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Approaching Diversity through Learning Communities

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In the past ten years, our collective understanding of the concept of "diversity," and its ramifications, has blossomed in higher education. Important work has been done through student affairs to bring issues of the presence and absence of historically under-represented people—as students, faculty, administrators and staff—into the foreground of all discussions of diversity. Simultaneously, scholars have enriched the work in all disciplines by cultivating knowledge about peoples, practices, cultures and history. A body of knowledge has also been shaped about pedagogical practices that work with students from under-represented groups as well those that help traditional majority students develop multicultural competencies and awareness of perspectives and histories other than their own. While diversity can be defined in many ways, the underlying commitment in this paper is to support those practices that increase the presence and improve the academic success of students of color—in particular, African American students, Latino/Hispanic students, Native American students, and Asian/Pacific Islander students. Research shows that when schools and colleges are designed to facilitate the success of students of color, other students benefit as well.

Educators aligned with learning communities and diversity grapple with the identical question: at what point do the practices cultivated for these particular programs become widespread throughout an institution? At what point does an institution reach its tipping point so that systemic change occurs? *In Transforming the Multicultural Education of Teachers*, Michael Vavrus (2002) argues that successful multicultural educators have learned how to engage the uneasy coexistence of a transformed and a more traditional curriculum within a single school: "Transformative multicultural education pragmatically recognizes and engages this tension as an inherent aspect of meeting multicultural education goals" (p. 7). By the same token, learning community

practitioners have come to realize that transformed curricular structures usually coexist with more traditional curricular structures, and the challenge in most institutions is learning how to engage this tension in pragmatic and productive ways. One place to start this work is by purposefully connecting communities of practice—in this case, the communities of practice that have evolved around diversity work and those that have organized around learning communities.

Diversity work on campuses takes many forms, and at their best, learning communities build on this existing work. Learning communities can be designed to invite students from under-represented groups into the academy, and to help them stay and be academically successful. The curriculum developed for learning communities, in its interdisciplinarity and its focus on issues that matter in the world, can readily include multiple world views and histories. Learning communities can also become places where teachers develop powerful pedagogical strategies that support the learning of all students. In short, the three central elements for approaching diversity through learning communities are as follows:

1) Designing learning communities for particular groups of students;
2) Using learning communities as sites for curriculum transformation;
3) Developing pedagogical practices that support diverse learners.

Reflecting on these three elements is at the core of connecting the widely recognized power of learning community structures with the rich work that has been done around diversity issues over the past two decades. What follows is offered as an attempt to start making these connections, drawing on research and practice, and leading to a discussion of what Robert Ibarra calls a "theory of multicontextuality" (2001).

Designing Learning Communities for Particular Groups of Students

The demographic profile of students involved in post-secondary education in the United States is changing as the overall demographic profile of this country is changing: already, California, Texas and New Mexico are on the verge of becoming "minority majority" states (Rendon & Hope, 1996). In California, more than 30% of children in public schools are minority, over ninety languages are spoken in Los Angeles, and in 1996, over half of the freshman class at the University of California-Berkeley was minority (Rendon & Hope, 1996). Colleges across the country are making efforts to recruit and retain students of color, and many campuses are developing learning communities for that purpose. Vince Tinto's research (1987) suggests retention is a function of three strategies, all of which can be incorporated into the design of learning communities:

1) Integrating social and academic activities, formally and informally;
2) Addressing issues of academic preparedness, making sure that students have the skills they need in order to be academically successful once they are admitted to our campuses;
3) Engendering a sense of belonging to a community on campus.

The following case story from the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP) illustrates how learning communities can be purposefully designed to attract and support students of color.

Case I: Promoting Achievement for Diverse Learners: Learning Communities at The University of Texas in El Paso (Connie Kubo Della Piana[1])

The University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP) received a National Science Foundation award of about 2.5 million dollars to create learning communities focused on science, math and engineering for students of color. UTEP's goal is to make sure that students have access to quality science and engineering education. UTEP is a commuter campus with 82% of the students from El Paso County; 70% of UTEP students are Hispanic, 55% are first generation college students. The university focuses on providing higher education opportunities for the people of the region. While the learning community programs are offered to all students, the strategy is designed to get more Hispanic students into science, math and engineering programs. The learning community program was designed to try to make sure that students are retained at a higher level as they go through the program and that the graduation rates increase.

At UTEP, all students who go into science, engineering, and math take a learning community only after they have taken a mandatory summer orientation which starts the process of getting students acquainted with the university, developing some of the skills they need to be successful, meeting other students, and getting an introduction to science and engineering. Incoming students have very high expectations and one goal for the faculty and staff involved with the learning community program is to make sure that students have the necessary skills to achieve their expectations. In the community, engineering and law are widely seen as ways to make money and have good careers, and students enter the university with those goals in mind. The first step in the process then, is to make sure they understand what they will need to be successful.

Incoming students go through an orientation, take math and English placement exams, and then they are placed into learning communities organized around their mathematical skills. The student's learning community is designed around a freshman seminar that has a science and engineering orientation, the math course they have placed into, and an English course. Faculty teaching courses are encouraged to use cooperative learning practices. The learning communities include peer facilitators who are upper-division students, many from science and engineering. The intent of the learning community is to form both an academic community and a social community for incoming students, as well as making sure that students have opportunities to develop the academic skills they need to be successful—particularly math skills.

In 1997, the retention rate for students in the learning community programs was 77%, compared with an overall retention rate of 68%. Consequently, the program was asked to scale up from around 70 to 400 entering science, engineering, and math students. The one year retention rate for this larger group of students was 80%, regardless of their math placement. Disaggregated data showed a significant difference in the retention of Hispanic students, and the retention of male and female students approached statistical significance.

Student achievement is another goal of the learning community program. For convenience, achievement is being measured in terms of GPA, and early results suggest that students who have gone through the learning community program have higher GPAs than students who did not. Learning communities at UTEP are intentionally designed to increase the numbers of students, Hispanic students in particular, who enter successfully into science and engineering fields. The results so far are promising.

UTEP's learning community programs were specifically designed to support large numbers of Hispanic students coming to the institution. At many colleges, the challenge of attracting students of color into learning community programs is one that belongs to the institution as whole.

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[1] Connie Kubo Della Piana, panel presentation on learning communities and diversity, American Association of Higher Education National Conference, March 2001.

Faculty in learning community programs interested in increasing the numbers of under-represented students who participate in their programs often need to participate in larger institutional efforts to recruit and retain students of color at the institution.

Many times, this effort is organized through student affairs or enrollment management, with student support programs offered by an office of multicultural programs or student diversity efforts. Sometimes, the best strategy for faculty involved in learning communities who want more diverse students in their program is to partner with student affairs professional and administrators in ongoing efforts to make the institution more accessible and more hospitable.

Using Learning Communities as Sites for Curriculum Transformation

The learning community effort at UTEP aims to help students develop the knowledge, skills and abilities required to be successful in math, science and engineering. The content of the math course or the established sequence of math courses is not (at least at this time) the major focus of discussion; rather, the focus is on students' success within those courses.

This focus is well placed. As Robert Moses and Charles Cobb write in *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (2001), achievement in math is critical to the future of young people, particularly students of color, given the omnipresence of computers and information technology in all parts of economic and social life. The tools that control this technology are based on systems of symbolic representation, and the place where students first encounter this symbolism is in algebra. Student success in algebra, then, is the goal around which educators and community members need to organize (Moses and Cobb). Their analysis is consistent with the program at UTEP, which is specifically designed to support the academic achievement of students of color in traditional high-wage related fields of study.

However, the Algebra Project also focuses on transforming the curriculum of the standard algebra course, exemplifying a second approach to diversity. Many educators are adopting this approach, which questions the nature of the knowledge at the heart of the curriculum. In this sense, transforming the curriculum is a form of multicultural education that require teachers to have a knowledge base "that is responsive to the conditions of people historically placed on the margins of society's political and economic activities" (Vavrus, p. 18). Multicultural education does not always entail transforming curriculum. Robert Rhoads and James Valadez (1996) characterize the most basic form of multiculturalism as a human relations approach, designed as a means to achieve greater tolerance for diverse peoples. Both majority and minority students gain from an increased understanding of the other developed by participating in courses and educational experiences designed to expose students to a wide range of cultures and world views (p. 8). Rhoads and Valadez argue that this human relations approach to multiculturalism is too limited because it situates "cultural diversity as a subject matter to be learned and not as ways of thinking and doing that fundamentally challenge Eurocentrically conceived institutions" (p. 9). Designing the curriculum to help students move beyond achieving tolerance of diversity towards a deeper understanding of multiple world views and knowledge traditions is an important step for learning community practitioners to take.

The need for curriculum transformation

An incident that occurred at Seattle Central Community College (SCCC) illustrates the power of purposefully designing learning community curriculum to reflect multiple world views. Seattle Central launched its first interdisciplinary coordinated studies programs (CSPs) in 1984. The CSPs were designed as team-taught, interdisciplinary programs organized around themes involving inquiry, problem-solving, identifying issues, and proposing solutions. Over 40 CSPs were offered between 1984 and 1989, but student enrollment in the programs did not reflect the multicultural/racial diversity of Seattle Central as a whole. According to Gilda Sheppard and Minnie Collins (1989), when data from the SCCC research office was analyzed, faculty hypothesized that the college transfer CSPs were not attracting meaningful representation because the themes did not reflect the experiences of multicultural/racially diverse students (p. 26). In response, faculty developed a CSP entitled "Our Ways of Knowing: The Black Experience and Social Change," an interdisciplinary learning community linking sociology, literature and writing as an attempt to connect reality to students' awareness of themselves and their connections in the world (Sheppard and Collins, p. 26). Thirty of the forty-nine students who enrolled were African American students. (In contrast, only 12% of the students enrolled in the previous CSP programs were African American.) The point of what has now become a local legend among faculty and student affairs professionals in Washington State is that simply having learning communities is not enough. For learning communities to become hospitable places for students of color to learn, faculty need to become more reflective and more purposeful about transforming the curriculum.

Faculty development and curriculum transformation

Faculty development can be designed to support the development of learning communities as sites for multicultural education. Ann Intili Morey (1997) suggests that an important foundation for attempting to infuse college courses and curricula with content and instructional strategies responsive to our diverse society is the establishment of a learning community among teachers (p. 265). Providing faculty with opportunities to reflect on the goals of their learning communities, goals which affect choice of content and the development of curricular strategies, is key. Margie K. Kitano (1997) lists

the kinds of questions about goals that can become the basis for initial conversations. Is the goal to:

- Support diverse students' acquisition of traditional subject matter knowledge and skills?
- Help students acquire a more accurate or comprehensive knowledge of subject matter?
- Encourage students to accept themselves or others?
- Understand the history, traditions, and perspectives of specific groups?
- Help students value diversity and equity?
- Equip all students to work actively toward a more democratic society? (p. 19)

Reflecting on course goals is one way to begin conversations about potential curriculum transformations.

Table 1 presents a useful framework for thinking about course changes (Kitano, 1997). One of its strengths is that it integrates four dimensions of courses and programs—content, instructional strategies, assessment and classroom strategies. The framework is designed to stimulate thinking about course change. Although in practice it is impossible to separate out any one component from any other, seeing the components teased apart may inspire faculty to think creatively about components of the courses they are planning.

Table 1: A Paradigm for Multicultural Course Change: Examining Course Components and Levels of Change (Kitano, 1997: p. 24)			
Component	**Exclusive**	**Inclusive**	**Transformed**
Content	Gives traditional mainstream experiences and perspectives; adds authors from different backgrounds who confirm traditional perspectives or support stereotypes	Adds alternative perspectives through materials, readings, speakers; analyzes historical exclusion of alternative perspectives	Reconceptualizes the content through a shift in paradigm or standard; presents content through non-dominant perspective
Instructional strategies and Activities	Mainly lecture and other didactic methods; question and answer discussions; instructor as purveyor of knowledge	Instructor as purveyor of knowledge but uses a variety of methods to: relate new knowledge to previous experience; engage students in constructing knowledge; build critical thinking skills; encourage peer learning	Change in power structure so that students and instructor learn from each other; methods center on student experience and knowledge such as: analyzing concepts against personal experience; issues-oriented approaches; critical pedagogy
Assessment of student knowledge	Primarily examinations and papers	Multiple methods and alternatives to standard exams and papers; student choice	Alternatives that focus on student growth: action oriented projects; self-assessment; reflection on the course
Classroom dynamics	Focus exclusively on content; avoidance of social issues in classroom; no attempt to monitor student participation	Acknowledgement and processing of social issues in classroom; monitoring and ensuring equity in student participation	Challenging of biased views and sharing of diverse perspectives while respecting rules established for group process; equity in participation

Critical reflection on the part of teachers is an essential part of the ongoing work of developing multicultural curriculum (Vavrus). Table 2 presents a workshop that was adapted from "Conceptual Foundations for Social Justice Courses," by Rita Hardiman & Bailey W. Jackson (1997) for faculty teams at The Evergreen State College as a way to invite faculty into reflective conversations about the nature of their own social identities, their

learning community curricula, and the kinds of knowledge (and knowers) it privileges. An important part of the workshop—a place where some teams stopped—is in the first step, which asks faculty to identify their own social identities. Some faculty objected to making this information public among their colleagues; others objected to the phrasing of the question about "historically powerful" even though in practice, much of

the curriculum developed by Evergreen teams transforms traditional structures and sources of knowledge. Nurturing a collective public practice of critical reflection takes time, persistence and patience, as does the process of curriculum transformation.

Table 2: What do we mean when we talk about diversity and what might it mean in practice?*			
(Kido, Parson and Decker, 2000)			

One way to think about diversity is to situate ourselves within social groups and social structures within the United States. Each of us has our own practice our matters of difference and power, and at the same time, we all belong to social groups or are perceived as belonging to social groups which have had more or few systemic privileges relative to other groups. To start this workshop, indicate your own social group memberships.

Social Identities	Membership	Historically powerful?	How comfortable are you talking about issues around this?
Race			
Gender			
Class			
Age			
Sexual Orientation			
Religion			
Physical abilities			

*Adapted from "Conceptual Foundations for Social Justice Courses," by Rita Hardiman & Bailey W. Jackson, in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice,* eds. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, 1997.

1. Talk about your responses with your team. How might your own social identities affect your view of teaching and learning?
2. (30 minutes) How do you imagine working with any differences that have emerged—differences in terms of how you choose to describe yourself, differences in how you feel about even having this conversation, whatever emerges? Within your team, what are your obligations to each other?
3. (30 minutes) Work as a team to conduct your own "environmental" scan about nature of your curriculum: Who are the authors you've chosen? Whose ideas do they cite? Who are your guest speakers and visitors? What kinds of images are in the materials you have selected? As a team, talk about the obligations you feel towards your disciplines, towards each other and the content of your program. To what extent does a conversation about diversity enter into your curricular designs? If you vary in your approaches to this question, how are you going to work with each other?
4. (30 minutes) Another way to think about working with differences is to pay attention to pedagogy. A question to consider is this: for each member of your team, what is the nature of your obligation to students? If there are differences among you, how will you work with them?

Developing Pedagogical Practices that Support Diverse Learners
The who and the what of learning are inextricably linked with the how of learning. James Anderson (2001), for instance, promotes teaching and assessment practices that facilitate the learning of all students, including those students who have historically not not been well served by higher education. He argues that most of the teaching that goes on in higher education is oriented towards learners who tend to be strongly analytical—comfortable learning material in relatively abstract terms, or separate from particular contexts, comfortable separating concepts from their own life experiences. As a result, students who tend to be more relationally oriented are often excluded, not through overt discriminatory practices, but because the learning environments they find themselves in do not create enough opportunities to connect learning and life, or to put new learning into meaningful contexts. Relational learners need more overt cues that the work is worth their while, that their presence is valued, that useful

connections can be made with their own lived experiences.

Much good work has been done developing pedagogical strategies that support diverse learners by valuing their presence, their voices, and connections with their lived experiences. *Critical Moments* is one such project. The concept and practice of *Critical Moments* was developed and piloted in the Goodrich program of the University of Nebraska-Omaha by Diane Gillespie, now an interdisciplinary arts and science faculty member at the University of Washington-Bothell. *Critical Moments* is used as a retention, awareness and change project for students of color, other underrepresented students (first generation college students, students with disabilities, students for whom English is a second language, etc.), and the institutions they attend.

At the heart of the project are interviews with students about their "critical moments"—moments when they considered dropping out of college. These interviews become the basis of case stories, which can be discussed by students, faculty and administrators. Gillies Malnarich (2002), director of the *Critical Moments* project based at the Washington Center, observes that "*Critical Moments* is a particularly powerful complement to the many existing strategies for improving campus climates for diversity and retention because it empowers students to act on behalf of themselves and their communities." Case stories can be used in a variety of educational settings: academic courses, co-curricular organizations, community settings, and staff/faculty development institutes. At some colleges, including the University of Nebraska, Lincoln and Seattle Central Community College, *Critical Moments* cases form the curricular basis of learning community programs jointly taught by a faculty member and a student affairs professional.

Learning communities create ideal places for faculty and students to develop practices that are inclusive and hospitable. Some strategies, like *Critical Moments* and a related project known as Intergroup Dialogue (Schoem and Hurtado, 2001), are relatively formal programs rooted in research on teaching, learning and diversity. These programs are well documented, and learning community practitioners interested in learning more about them should contact the sources listed at the end of this chapter. Much of the learning about pedagogical strategies that supports diverse learners grows out of years of practice—in learning communities, in women's studies, in ethnic studies, in other courses. As Morey and Kitano (1997) note, the heart of the academic experience—the thing which we should continually reflect on—is what happens in the classroom, the interactions between teachers and students and the curriculum (p. 10). In the story that follows, Phyllis Van Slyck and Will Koolsbergen illustrate how their learning community program fosters reflection about diversity in classroom interactions.

Case II: Thirty Students, Twenty-five Nationalities: Diversity and Learning Communities at LaGuardia Community College (Phyllis VanSlyck and Will Koolsbergen[2])

LaGuardia Community College stands in the shadow of the United Nations. One of the first things a visitor sees when they enter the main building on campus is a hall of flags representing every country for which there is a representative at the college. LaGuardia has had learning communities since 1971, beginning with liberal arts clusters, which are required clustering of four thematically integrated courses for liberal arts day students. The college currently offers both college-level and developmental learning communities organized as clusters and pairs, and beginning in 2001 as Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs). Furthermore, at LaGuardia, the majority of entering students test into pre-college writing, pre-college reading, and pre-college math. In 1991, building on the success of the liberal arts clusters, the college developed a new program called the New Student House program, a college within a college for developmental students. The original New Student House consisted of three developmental courses (reading, writing and speech) and a freshman seminar. Because of financial aid regulations and a change in the credit structure, within two years LaGuardia began to offer New Student House with basic reading, basic writing, freshman seminar and one college-level course (Oral Communication, Introduction to Business, Introduction to Computers). The content course is selected to suit students' needs from a developmental perspective, but equally important, to support their interests in majors and professions. An ESL version of New Student House is also offered and includes Communication for the non-native speaker as the credit-bearing course. New Student Houses are especially designed to support a very at-risk population: students requiring one or more developmental courses or assistance in language proficiency. Like the liberal arts clusters these houses have a highly integrated curriculum which includes a joint syllabus and shared readings and activities.

Given that the population of students in developmental programs reflects the general student body, in a group of thirty students, probably twenty-five different nationalities will be represented. Out of necessity faculty teaching in the program need to face issues of diversity. New Student House programs are organized around themes, and faculty discovered early that one way to deal with diversity is to give students a voice so that they can tell their stories by picking a theme that resonates for everyone. For example, "relationships" proved to be more fruitful than "work," because not all students had had work experience. What has happened is

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[2] Phyllis Van Slyck and Will Koolsbergen, presentation on diversity and learning communities, American Association of Higher Education National Conference, March 2001.

that the learning community programs have become a place for students to develop oral histories about who and what they are. For several years, these oral histories were transformed into theater pieces. Students got to tell their stories, and they got to direct other students in their stories. So, not only were students encouraged to give voice to their experiences, but also to take charge of the way their stories would be told, from what point of view and through what form. Reflecting on diversity, one way to do it is to allow a diverse population an environment in which they can feel comfortable enough to tell who and what they are.

One of the very strong features of LaGuardia's learning communities is that they are thematically integrated. Faculty who decide they want to work in learning communities meet and plan a coordinated curriculum around a specific theme. This integration is reinforced during the semester because faculty in clusters team-teach during an integrated hour and all faculty teaching in learning communities meet on a regular basis to review the curriculum, to talk about what is working, and to change what needs to be changed. Learning communities create something close to an ideal (nothing is ever ideal) opportunity to work with diversity issues because students and faculty in learning communities already have a kind of community. They have more potential to build trust, so that difficult issues that need to be talked about can be handled, not in a more comfortable way necessarily, but in a safer way.

One important strategy for facilitating conversations in the classroom is the use of ground rules. LaGuardia faculty borrowed the rules published by Lynn Weber (1990) in *Women's Studies Quarterly* (see table 3). Seminars are intended to be situations where students agree to help keep track of the seminar process. Sometimes seminars start with the ground rules, but more often students are invited to help create them. This is a delicate process. Faculty know the kinds of ground rules that will foster the classroom community, and faculty also know that students need the chance to develop them on their own, so that they have some ownership of them. Teachers have to be good enough actors to let the students think that they are creating the rules entirely. That's a fine line to walk. Essentially, teachers walk into their classrooms and say, "look, we're going to talk about some really great things in here. But some times we may see things differently, so in order for us to maintain some kind of order in what could be a chaotic democracy we have to have some basic rules. So what are your ideas, what are some of the things you think we should follow?" Usually, no one will respond, and so the teacher volunteers an easy one, like "raise your hand to be recognized to speak." Someone writes it on the board, and then the class moves to the next ground rule. The process can take anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour, depending on the class dynamics. It's always an enriching discussion because of all the things that come out in terms of etiquette from different cultures—like not showing the bottoms of your feet.

Once the list is on the board, the teacher steps back and suggests the class look it over for things to add, to take away, to negotiate. When the list is finalized, the teacher types it up, and gives a copy to every student to keep. One copy gets passed around and everyone signs it, like the Declaration of Independence. Some teachers laminate the signed copy, and carry it with them to class. The first time a discussion goes awry, the list comes out, and after that, students look after the process. If someone is not raising their hand, or of someone is engaged in a dialogue inappropriately, then students take care of it. They will be very polite at the beginning, but they can become very insistent. It's like a contract. After using the rules for two or three weeks, students do a two-minute essay on their reaction to how they are using the rules. That gives the teacher a chance to facilitate any changes that need to be made. All of this attention to process takes time, but it supports the development of a community of learners, and from a more academic point of view, it also helps students apply their critical thinking and critical reflection skills to the classroom dynamic and their own roles within that. Sometimes, when the students leave the class, teachers will give them the rules miniaturized on something the size of a business card and then laminated, and encourage them use it in another class if the discussion gets out of hand.

Table 3: Ground Rules for Class Discussion (Weber, 1990)
1. Acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist.
2. Acknowledge that one mechanism of institutionalized racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and the like is that we are all systematically misinformed about our own group and about members of other groups.
3. Agree not to blame others or ourselves for the misinformation we have learned, but to accept responsibility for not repeating misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
4. Agree not to "blame victims" for the conditions of their lives.
5. Assume that people—both the groups we study and the members of the class—always do the best they can.
6. Actively pursue information about our own groups and those of others.
7. Share information about our groups with other members of the class, and never demean, devalue, or in any way "put down" people for their experiences.
8. Agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain.
9. Create a safe atmosphere for open discussion. If members of the class wish to make comments that they do not want repeated outside the classroom, they can preface their remarks with a request that the class agree not to repeat the remarks.

Ground rules work in an electronic classroom as well as in person. At LaGuardia, ground rules are also used in FIG seminars which are held in a computer lab. The seminars are led by "master learners," senior faculty members or administrators of the college. Students in the FIG seminar are learning a program called "Speakeasy," which is very user-friendly. The program lets faculty set up discussion boards for students, assignments can be posted, and students can read and respond to each other's work. As well, the program has a feature that makes it possible to post the ground rules on the screen so they are always visible.

Integrating the Who, the What and the How: The Case for "Multicontextuality"

On many campuses, learning communities have become important sites for creating welcoming places in the academy for students of color, for transforming the curriculum of classes, and for developing pedagogical strategies that support diverse learners. In *Beyond Affirmative Action: Reframing the Context for Higher Education*, Robert Ibarra (2001) argues that for American higher education to make good on the promise of access and equity, incremental change—including the development of learning communities—will not be enough. We need a new conceptual framework. Until now, Ibarra argues, diversity efforts have been grounded in the pipeline metaphor that emerged after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when the first diversity programs in the country were organized to create better access for "educationally disadvantaged populations." Ibarra argues that the mission of early diversity programs was fourfold:

1) increase the number of minority students on campus through selective recruiting;
2) offer academic support for underprepared minority students, which evolved into other academic support programs including orientations, writing workshops, study skills workshops, and ESL support units;
3) assist in meeting the financial needs of minority students through scholarships;
4) offer academic advice and counseling, particularly from trained minority staff (p. 236).

When these programs were first implemented, they were very successful largely because there were few minority students on campuses to begin with. Ibarra argues that these early programs focused on a symptom, the lack of presence of minority students, rather than on a more fundamental problem in the higher education system. Diversity programs focus on the business of education—recruiting and retaining minority faculty and students—rather than on transforming the academic business of higher education. With the benefit of nearly forty years of experience trying to "fix" the problem of the lack of presence of minority students and faculty, the real problem facing higher education and educational activists becomes more apparent. According to Ibarra,

> Academic culture has always been the central problem for ethnic minorities in higher education. The difference is that today we must rethink and reframe the operative paradigm to address the real problem, which is academic organizational cultures that prefer to confront, not collaborate. And in no way are the pipeline programs born in the 1960s capable of dealing with the growing problem of high-context, field sensitive students who are abandoning (or never entering) graduate schools, which are dominated by low-context, field-independent professors (p. 243).

The problem with academic culture can be explained in anthropological and psychological terms. As a culture, academia is relatively low-context. Drawing on the work of Edward D. and Mildred T. Hall, Ibarra characterizes the differences between high and low-context cultures. Table 4 presents some of the distinctions he makes:

Table 4: Comparisons Between Low Context and High Context Cultures (Robert Ibarra, 2001: pp. 69-76)	
Low Context (LC)	**High Context (HC)**
Interaction: Low use of nonverbal signals; communication is direct; messages are explicit; disagreement is depersonalized	Interaction: high use of nonverbal signals; communication is indirect; messages are a form of engaging with another person; disagreement is personalized
Association: Personal commitment to people is low; task orientation; success means getting recognized	Association: personal commitment to people is high; getting things done depends on relationships with people and attention to group process; success means being unobtrusive
Temporality: time is monochronic—work is done on a schedule, speed and efficiency are valued, promptness is valued; time is a commodity	Temporality: time is polychronic—the needs of people may interfere with schedules, accuracy and completion is more important than speed; plans can be changed easily; time is a process

Table 4 (continued)	
Low Context (LC)	**High Context (HC)**
Gender and low context cultures: formal, male-oriented, team-oriented (teams consist of individuals brought together to do particular projects or tasks)	Gender and high context cultures: informal culture evolves over time from shared personal experiences that tie individuals to the group; wisdom is group oriented
Learning: knowledge is obtained by logical reasoning; analytical thinking is important; learning is oriented to the individual; scientific thinking is emphasized; academic style is teacher-oriented; research interests focus on theoretical and philosophical problems	Learning: comprehensive thinking is important; learning is group oriented; practical thinking is valued; academic style is student-oriented

The norms and practices in academia are more like those of low-context culture than a high-context culture, which puts students from high-context cultures at a disadvantage. Furthermore, Ibarra asserts, academia has been designed in ways that favor field-independent people over field-dependent people. The table below lists a few of those differences.

Table 5: Comparisons Between Field-independent and Field-dependent Children (Robert Ibarra, 2001: pp. 77-78)	
Field-independent Children	**Field-dependent Children**
Relationship to peers: prefer to work independently; like to compete; are task oriented; are inattentive to social environment when working	Relationship to peers: like to work with others to achieve common goals, like to assist others; sensitive to feelings of others
Social/instructional relationship with teacher: avoid physical contact; interact formally; like to try new tasks without help; impatient to begin tasks	Social/instructional relationships with teacher: openly express positive feelings about teacher; ask questions about teacher; highly motivated by working individually with teacher
Interpersonal relationships: are reserved and cautious in social settings; present selves as formal and distant	Interpersonal relationships: are open and outgoing in social settings; present selves as warm and informal
Communication: tend to be impersonal and to the point, tend to focus more on verbal than nonverbal communication	Communication: tend to personalize communication by referring to own life experiences, interests, feelings; tend to focus more on nonverbal than verbal communications
Thinking style: focus on detail and parts of things; deals with math and science concepts	Thinking style: function well when objectives are modeled or carefully explained; deal well with concepts in humanized or story format; function well when curriculum is relevant to personal interests and experience

Until learning community practitioners and diversity practitioners collaborate to change the academic culture in and out of classrooms, students of color, first generation students and women will continue to achieve at levels that are disproportionate to their presence in the general population. Ibarra's research with Latino and Latina graduate students has led him to argue that

> low-context field-independent knowledge and learning may be so ingrained and so prevalent in education that any alternative is unimaginable…. Meanwhile, Latinos and others from high-context cultures enter our educational systems with various cognitive learning styles. Many are prepared to learn in groups, think comprehensively, and cherish the commitment to family and community above all. To succeed, Latinos must then learn to think and do things in both high and low contexts, must become field independent as well as field sensitive, and must maintain these learning styles throughout their educational experiences. As a result, too many drop out in high school and few continue into higher education (p. 61).

"Opening the pipeline" won't work if the students who do come choose not to stay.

What makes Ibarra's argument so compelling is its resonance with the arguments made by educators focused on language diversity issues. Lisa Delpit (2002) is one the scholars whose work points to the utter simplicity and the awful complexity of transforming education to welcome and support the achievement of all students. In years of debate and discussion among English teachers about students' right to their own language, a relatively simple solution emerged: acknowledge that students have a variety of home languages and dialects, and that the work of school is to help all students develop competence in the "prestige dialect" of standard English. The invitation is for students to add another language form to their repertoire. For that invitation to be taken up, Delpit writes, children and adults must know that what they bring to school is valuable: "If we are truly to add another language form to the repertoire of African American children, we must embrace the children, their interests, their mothers, and their language…. We must make them feel welcomed and invited…We must reconnect them to their own brilliance and gain their trust so that they will learn from us. We must respect them… then, and only then, might they be willing to adopt our language form as one to be added to their own." (p 48) . The simple solution is to invite children to add another language form, to invite adults to learn to think and do in another context, in another style. The invitation is simple, but for the invitation to be genuine, it must be about adding, not subtracting. That means learners must feel welcomed and respected; that means academia must become a place that offers respect to learners and all that they bring with them.

Ibarra's theory of multicontextuality provides a framework for thinking about learning communities as places where colleges can make progress toward the goal of making higher education accessible to all students. Theoretically, learning community programs can be developed in ways that support high context, field dependent learners.

On many campuses, learning community programs do just that. They are designed to help welcome students into the academy and to ensure that students have the skills necessary to be successful. Learning community faculty can design interdisciplinary curriculum that is inclusive, and they can develop pedagogical practices that support diverse learners. One of the richest examples of a sustainably institutionalized learning community designed to address the who, the what and the how of learning in ways that support the academic achievement of students of color is the Tacoma campus of the The Evergreen State College.

Case III: Multicontextuality in Practice: The Evergreen State College-Tacoma campus (Joye Hardiman[3])

The Evergreen State College was founded as an alternative public liberal arts college organized through a series of team-taught, thematically organized, interdisciplinary programs—"learning communities." The Evergreen State College-Tacoma campus was developed to meet the needs of working adults who were interested in having access to this form of education in their own community. As a result, the campus population has grown from four women who studied together around the founder's kitchen table, to a cohort of over 200 with their own building. The program was 'brought into the center of the institution" in 1984 as an upper-division program. One of the founder's insistences was that the program not be marginalized, that its operation monies be embedded within the academic budget to protect it from budget cut vulnerability.

Soon it became clear that many community members lacked the first 90 credits of a degree, so Evergreen developed an articulation agreement with Tacoma Community College (TCC) and TCC now offers a "bridge" program on the Evergreen-Tacoma campus. Eighty four percent of the TCC Bridge students go on to complete their four-year degree from Evergreen. The retention and graduation rate in the upper-division program fluctuates between 91-95%. The Evergreen-Tacoma student population includes 40% African-American, 39% European American, 8% Hispanic, 4% Asian American, 5% Native American and 4% International. 100% are commuters. The campus has success with these students because it is contextually responsive, value based and philosophically and physically structured to promote student success and excellence.

The class schedule is contextually friendly. The curriculum is organized so that the same courses offered during the day are offered again that evening. That way, if a baby gets sick or a work schedule changes and a student has to miss their class, they have the option of attending the other class. The program content is organized so that information given in Tuesday's all program assembly can be used in seminars on Wednesday and shared in the barber and beauty shops on Saturday. When they enter, students are asked what they want to do when they graduate. The expectation of success is built in from this welcoming ritual to the course requirements, including those courses that have traditionally been roadblocks for marginalized people but are critical for graduate school or community leadership success.

The curriculum is based on students' needs, community realities and faculty passion. All students must write an autobiography in which they explore the

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[3] Joye Hardiman, panel presentation on learning communities and diversity, American Association of Higher Education National Meeting, March 2001.

lessons learned and the wisdom earned by living their lives. They have to demonstrate skills in statistics, quantitative and qualitative research methodology, and computer and multi-media technology; and complete a senior synthesis detailing their intellectual journey up to the point of college graduation. Most assignments are collaborative, and many involve family or work in the student's own communities. Applause occurs frequently and people are publicly praised for their accomplishments. An inclusive curriculum is attempted by consciously selecting books and issues that reflect the histories and cultures of students who enroll, as well as addressing issues that matter to the wider community. Each spring, all-program collaborative projects occur where students take their theoretical work out into the community and make a difference in some way. Student projects have included advocacy work with the homeless, domestic violence survivors, schools, environmental justice groups, citizen advisory boards, the courts, juvenile authorities, arts organizations, cultural and ethnic communities and non-profit groups and foundations. Students also work with younger students through instructing, mentoring, and facilitating an Intel Computer Clubhouse.

The campus is very intentional in terms of its value system. The entry hall says "enter to learn, depart to serve," a motto adapted from Bethune Cookman College, a historically Black college in Florida. Four core values, inclusivity, reciprocity, hospitality and civility, guide campus interactions and curriculum. Inclusivity and reciprocity are practiced in the design of the curriculum. Hospitality is practiced by the expectation that multiple members of the community will greet everyone who walks into the building respectfully and cordially. Civility is an expected norm and the key to creating a cohesive community. Conflicts are managed through a social contract and procedural chain.

Indigenous learning structures were taken into consideration when designing the new campus. Courtyards and circles were found at the center of traditional learning spaces and community hearts. So in the new facility, visitors walk into a open commons with faculty offices along two sides. Because the campus didn't want a division between the faculty and the students, the offices are made of glass, creating a learning market, like the Marrakesh market or the 125th street in Harlem. In the morning, the faculty come and slide open their wooden doors, which means they are open for learning business, and when they do private work they slide the doors closed. The commons includes a living room-like arrangement of couches and over stuffed chairs plus a space with tables and chairs for conversations and shared meals, both critical elements on a commuter campus. On the 2nd floor of the new building, there are four learning labs: an urban environmental science and public health lab, a computer research lab, a multi-media lab, and a civics and democracy lab designed like a moot court, where students practice debating and discussing policy issues. The Tacoma Campus has worked very hard

to think about how to merge the learning community work and diversity work in terms of students, curriculum, campus core values, and physical space (Hardiman, 2001).

Conclusion: Challenges for Practitioners

This decade is likely to be characterized by national, state and local struggles about the appropriate balance between private gains and public good. Critical markers of this conversation will be decisions made locally, at the level of the states, and nationally about the collection and the subsequent allocation of resources. In Washington state, for instance, like over forty other states, legislators in 2003 will be asked to make decisions about how to address a budget shortfall of over 2 billion dollars. The public good, like accessible and equitable education for all, will be weighed against individual gains, in the form of taxes. In the face of an economic decline, with more uncertainty in sight, colleges and universities are in the process of making decisions about which programs to keep, which to cut, what kinds of services are part of core missions, what can be removed. The climate is ripe for directors and advocates of historically marginal programs—learning communities and diversity programs—to be pitted against each other in the competition for increasingly scarce resources.

The irony is that the two efforts can support each other. Learning communities represent a powerful strategy for supporting learners from diverse backgrounds. In their practice, they can begin to adopt high context cultural practices and practices that support field-dependent knowers. Because learning communities are frequently interdisciplinary in nature, they can be designed to tackle problems faced by people in the world and to draw from the rich intellectual and artistic legacies of people around the world. As an education reform effort, learning communities are worth advocating for because they can present rich opportunities for significant learning for all students.

To realize the dream in this country of widespread access to and significant achievement in post secondary education, practitioners with expertise in learning communities and in diversity must find ways to connect their practices, to form their own learning community focused on designing communities for particular students, transforming the curriculum to make it more inclusive, and developing the pedagogical practices that lead to substantive learning for all students. Forming alliances with educators who share commitments to making higher education accessible and hospitable for students of color and other historically marginalized groups is critical to this work, even when the practicing of those commitments takes different forms. Patience and persistence, and a willingness to learn from the experiences of others will help communities of educators continue to discover the implications of our own social identities for our work with colleagues and students, and

how learning communities can be designed and implemented to support the learning of all.

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