critical (Rothstein 2004; Hurtado 1996), and keeping good state and federal financial aid programs is central to maintaining this diversity. So, too, is maintaining support for the community college systems across the country. Nearly half of the country's black and Hispanic students attend community colleges. Budget cuts to community college systems have significant effects on who enrolls in college. The Los Angeles Community College District, for instance, estimated that it would turn away about 6,000 Hispanic students in fall 2003—more than five times the number of Hispanic freshmen admitted to the University of California at Los Angeles in 2002–03 (Evelyn 2003). A Century Foundation study found that in the absence of affirmative action policies, if the 146 most selective colleges in the country used *only* grades and test scores as admissions criteria, about 5,000 fewer black and Hispanic students would be admitted each year. In contrast, officials estimated that at least 20,000 black and Hispanic students would be shut out of California's community college system alone in 2003–04 because of cuts in state spending (*ibid*).

Access to postsecondary education has always been influenced by race and by income; it is also influenced by ethnicity. Underdeveloped educational policies on linguistic diversity present a barrier to many people in the United States. As Juan Gonzalez points out in *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (2000), unlike many other nations, the United States has yet to recognize the right of language minorities to protection against discrimination (272). In particular, the tendency towards an English Only policy exacerbates historical conflicts with Spanish-speaking people who were involuntarily made citizens of the English-speaking United States. While many argue that learning English is necessary to function in the world of work and even to act in the capacity of citizen, the question of how best to achieve this goal remains under debate. Given the growing number of people who speak languages other than English at home, we need more classes intended to help non-native speakers learn English at all levels. Educators estimate, however, that although approximately 14 million residents born outside the United States would benefit from ESL classes,

federal funds pay for only 10 percent—between 1.4 million and 1.5 million ESL slots each year.

The educational achievement gap between students of color and white students at all levels of education continues to grow.⁶ In terms of college graduation, minority students are less equal now than they were thirty years ago (Bensimon 2004; Rothstein 2004; Bok 2003). Martha Lamkin (2004) lists the following sobering facts in a recent Lumina Foundation report:

- a) Although 59 percent of white students earn a bachelor's degree within six years of entering college, the same is true of only 39 percent of African American students and only 37 percent of Latino students.
- b) Only 7 percent of young people from the lowest-income families earn four-year degrees by age twenty-six; among young people from high-income families, the number is 60 percent.
- c) At four-year colleges, 26 percent of freshmen drop out before their sophomore year; at two-year institutions, the first-year attrition rate is 45 percent.

At the same time that substantially increasing participation and completion rates for students of color and low-income students appear to be beyond our collective grasp, the benefits of earning a college degree are increasingly clear. On average, college graduates earn 70 percent more than high school graduates, and high school dropouts are four times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed. Only 29 percent of all Americans in their mid- to late-twenties have completed B.A. degrees, and 7 percent have A.A. degrees. Only 18 percent of African Americans and 9 percent of Hispanics between twenty-five and twenty-nine have earned a B.A. (Kazis, Vargas, and Hoffman 2004).

The promise of learning communities is that they can help people develop the skills and abilities needed to address these inequities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, both Du Bois and Dewey argued that the purpose of education is to create conditions for genuine exchange across significant differences leading to strategies for acting collectively to address shared public issues. A necessary condition for these conversations, then and now, is the very presence of people from diverse backgrounds participating in these conversations. The history of our country, including the legacies of segregation, racism, and privilege, affects our present collective circumstances in a way that makes these conversations difficult. Building as it does upon successful completion of years of schooling, access to postsecondary education

is already restricted based on class, race, and ethnicity. In this context, the promise held out by intentionally creating communities of learners on our college campuses is high; at the same time, the challenges we face in making sure that this reform effort contributes to educational equity, rather than becoming a strategy that underscores the current patterns of inclusion and exclusion, are equally great.

Participants in the workshop at the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities discussed the complexity of creating learning communities that support all learners. They recognized that the architecture of a learning community does not in itself guarantee the outcome of educational equity for the students participating in it. They also were conscious that the focus within learning community programs and even within the administration of such programs is frequently not on the larger social context that gives rise to equity issues. Although learning communities on many campuses are fostering educational equity in a variety of ways, the question before us is still, as Patrick Hill (n.d.) writes, how we encourage citizens to sustain conversations of respect with diverse others for the sake of making public policy together, forging over and over again a shared future. As a reform effort, learning communities are situated broadly within the tradition of progressive education in the United States, specifically within the context of local, national, and global issues requiring our best, more rigorous, and multifaceted thinking. The extent to which learning communities will help educate citizens who are able to contribute collaboratively to addressing those issues, working for equity within and beyond our campuses, remains to be seen. Adopting two strategies from longstanding work on equity issues increases the likelihood that learning communities will contribute to educational equity.

Institutional Data and the Location of Learning Communities

One of the most promising projects aimed at achieving equity is the analytical, action research approach developed by Estela Mara Bensimon and her colleagues at the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California. They have developed the Diversity Scorecard project as a model of research-as-praxis to advance equity in educational outcomes. The project is based on two key assumptions. First, within most colleges and universities in the United States, whether the campuses are highly selective and predominantly white, open access and relatively heterogeneous, or classified as Hispanic-serving, academic achievement is stratified based on race. This means that the

presence of diverse students on a campus does not guarantee that all students are equally well served by the institution: diversity and educational equity are not synonymous. Second, in order to create change within an institution, individuals who work at that institution must see for themselves the magnitude of the inequities, analyze and internalize the meaning of these inequities, and ultimately be moved to act upon them. In the Diversity Scorecard project, campus teams are invited to gather data related to four dimensions of institutional performance with respect to equity in outcomes: access, retention, institutional receptivity, and excellence. The aim of the project is for campus team members to develop a deep understanding of educational inequities by creating the tools leading to their own recognition of the problem and a subsequent commitment to address it (Bensimon 2004).⁷

A parallel project—analytical, data-driven, and team-based—evolved in Washington State as a collaborative effort by multicultural affairs directors in community and technical colleges, institutional researchers, deans of instruction, and staff from both the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges and the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. This statewide working group developed a framework that helps campus teams use existing institutional data to look at eight dimensions of their institution: access, student progression, student goal attainment and completion, hiring and retaining of diverse faculty and staff, instruction, student support services, institutional and administrative policies, and physical environment. The premise of the Framework for Diversity Assessment and Planning project is similar to that of the Diversity Scorecard: campus teams working together to gather and interpret data related to educational equity for students of color can become a powerful force for institutional change.⁸

With increasing frequency, campuses are intentionally situating learning communities at critical entry or transition points to support the academic achievement and sense of belonging of students of color and first-generation students. Federally funded Title V programs (serving Hispanic students) and Title III programs (serving first-generation and low-income students) often use learning communities as a core strategy (Smith, MacGregor, et al. 2004). Of the Title V programs funded in 2002, for instance, approximately one third explicitly named learning communities as a strategy for improving the retention and academic achievement of Hispanic students.⁹ The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), a Hispanic majority (73 percent in fall 2003) research-intensive university, used funds from the National

Science Foundation to develop learning communities to support students intent upon majoring in engineering or science (Lardner 2004). More recently, with support from Title V funds, UTEP has developed a range of learning community models aimed at helping students form social and academic communities, strengthen their academic performance, make connections across disciplines, and develop a sense of belonging on campus (Smith, Ward, et al. 2004). The purpose of the learning communities that are part of these federal grants is to boost retention and achievement rates by creating cohorts of students supported by members of the academic communities they intend to join.

In *The Pedagogy of Possibilities: Developmental Education, College-Level Studies, and Learning Communities*, Gillies Malnarich (2003) argues that learning communities can effectively be used as deliberate intervention strategies to address trouble spots in the curriculum, including:

- high risk courses where 30 percent of students drift away after one month;
- graveyard courses where 50 percent of students earn low grades or drop out;
- gateway courses that have a reputation among students for being tough;
- platform courses for entry into professional and technical programs; and
- transition courses for developmental and second-language speakers moving into liberal arts and professional/technical programs. (44)

Malnarich argues that we should focus on the places where we have created a curriculum that is “risky”—rather than labeling students as being “at risk.” She urges educators to notice where the curriculum puts students at risk and to move quickly to change those curricular trouble spots. Malnarich further argues that a core strategy for connecting learning communities with the aim of educational equity is to site them in these critical places, using data from the institution. Recognizing places where the curriculum puts students at risk is a fundamental obligation of educators committed to equity. As Malnarich points out, those students who finally do arrive in higher education—particularly low-income and first-generation students, and students of color—are heroic; we can’t afford to lose any of them. *The Pedagogy*

of Possibilities describes over a dozen learning community programs that effectively combine high expectations, intellectual rigor, and academic and social support for students who are considered to be academically under-prepared.

Campus teams participating in the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities held annually at The Evergreen State College are now asked to prepare campus fact sheets prior to the institute. These fact sheets are designed to help teams analyze patterns of student enrollment and success, and decide, based on this data, on the most strategic places for learning communities to be sited, given the aim of reaching educational equity. The fact sheet helps teams surface potential tensions between where faculty would like to create learning communities—between pairs of very congenial colleagues, for instance, deeply interested in each other’s upper-division course material—and courses in which large numbers of students appear to stall out, for instance in large introductory courses, or required courses in math or writing. The fact sheet does not dictate what teams will decide to do, but it does help teams make decisions about developing learning communities that are informed by larger issues of student success.

The Evergreen State College-Tacoma program is a nationally recognized example of a learning community designed expressly to support the learning of working adults in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, Washington, the majority of whom are African American (see Joye Hardiman’s description of the program in Lardner 2004). Faculty work collaboratively to develop a thematic focus for the year that connects students’ lives and community issues, giving rise to a curriculum grounded in genuine questions that matter in the world. The program is designed around the core values of hospitality, reciprocity, inclusivity, and civility and these values are manifest in the curriculum and the pedagogy of the program, as well as in the physical design of the campus space and the scheduling of classes. It takes the form of a cluster of team-taught courses linked by an overarching theme as well as a weekly Lyceum—an integrative seminar. Courses are offered from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and then again from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., which means students who have to miss class during their regularly scheduled time have an opportunity to make it up during the other time block. The nature of the program theme varies each year, but it always connects community issues and students lives’ within the curriculum. For instance, when the program theme focused on urban studies and institutional dynamics, microbiologist Willie Parson team-taught a course with attorney Barbara Laners on urban public policy.

Laners and Parson and their students analyzed federal, state, and local public policy making, particularly its impact on urban communities. In winter, Parson teamed with Gilda Sheppard, a sociologist, in a class that used scientific and sociological perspectives to examine media representations of public health issues, particularly HIV-AIDS. Students developed an array of educational materials for audiences ranging from children to senior citizens. In spring quarter, Parson teamed with environmental scientist Tyrus Smith and developed a course where students used environmental and physiological studies of the Tacoma waterfront as the basis for their statistical analyses (Parson 2002). The Evergreen -Tacoma program provides an exemplary model of a learning community program grounded in a commitment to equity and to educating citizens who will be able to address public issues together, as the high retention and graduation rates, along with the accomplishments of Tacoma graduates, demonstrate.

The Positionality of Our Experiences and Perspectives

The recognition that our thinking is shaped by our lived experiences has been widely discussed across disciplines. The central assumption behind this view of situated knowledge is that all knowledge, all theories, are generated from the standpoint of particular interests, locations, and life experiences (Bensimon 1994; Harding 1991). Edgar Beckham (2004) refers to this as *positionality*—the synthesis of where each of us “is at” and where each of us is “coming from,” students, faculty, staff, and college presidents alike. Recognizing positionality, the “situated-ness” of my knowing, depends on my ability to appreciate that how I understand the world has been shaped by my particular historical, economic, and sociological circumstances. Understanding the situatedness of my own perspective means learning to appreciate how factors beyond my control, including my race, class, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities or abilities, nationality, and language spoken at home affect me, the way others perceive me, and the circumstances I find myself in.¹⁰ In terms of work on diversity and equity, recognizing positionality is fundamental; everything else builds upon that, including an analysis of systems of privilege and power based on social identities. Patrick Hill (n.d.) argues that a central goal of learning communities should be to invite students (and of necessity, faculty) to become aware of the partiality and limitations of our experience, to develop the confidence and skills to share that experience—partial as it is—and move toward a less partial

understanding of the world, of others, and of ourselves by developing skills and dispositions so that we can learn with and from others.

Inviting students to recognize the partiality of their own views, to develop a certain level of epistemological humility based on the awareness of the limits of any one person's view including their own, is crucial. Drawing on her work with pre-service teachers, Sonia Nieto (1999) writes that the inability to recognize the limits of our own perceptions is a fundamental problem facing schools: many contemporary white educators identify as being "just an American"—absent any ethnicity, absent a connection with history. The problem with this "just an American" view is that it erases history, reinforcing a view of the United States as a straightforward meritocracy, a country where the material conditions in people's lives can be accounted for simply in terms of their persistence and good luck.¹¹ The social stratification that gives rise to the need to recognize differences in privilege, power, and perspective also limits opportunities for exchanges across perspectives in the first place.

A student in a summer class wrote a dialogue that illustrates how conversations between students are shaped by the situatedness of their perspectives and the ways in which, as Edgar Beckham (2004) writes, the social history of the United States erupts into the present. The assignment called for developing a text based on two voices.¹² Another student in the class—a white student—was writing about breaking up with the man she had married at age seventeen. An older white student returning to college nearly twenty years after graduating from high school was writing about the different ways she and her neighbor started their gardens. The student whose essay is excerpted here is a young African American woman just starting college. In this dialogue, she is trying to imagine how two young people can have a substantive conversation about race and racism across their significantly different ways of understanding the world.

Two average people narrate this essay.
One is black; the other is white.

BP: "Your people enslaved us and have yet to apologize or give any kind of reparation."

WP: "I didn't enslave your people; how can you hold me responsible for something I didn't do?"

BP: "For my people slavery is a generational curse that won't go away and your people brought the curse on us.

Why won't you stand up and take responsibility for what your people did? Don't you have some pride in yourself? You're too quick to shake off your connections to your ancestors; where is your pride?"

WP: "Wouldn't you be quick to shake off something so shameful? I know my ancestors did a lot of things wrong. . . . What happened to your ancestors and what's happening to you today is wrong, but there's nothing I can do about that. The damage is already done. The hurt and pain of your people is too deep. Tell me, what can be done?"

This student's dialogue captures the complexity of the dynamics that inform conversations and interactions in the classroom all the time. In her dialogue, she makes explicit how social history and our different relationships with that history shape even a brief conversation in the present. Without an appreciation of our shared history, and without deep reflection particularly for whites about that history, a conversation that begins this way—"your people enslaved us"—can quickly go awry, cementing polarized positions and reinforcing frustration on all sides.

Given that most faculty and administrators in higher education generally, and learning communities in particular, are white, understanding the nature of whiteness and white privilege is a critical foundation. Peggy McIntosh's (1988) groundbreaking work on white privilege is an extremely useful and accessible place to begin. McIntosh argues that white privilege is at once pervasive *and* taboo because the acknowledgment of white privilege flies in the face of the American myth of a meritocracy. Describing her development as a white woman in the United States, McIntosh writes that in no way did her schooling prepare her to see herself as unfairly advantaged, or as an oppressor; instead, she was taught to see herself as an individual shaped by her individual moral will. McIntosh argues that whites need to do more consistent work to understand how unearned race advantage and the dominance that goes with it actually affect our daily lives. Many white people in the United States—students and faculty—do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity, and do not see racism as a problem affecting them because they are not people of color.¹³ Race is a critical social identity to investigate, but race is not the only advantaging system at work. McIntosh argues that we need to work as well on examining the daily experience of having gender advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation (ibid).

Given the role of the United States in the world, for U.S. citizens, nationality has become another social identity requiring critical investigation for the ways in which it—in conjunction with an individual’s other social identities—shapes perceptions. Those of us who are U.S. citizens have to recognize the limits of our national perspective with as much alacrity as we are learning to recognize the blind spots arising from our other social identities. As Grant Cornwell and Eve Stoddard argue, “in the process of becoming more self-aware, students need to develop the capacity to discern their social locations in every relation, transaction, and encounter. Just as race studies in the United States have led to critical white studies and the realization that the dominant group needs scrutiny, so in the global context, U.S. students need to learn about their power and privilege in relation to most of the world’s population” (1999, 24). In his 1982 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Gabriel García Márquez eloquently argues for the epistemological humility that comes from scrutinizing positionality, including nationality, and leads those of us in the most developed and powerful countries to realize the distortions that come from imposing one’s own patterns for interpreting reality on the lives of people in other countries: “The interpretation of our reality (in Latin America) through patterns not our own serves only to make us more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary.” From the most global level—nation to nation—to the most personal level—one to another—a core ability in the formation of genuine learning communities is the ability to recognize our own patterns for interpreting reality, to resist applying our patterns to others, and to be open to and interested in learning about the patterns used by others.

Scrutinizing our own positions as educators is a prerequisite for creating welcoming and inclusive classrooms. Students sense in the first few moments of an interaction whether or not they will be welcome in a particular setting, and when students feel they are in a caring and supportive environment, one that is respectful of their social identities, they learn (Zull 2002; Nieto 1999; Steele 1992). Creating a welcoming environment for all students is critical if we are going to move towards equity in education, particularly on heterogeneous campuses. The benefits of working with diverse peers have been clearly documented (Hurtado, et al. 1999). Increasing ethnic/racial diversity, however, without attending to issues of campus climate, particularly the racial climate, often results in difficulties for students of color as well as for white students. Sylvia Hurtado’s (1996) research suggests that the presence of small populations of historically under-represented groups

on predominantly white campuses tends to create conditions where students of color are perceived as tokens, rather than as individuals. As a result, minority students are frequently left feeling alienated due to what are perceived as inhospitable practices.

From the perspective of educational research, experiencing a sense of belonging is crucial for academic success. Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (1991) argue that students who have a high sense of belonging and are very involved with peers, faculty, and institutional activities are likely to be academically successful. For first-generation learners and students of color, though, negotiating this sense of belonging is complex. As William Tierney (1992) points out, until recently U.S. colleges and universities were designed to educate a clientele composed primarily of white, middle- and upper-class males. Research on student involvement has tended to put the responsibility for making a place for themselves on the students. As a result, students often have different perceptions of how welcoming a campus is. For instance, Chalsa Loo and Garry Rolison (1986) found that at one institution, 68 percent of white students and only 28 percent of African American and Chicano students thought the university was generally supportive of minority students. In response to these differences, Laura Rendón (2004) argues that colleges need to adopt a very proactive approach to making students feel welcome, which she terms *validation*. Validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by people in the college or university, in or out of class, that shifts the focus from what students need to do to what members of the university can do. In other words, faculty, staff, and administrators are expected to take the first steps in reaching out to students, helping them believe in themselves and their inherent capacities to learn (Rendón, García, and Person 2004).

The learning community program at the University of New Mexico, *Freshman Academic Choices*, has been explicitly designed to validate students. The fundamental pedagogical approach of the FAC program can best be described in terms of Robert Ibarra's (2001) conceptual framework, multicontextuality. The central assumption in Ibarra's framework is that the cultural frameworks within which individuals develop influence how we learn and express ourselves. Multicontextuality is based in part on a polarity between high and low context, where low-context is associated with traditional university values—objectivity, abstraction, non-contextualized information—and high context is associated with community, collaboration, and contextualized knowledge built through an interactive process. As Joel

Nossoff and Dan Young (2004) write, “the interdisciplinary, community-oriented, collaborative approaches of our *Freshman Academic Choices* address the strengths of our high-context students and help them in their transition to understanding and being able to succeed within the low-context world of academia. Our low-context students gain as well by—among other things—benefiting from the increased opportunities to actively process and reflect on their learning while also making sense of diverse perspectives” (19). The process of validating students is based on an awareness of students as whole people, and as is the case in the FAC program, it leads to a practice of inclusive pedagogy grounded in an awareness of positionality, focused on students as personal, political, and intellectual beings (Howell and Tuit 2003).

Characteristics of Effective Learning Communities

In addition to being situated in places that can make a difference for students—for instance, in curricular trouble spots—as well as reflecting a deep investigation of the positionality of perspectives, effective learning communities share a set of defining characteristics. Educators “infuse intellectually rigorous, inclusive curriculum with high expectations; (they) design developmentally appropriate assignments and award fluid credits” based on the work students are able to do; and they “invite students to participate in the creation of knowledge” (Malnarich 2005, 59–60).

Intellectually rigorous and inclusive curriculum

Intellectual rigor and high expectations take several forms. Many learning communities assign trade books and primary source material, rather than text books, so that students have more opportunities to study ideas in depth, and to develop a sense of intellectual history and scope. Moreover, the questions and problems that lie at the heart of the learning community are similar to those faced by groups of people in the world: the relationship between what we invite students to do inside school and what we hope they will be able to do outside school is clear. In learning communities involving developmental studies courses, students learn to do college-level work by actually doing it, with support from their developmental courses (Malnarich 2005).

In addition to being rigorous, the curriculum of effective learning communities needs to be inclusive. Given our aspirations to create welcoming learning environments and to achieve educational equity, developing curricular materials that acknowledge, value, and reflect

multiple points of view and ways of knowing the world is critical. As Martha Nussbaum (1997) points out, however, the exclusion of groups of people from higher education—women, African Americans, other ethnic minorities—also meant excluding the lives of these people from the official domains of knowledge. Nussbaum points out that these exclusions are invisible, appearing simply as the tradition we inherit. Consequently, she writes, because the exclusions seem natural, they also appear to be apolitical—only the demand for inclusion is interpreted as being “politically motivated” (7).

The effort to develop more inclusive curricula in the United States is not new. Formal efforts to develop a more inclusive curriculum in higher education have their early roots in efforts to reduce intergroup prejudice and related human relations work beginning in the 1940s and 50s, based on the assumption that awareness of differences in perspective would reduce prejudice. In the 1950s, cross-cultural and international training programs were designed to prepare students to study in other countries. Black and ethnic studies emerged from the civil rights movement in the 1960s, rooted in a critique of what was being taught in the universities—what, by whom, and for whom. The 1970s gave birth to the women’s movement and consciousness-raising as a strategy for critical self-reflection, connecting personal stories to larger social realities. (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 1997). Currently, many campuses have instituted diversity requirements as part of their degree requirements. A National Panel convened by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) recommends that campus diversity requirements encourage students to explore four dimensions of U.S. diversity, including the student’s own inherited and constructed traditions and identity; the history of diverse groups within the United States in terms of their experience of democracy and the pursuit of equality; hands-on experiences with community-based efforts to redress systemic social inequities; and practice with sustained forms of inquiry into contested issues.¹⁴ These National Panel recommendations bridge early efforts to expand the curriculum by adding “supplementary” materials to more recent efforts to transform it, changing the core assumptions about what counts as “knowledge.”¹⁵

Estela Mara Bensimon (1994) usefully distinguishes among approaches to curriculum transformation, ranging from those she describes as taking an additive approach to those she describes as emerging from a “paradigmatic shift” in the way that both knowledge and pedagogy are conceptualized. A paradigmatic shift depends upon teachers’ willingness to reconceptualize the traditional hierarchical

relationship between teachers and students and to rethink the notion that there is a single body of intellectual knowledge (61).

One of the most striking examples of a culturally responsive learning community program in which both curriculum and pedagogy have been transformed is the *Power and Limits of Dialogue* program (PALOD) at The Evergreen State College. Developed by Patrick Hill and Angela Gilliam, PALOD has been offered as both a full-time and a half-time team-taught interdisciplinary learning community program that runs for two quarters. Credits are awarded in philosophy, anthropology, sociology, political economy, and the theory and practice of interpersonal communication. The first quarter of the program emphasizes models of human differences and varieties of dialogues and dialogical skills, strategies, and expectations. Dialogues with environmentalists and loggers, Palestinians and Israelis, and African Americans and whites are introduced. The second quarter focuses on two or three dialogues, emphasizing interracial issues, particularly reconciliation and reparation in a global context. In both quarters, particular dialogues are approached as case studies for understanding the power and limitations of dialogue. In describing the program for prospective students, Hill and Gilliam write, “each student will sense over the course of the program that he/she can internalize the dialogical skills as add-ons to already existing strategies of survival; and/or as the adoption of fundamentally depolarizing habits of mind and heart now widely seen as vital to a pluralistic age in need of a more functional understanding of our differences. This program might in part be described as a six-month experiment in understanding, in unprecedented, radical or respectful listening.”¹⁶

The practice of radical listening, rather than a more defined product, figures prominently in PALOD students’ final portfolios. Students keep a log of the hours they spend on project work, recording the blocks of time they invest in making dialogue possible even if the dialogue never happens. Success is measured in terms of students’ willingness to create conditions where dialogue can happen; they are not held responsible for making sure that a dialogue does happen. The final written assignment takes the form of an integrative exam, which Hill and Gilliam characterize as being closer to a lengthy journal entry or a goodbye letter to classmates than to a traditional exam. It is explicitly designed to help students synthesize and make public their learning in a way that is useful for their peers. Consistent with Bensimon’s description of a paradigmatic change, the PALOD learning community program embodies transformed relationships between faculty and

students and among students so that students in the program can focus on how and what they are learning, in a rigorous and inclusive way.

Developmentally-appropriate assignments

Effective learning communities are characterized by assignments based on genuine questions or issues, which allow for a range of responses. In some learning community programs involving English courses, for instance, students are evaluated based on a final portfolio. Depending on the quality of work in the portfolio, students may earn credit for college-level English or for developmental English. The focus of their learning is the same, however. Imagine another example: a mix of pre-service and practicing teachers enroll in an intensive summer course on the teaching of writing with a focus on grammar, and they are discussing the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Language Diversity in the Classroom*, edited by Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva (2003). One young woman has just asked why, if dialects are just as complex and rule-based as Standard English, teachers have to prepare students to use Standard English almost exclusively. An experienced middle-school teacher, keeping her impatience in check, replies: “It’s fine to want to change the world. Kids need to know how to speak and write in ways that match the status quo. Call it the language of power if you like. But if you can’t write with correct grammar, no one will take you seriously.” Another teacher enters into the conversation, assuring her colleagues that the solution is simple: honor your students’ home languages, *and* teach them to use standard written English. Then, this student remembers growing up in the South and having her accent “coached” out of her so that she will sound “smart.” Another woman who grew up in rural Panama without access to secondary schooling talks about her experience emigrating to the United States, enrolling in English classes, and then dropping out for several years because she felt so inept. She preferred learning English outside of school, where she felt herself to be smart.

Most of the participants in the class grew up speaking English at home, and their formal schooling had been in English. While they had some concerns about their own grammar, they had not, for the most part, developed a critical awareness around the teaching of standard written English in school. Through the course readings and more important, through conversations with each other, they gradually came to see that they too had questions about a central concern in the field of English studies: how best to support students as they learn to negotiate the particular standards and conventions that are part of

academic writing. The portfolios created by students in this seminar varied in their intellectual sophistication and in their clarity, and students' evaluations reflected those differences. In spite of significant differences in skills and backgrounds, all the seminar participants, like David Bartholomae (1988) and Mina Shaughnessey (1977) before them, turned their attention to a major "trouble spot" in the curriculum: the varieties of English spoken, the complex nature of academic discourse, and the multiple demands students face as they learn to make a place for themselves within that discourse.

Curricular changes necessitate changes in pedagogy, as the seminar participants discovered. The key to making learning inclusive is to design strategies that build on and honor the perspectives and experiences that each student brings. Then, educators need to take explicit steps to help students learn from each other as well. Learning always builds on what we already know, and developmentally appropriate assignments help students connect what they know with what they are learning, supporting without limiting intellectual development. In *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), Paulo Freire argues that his role as a teacher of mathematics or biology (or any other subject) is not simply teaching subject matter, but rather helping students recognize that they are "the architects of their own cognition process" (112). For Freire, the key to this transformative approach is twofold: the teacher is always also a learner, and secondly, the invitation extended to students, regardless of the discipline, is to recognize that they are simultaneously shaped by all they have learned, and that they are the creators of their own learning. Lee Shulman (2004) argues that to take learning seriously, we have to take learners seriously and we have to help learners discover what it is they already know. New learning comes from applying old understandings to new ideas and experiences, and new learning is enriched immensely through social interactions with other learners who are also wrestling with connecting old understandings and new ideas. Shulman writes that what lies at the heart of powerful learning are opportunities for "active, collaborative, reflective reexamination of ideas in a social context" (36). Developmentally appropriate assignments in the context of learning communities create exactly these kinds of opportunities.

Students construct knowledge together

A theme throughout Dewey's writing is the precarious balance between our evolving ability to work on problems together for the sake of our common future, and the rapid pace of industrial and technological

change that seems to put the most critical issues well beyond the scope of ordinary citizens. In “American Education Past and Future,” Dewey writes, “the sense of unsolved social problems is all about us. There are problems of crime, of regard for law, of capital, of labor, of unemployment, of stability and security, of family life, of war and peace, of international relations and cooperation—all on a larger scale than the world has ever seen before. . . . Unless education prepares future citizens to deal effectively with these great questions, our civilization may collapse” (1931, 94). He argues that we are engaged in a contest between “mis-education,” which bears no relation to the needs and conditions of the modern world, and a possible education, which helps us face the future more effectively and collaboratively.

Writing fifty years later, John Kemeny, president of Dartmouth and chairman of President Carter’s commission investigating the causes of the disaster at Three-Mile Island, makes a similar argument about the right purpose of education given the kinds of citizens we need: “[We] desperately need individuals who can pull together knowledge from a wide variety of fields and integrate it in one mind. We are in an age when we are facing problems that no one discipline can solve. . . . What we’d like our best students to be able to do is to walk in on a problem they know nothing at all about and by working hard in six months become fairly expert on it.”¹⁷ David Rossides (2004) makes much the same case when he argues that the center of gravity in a curriculum ought to be the most pressing problems a society faces.

The *Local Knowledge* program, a yearlong learning community program taught by Lin Nelson and Ann Fischel at The Evergreen State College, was designed to help students develop the skills to sort through perplexing issues, connecting local, national, and international issues. As Fischel and Nelson (2002) write, students in the program were expected to take themselves seriously as citizen-learners. Students worked in teams with community-based mentors from a range of local organizations including the Cold and Hungry Coalition, Garden Raised Bounty, Mason County Literacy, and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. Drawing on media studies and environmental studies, the focus of the program was on “how people experience and define themselves in community, how they value (or de-value) their lives and the lives of their neighbors, how they interpret and analyze their reality, and how they come to do politically engaged work—from challenging local authorities over official treatment of the homeless to creating public space to discuss the war in Afghanistan” (32). The program included seminars, field trips, meetings with

community mentors, workshops on survey design, video production, interviewing, and research—library, archival, and community-based—plus panels on community fundraising, alternative economic development, local media, and nongovernmental organizations. At the end of the year, community mentors reported that students made genuine contributions to their projects. In their self-evaluations, students described their own rich learning, including the ability to use knowledge gained in school to help address larger public issues.

Educating for Compassion

The simultaneous recognition that our future is shared while our thinking is grounded in our particular experiences of the world underscores the need to learn together in communities. Learning community structures create educational opportunities for developing the habits of mind necessary to participate effectively and collaboratively in a pluralistic and democratic society. Given the structured opportunities for social and integrated learning, learning communities become rich sites for addressing complex problems that defy the boundaries of any single discipline. Learning communities can become places where students and teachers experience the gift of learning with others who understand the world differently not just because of disciplinary differences, but also because of genuine differences in how we experience and interpret reality, how and where we are situated, and the social identities that shape our thinking. What animates an effective learning community is a sense of our shared future, a mindfulness about our responsibility to imagine a larger public good to which we can work.

One way to understand this animating principle for learning communities is in terms of compassion—a series of judgments that lead us to be moved to act on behalf of others. According to Nussbaum (2003), compassion is not a feeling; rather, it consists of a series of decisions or judgments of which we can become more conscious. The first step in compassion is making a decision about the seriousness of the situation that others find themselves in, a decision limited only by our ability to imagine those circumstances. The next step is deciding that the situation is undeserved—it has simply happened to people. Then, we decide that a similar thing could happen to us: were we in a different location, we too could become victims of war or famine or mudslides. We too could be facing the consequences of massive layoffs or environmental hazards. Finally, compassion requires that we

decide to include more people, including distant others, within the circle of people we care about and are moved to act on behalf of (ibid). Ultimately, our ability to make public policy together—locally, nationally, globally—depends upon how deeply we have learned to practice compassion.

This description of compassion as a decision-making process shows how things can go wrong. We may not be able to imagine the suffering of others. For instance, hearing statistics about incarceration rates doesn't automatically translate into an appreciation of what that means for families and communities, just as learning about U.S. foreign policies doesn't translate automatically into an appreciation of the effects of those policies on other people's lives. On campuses, white students often underestimate the effects of racism on students of color. Men may underestimate the effects of sexism on women. A critical task for educators in learning communities is to help students use their imaginative and empathetic capacities to appreciate the circumstances that other people find themselves in.

Other judgments can go wrong as well. A classic error is that of "blaming the victim" rather than analyzing structural inequalities and the circumstances beyond someone's control. The comment, "I'm not racist, I just have a problem with the way she presents herself" is an example of this faulty thinking. People who have lived relatively privileged lives often cannot imagine the material circumstances of other people's lives. The inability to imagine living in profoundly different circumstances can lead to an inability or an unwillingness to recognize that the suffering of others is caused by social injustices or inequities. Instead, we make a judgment that somehow other people are responsible for the circumstances they find themselves in.

Another danger of uneducated compassion is that we can move too easily from having compassion only for our own children, our own families, the people we know best—to wanting to promote the well-being of "our" people *over* all other people. Nussbaum cites the aftermath of 9/11 as an example of overvaluing some lives relative to others. She writes, "we think the events of September 11 are bad because they involved *us* and *our* nation. Not just human lives, but *American* lives. The world came to a stop—in a way that it rarely has for Americans when disaster has befallen human beings in other places. . . . Floods, earthquakes, cyclones, the daily deaths of thousands from preventable malnutrition and disease—none of these makes the American world come to a standstill, none elicits a tremendous outpouring of grief and compassion" (2003, 13).

Effective learning communities offer opportunities for teachers and students alike to learn to imagine the realities of each others' lives, as well as the lives of people beyond the walls of the academy. As Carolyn Vasques-Scalera notes, "all students and faculty bring a wealth of tradition, information, and experience to their understandings of the world, and that wealth can contribute in meaningful ways to the learning process" (2002). Achieving educational equity depends on our ability to understand the genuine differences in people's lived experiences, to appreciate that these differences are not wholly of anyone's making but are also a legacy of segregation and exclusion, and to act together to create a better future.

Endnotes

1. In 2003, one third of all first-year students responding to the survey indicated that they had already participated in or planned to participate in a learning community. To view the NSSE 2004 Annual report, see <http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse/html/report-2004.shtml>.
2. See "A Radical Idea—Or, How a Civil Rights Leader Inspired an Interdisciplinary Approach to Learning Quantitative Concepts in Real-World Contexts" by Karen Casto in the Fall 2003 issue of the *Washington Center News* for more information.
3. From "Civil Rights Learning Community: An Overview" presented by Karen Curls and Greg Sanford at the Midwest learning community conference, November 2004. For more information on this learning community, see <http://news.pennvalleycc.com>.
4. June 22, 2003 at The Evergreen State College.
5. Source: www.uspirg.org.
6. Academic achievement depends on a number of well-documented factors, including access to food, medical care (including vision and dental care), affordable and stable housing, well-resourced public schools, and family assets that allow for long-term financial planning, including plans for college. Referring to the Coleman Report, which was written in response to the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Rossides writes, "while under-funded schools would benefit from more money, they are not likely to close the gap much between themselves and schools in affluent districts unless families in lower classes are also 'better funded.'"
7. See <http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CUE/documents/urbaned.pdf> for more information on the Diversity Scorecard project.
8. For more information about the origins of the Framework for Diversity Assessment and Planning and its implementation on several campuses, see the Washington Center Fall 2004 newsletter at <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/newsletters.htm>.
9. Number based on a review of the Department of Education database of funded Title V programs for 2002.
10. Social identities are constructed in terms of dominant and disenfranchised, and individuals usually embody a mixture of social identities. For instance, a white middle-class lesbian in the United States experiences the privileges of

being white, and the lack of privilege of being gay and female. Social identity development theory is an adaptation of black identity development theory and white identity development theory (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 1997).

11. The limits of the “just an American” view becomes evident when considering the following fact: Barack Obama is the *only* African American senator currently serving, and only the *third* in our country since Reconstruction. Merit alone, absent confounding factors of race and class, wouldn’t predict that pattern of underrepresentation. In fact, Obama identifies himself as an African who is an American.

12. An assignment borrowed from Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen (1982), *Beat Not the Poor Desk: Writing: What to Teach, How to Teach It, and Why*.

13. Paul Kivel’s, *Uprooting Racism* (2002), and Allen Johnson’s, *Privilege, Power and Difference* (2001), provide additional accessible discussions of systems of privilege and power based on social identities including race, gender, and class.

14. Source: <http://www.diversityweb.org/Digest/W97/currrec.html>.

15. Several web sites provide useful material on curriculum transformation efforts, including Diversity Web (www.diversityweb.org), the Multicultural Pavilion (www.edchange.org/multicultural), the University of Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (www.crlt.umich.edu/multiteaching), and the Teaching Effectiveness Program site at the University of Oregon (<http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/diversity>). Marjorie Kitano (1997) has developed a useful framework outlining four dimensions of curriculum transformation, including content, instructional strategies, assessment, and classroom dynamics.

16. For program description, see <http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/palod>.

17. Source: *New York Times*, May 18, 1980.

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