

Sustaining Learning Communities: Moving from Curricular to Educational Reform

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Making the Shift

Much has been written about the quixotic quality of educational innovation – here today, gone tomorrow. Seasoned educators recognize the pattern: good ideas followed by cautious optimism, hard work, and promising results. But once funding fizzles, institutional attention moves on. Who wouldn't want to hunker down in the privacy of the classroom?

That learning communities explicitly value teaching and learning as *the* work of educational institutions explains their initial attractiveness to faculty. The classroom focus of learning community work, combined with skillful administrative support, accounts for learning communities' staying power on wildly diverse college and university campuses.¹ But, for those engaged in learning communities for some time now, a puzzle familiar to other educational innovators emerges: how to move successful pockets of innovation from the margins to

the mainstream, from a priority for a dedicated group of individuals to the priority for an entire campus.

In our view, making this shift is essential to strengthening and sustaining learning communities. The problem is not as straightforward as simply “scaling up learning community work”; rather, the shift requires that learning communities, in all their iterations, evolve from a curricular innovation to a campus-wide educational reform strategy. Until this repositioning occurs, we will not be able to use the best of learning community work to address our most vexing and persistent problem in higher education – our collective failure to graduate the majority of students who come to college, dreams in mind, soon to be deferred.

For readers unfamiliar with the history of learning communities, we will begin with a brief account of their origins and evolution as an educational innovation. Then we will offer an approach on how to use learning communities as an institutional change intervention strategy, where the primary site for educational reform continues to be the classroom, but the aim is *academic success for all students*.

Learning Communities as a Curricular Reform

In its earliest renditions, learning communities sought to legitimize alternative curricular and pedagogical practices designed to improve the quality of students' learning experiences: disconnected, scattered courses replaced by interdisciplinary studies and theme-based curricula; formulaic testing and rote learning replaced by reading/writing intensive student inquiry; and, to offset a pervasive lecture model, versions of team teaching and active learning (Hill 1985; Cross 1998; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004). For many faculty, the creative work of designing integrative curriculum and the engaged student learning that resulted was, and continues to be, worth the collaborative effort.

On most campuses, the opportunity to be co-learners in the classroom while learning new teaching strategies from colleagues leads to invigorating faculty conversations. This cultural shift from teaching as a private matter to teaching as community property (Shulman 2004) has been an enriching and sustaining aspect of learning community practice not only for faculty but for advisors, counselors, and librarians whose involvement and contributions to successful learning community initiatives became evident



as campuses customized various learning community models to fit their needs (Pedersen 2003; Smith, Williams, and Associates 2007).

In the more than two decades since learning communities became synonymous first with curricular reform and then with student engagement and improved student persistence and retention (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo 1994; Tinto 1997; Taylor and Associates 2003; Engstrom and Tinto 2007), learning communities have become a credible educational innovation that counts as a success story. Growing numbers of campuses register their programs in the national learning community directory² and campus teams attend institutes to learn how to start learning communities or to strengthen existing programs. And, as is the case with many effective innovations, the grass roots appeal to faculty, the involvement of student affairs professionals, and administrative support continue to be essential to success (Levine Laufgraben, Shapiro, and Associates, 2004).

Learning Communities as a Promising Educational Reform

In 2004, when the two of us began leading the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities,³ we asked campus teams to send us a “campus fact sheet” to better understand the institutional context in which these campus teams did their work. As we poured over information on how many students were enrolled, whether they worked full or half time, their race and ethnicity, first and second languages, and figures on persistence and retention, we began to be



troubled that existing and proposed learning community programs, for the most part, benefited comparatively few students. Indeed, a very small fraction of students on any given campus experienced the engaged learning associated with quality learning community work or the supportive friendships that develop among students and sustain them through difficult times in the academy, well beyond their learning community experience.

We also noticed that proposed learning communities were not connected to well-known curricular trouble spots (Malnarich and Associates 2003, Malnarich 2005). We also noticed that the students who were not succeeding in their studies were exactly the students that the democratization of higher education was intended to serve (Cross 1971). Building on our earlier recognition that learning community work needed to be intentionally and purposefully connected with and informed by leading practice on cultural pluralism and equity, (Lardner and Associates 2005), we began to see how to work with campuses so that learning community programs become educational reform efforts. Since learning communities do have a proven worth in relation to student engagement, persistence, and retention, how might we

move faculty’s creativity as curricular designers of engaging learning to those trouble spots in the curriculum where students typically do not fare well? How might we direct that same creativity to examining questions of student success and achievement, finding patterns within the classroom and across the campus that might

shape pedagogical practices?

These questions frame the work campuses do at the National Summer Institute, and the plans developed by teams reflect their hard work on designing learning community programs as educational, rather than curricular reforms. For many campuses, that distinction between educational and curricular reforms is hard-won and goes against “ordinary” ways of thinking because it invites teams to be bold, yet grounded, in their aspirations for students’ learning – to appreciate that teaching and learning is truly “community property” (Schulman, 2004). In reflecting on the experiences of the hundred plus campuses that have come to the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities since we began directing it, in tandem with reviews of research about other educational reforms, we draw these working conclusions about what sustainability requires:

- Sustaining a learning community initiative requires that its goals be clearly aligned with larger institutional goals; it must be equally compelling for faculty as a place to do their best work. Even when learning community programs begin as educational reform efforts, they need regular re-focusing, given the number of variables juggled to offer successful

programs. In a way, what sustainable learning community programs become good at is maintaining focus in two directions - students' experiences within the learning community program, and the institutional context in which the program is situated.

- Sustainable learning community programs put learning community offerings right in the middle of students' pathways. Students juggle a host of demands on their time and their financial resources. Rather than hoping to woo these necessarily pragmatic students into stepping off their paths, strategic campuses design learning community programs that help students move along those routes. A classic example is linking a developmental course with a college-level course, especially if the developmental course is typically a prerequisite for the college-level course. By taking the two courses together, students progress towards their goals and they develop academic skills in reading, writing or math by putting those skills to use in another course simultaneously.
- Sustainable learning community programs do not ask faculty to risk too much to get started. Instead, they focus on encouraging faculty to begin by developing integrative assignments – assignments that explicitly link and build upon the substance of two or more classes. The process of designing integrative assignments, a process which is now a core practice at the National Summer Institute, allows faculty to discover common ground with other teachers in terms of what matters most for students' learning. The heuristic streamlines the process of collaboratively designing an assignment that builds on carefully chosen core learning outcomes, and in the tradition of democratic education, it invites faculty to frame the assignment in terms of a larger public issue or question. Campuses characterized by webs of integrative assignments are more likely to sustain their learning community programs than are campuses with wholly coordinated, fully team-taught programs that engage only a tiny fraction of students.
- As a result of focusing on developing integrative assignments, student learning also moves to the center of the learning community program. Sustainable learning community programs are those that can answer two central questions: what kind of learning are we for in this program? And is evidence of this learning present in student work? Early findings from the National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities suggest that using the collaborative assessment protocol⁴ to look at students' work refocuses and re-energizes learning community programs at all stages in their development. Programs discover areas where they need to work – including rethinking the purpose of the campus learning community program and

frankly assessing competing demands on faculty time.

One way to capture the shift in thinking we are suggesting is to consider this example. When we began working at the Washington Center, the most frequently used exercise was called “designing learning communities in an hour.” Like our colleagues, we recognized the energy and the creativity that this exercise unleashed. Faculty imagined they had no constraints on their time or their teaching, no budget or administrative constraints, and in groups of three or four they picked a theme or question they all wanted to explore. They designed wondrous activities for students – with the assumption that all were ably prepared to do college-level work – then faculty went back to their “real jobs.” The exercise seeded ideas, but the imagined learning community program remained imaginary. Shortly into our tenure as directors, we replaced that exercise with a heuristic for designing integrative assignments.⁵ It, too, has the merit of unleashing creative possibilities for faculty, but it also asks teachers to focus on important learning outcomes with real students in mind, to design a doable integrative project in which students use their learning to address a public issue, and that students make their learning public. Many of these integrative assignments – or versions of them – are included in course syllabi. The difference between the two exercises illustrates our point about sustainability and intentionality.

In Conclusion

Learning communities can have powerful consequences for everyone involved. To become an educational reform, though, this transformative power needs to be focused on the critical issue of student achievement on campuses. That means involving and creating wider campus conversations and providing opportunities for faculty to develop working relations with each other that are tenable and practical. Until we shift our collective attention to the students whose time with us is brief indeed, learning communities will continue to serve the fortunate few, while the many drift away— and so too the promise of this educational innovation to become a means for educational equity.



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- ¹Learning communities can be found on more than 600 campuses in the United States—both majority- and minority-serving institutions-- including private and public, rural and urban, residential and commuter.
- ²http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/directory_entry.asp
- ³We acknowledge the work of founding Washington Center directors, Jean MacGregor and Barbara Leigh Smith, and the group of national leaders who laid the foundation for the current version of the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities. See *About Campus*, May-June 2005/Volume 10, Number 2 for a more detailed account of The Pew Charitable Trusts funded project.
- ⁴<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project/documents/National-ProjectonAssessingLearning.doc>
- ⁵<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/upload/Winter2003-Number1.doc>
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