

Learning Community Case Studies

Drawing Lessons Early On:

The Learning Community Factor in Teaching and Learning

Ben Sloan, Fayetteville Technical Community College

In the past I would have students disappear without a word. Sometimes ones with “A” averages would drop, and I would try to call them to find out what the problem is, all to no avail.

—Jerry Ittenbach, Chemistry

Located in south-central North Carolina about an hour south of Raleigh, Fayetteville Technical Community College (FTCC) serves 13,000 college students as well as 26,000 continuing education students annually, with one-third of all curriculum students taking at least one developmental class each semester. Many students who come to this large urban school have been displaced from textile industry jobs due to plant closings. Many others are associated with the military since two large bases, Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base, are nearby. The demographics of Raleigh contribute to an unusually high level of student diversity at FTCC; those eligible for education benefits include current enlistees from around the country, retirees, and spouses from many foreign countries, including Korea and Germany, where the United States maintains large military bases.

Learning communities are relatively new to FTCC: the first two offered in the spring of 2001, and six now offered in the fall of 2003. Most of the original five instructors teaching in learning communities since their inception began working together in 1993 under the auspices of a large College Tech Prep grant-funded effort that emphasized the development of interdisciplinary teaching strategies. The idea to develop learning communities originated with two faculty members who attended learning community-related conferences and workshops. The instructors involved from the beginning are Jerry Ittenbach, Chemistry; Beverly Hall, Math; Chris Diorietes, Math; Vicki Pate, Sociology and Humanities; and Ben Sloan, English.

The two original learning communities were developmental math/developmental chemistry and developmental English/sociology. Because developmental math and developmental chemistry were two difficult-to-pass courses for students wishing to enter a health-related field, integrating the courses in the context of health-related activities and discussions would help students succeed in each. This learning community is now offered every semester and fills to capacity. The second learning community, offered every spring semester, combines developmental English and sociology, a popular elective and transfer-credit course for many different curricula at FTCC. The expectation was that the two courses would complement one another: the sociology context would add energy and excitement to an otherwise routine developmental writing course, while the writing would challenge students to think and communicate on a deeper level about sociology.

The Developmental Math/Developmental Chemistry Learning Community

The learning community combining a sixteen-week Introductory Algebra course with two, eight-week Basic Chemistry I & II courses is taught back-to-

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back, for a total of twelve contact hours—a full schedule for most students. For these instructors, the preeminent value of the learning community class over traditional stand-alone classes is *retention*. In a typical stand-alone chemistry class at FTCC, by mid-semester one-third of the students drop out, and by the end of the semester it is not unusual for half or more to have dropped. In a typical stand-alone math class, one quarter of the students are gone by mid-semester, and by the end it is not unusual for a third or a half of the students to have dropped. By comparison, typically 80 percent or more finish the semester with a passing grade in the math/chemistry learning community.

Part of the problem with chemistry is that students hear such scary stories that many give up before they start. Furthermore, once these students—most of whom have never had chemistry before—arrive in the class, a serious stumbling block is that they cannot “do” algebra. For math students who ask “what is this math stuff good for?” and “when will I ever use this?,” the learning community gives them an opportunity to see direct applications for algebra in career fields.

One strategy that addresses retention is the use of “Support Circles,” carefully contrived groups of four to five students organized on the basis of mixed ability or skill level, compatible out-of-class study time schedules, and shared “interests” such as childcare and transportation-related needs. In fact, much of what the students do in class involves Support Circle-related work; students bounce ideas off one another in a setting where they hear encouraging words from peers so no one will be in danger of feeling lost or isolated. Outside class, most students meet with their group members on a daily basis to work together on assignments and projects, a trend that instructors do everything in their power to encourage. One student who was on the verge of quitting wrote the following at the end of the semester:

Coming back to school did not seem possible and fear encompassed my very being . . . Everyone’s ability to learn is different, for various reasons, but being given the chance for 16 weeks to see the same faces, and talk the same talk, somewhat forces a greater bond of dependence of one [student] on the other. The learning community won’t allow absolute failure.

The learning community helps to disentangle challenging assignments, such as ones that involve combining percentages of different chemical concentrations to come up with a chemical of intermediate strength. From the perspective of math, students often say, “It’s a word problem; I can’t do it.” A simulated pharmaceutical research activity, however, asks students to become research technicians for an invented pharmaceutical company. The assignment focuses on the importance of mixing chemicals in just the right amount to create a desired product. As students proceed, the role of algebra becomes quite apparent to them.

In a stand-alone math class a student might be frustrated by attempting to analyze information, build equations, and then solve the equations; in the learning community setting students are mixing the chemicals and using lab equipment to verify what they come up with on paper. Students get practical information at the same time they learn a process they will use later in their chosen health-career field. In addition, students’ learning is deeper when abstract

ideas are linked with concrete experiences and when group members work together throughout the activity. Another assignment that enhances “bonding” among students is a Chemical Scavenger Hunt where group members go off campus to “find” chemicals and then provide their full names, formulas, and product names.

In practice, the math/chemistry learning community has proven to be a superb way to capitalize on the diversity that students bring to the classroom. Faculty also appreciate that developmental students are fragile and can benefit by becoming cheerleaders for one another. Food plays an important role when celebrating the successful completion of projects or special occasions such as Pi Day and Mole Day. For example, recently before touring a local hospital to learn about health-related careers, students and instructors met for breakfast at a nearby restaurant. The aim is to take advantage of every possible opportunity to help students feel comfortable with one another.

The Developmental English/ Sociology Learning Community

Vicki Pate from the Sociology Department and I teach in the second learning community first offered in 2001. This learning community combines the highest-level developmental writing course, English 90 (Composition Strategies) with a college-transfer-level Introduction to Sociology class. The purpose for blending these courses is to create an effective learning environment for students. Writing topics and exercises need to relate to the need for citizens to communicate clearly with one another about controversial, complex social issues. Students also need not simply to memorize theories and terms but to challenge themselves to apply concepts to real-life situations and then articulate their findings in class discussions and in writing. Because I already attempted to make writing more meaningful for students by asking students to communicate about their life experiences as they relate to social conflict and because Vicki required writing in her classes to deepen their engagement with sociological concepts, the courses were a natural fit for a learning community.

Like many colleges across the country, FTCC uses ACCUPLACER to make a writing class placement based on scores derived from “Reading Proficiency” and “Sentence Skills” multiple-choice questions rather than an evaluation of the student’s original writing based on a reading prompt. Students placed in writing classes based solely on their performance on multiple-choice-type questions often have a much better ability to articulate their experiences and ideas than the assessment instrument scores would seem to indicate. Learning communities provided an avenue for demonstrating that students could do better.

How the learning community operates

Case studies in the learning community become the occasion for mastery of sociological concepts and terms through classroom discussion as well as writing essays. When working on a case study, students first read about and then discuss a puzzling, unresolved situation. For example, one case study concerns a mother who relocates to the United States from a remote South American village. She brings her young daughter into a community health clinic to be evaluated by a nurse whom she has visited on previous occasions. When the nurse notices a

curious pattern of bruises and cuts, the mother explains that the child seemed to lack energy so the family performed a native-to-their-own-culture tribal “cure.” The nurse chooses not to communicate the situation to her supervisor, opting instead to rely on her evolving closeness with the young woman as the basis for eventually attempting to convince her that in the United States such “cures” may represent child abuse and could result in a child being taken away from parents. The question for the students is this: Did the nurse make the right decision?

The case studies we choose illustrate sociological concepts explained in the students’ textbook. At the same time that students are reading the case studies and preparing to discuss them in class, they are also reading chapters in a sociology textbook that explain various concepts such as social interaction, stratification, and the sociological imagination. During the discussion of the case study, students refer in their textbooks to particular terms and theories. We act as facilitators, recorders, and guides with respect to the exchange on various issues, terms, and concepts. We also pose questions and participate in the ongoing dialogue so that students can discover the connections between concrete, specific case studies and sociological theory. The discussion culminates with each student taking and defending sides of an issue, in writing. The students know in advance they will write argument essays defending their positions based on the sociological material in their textbooks.

After students work together in peer sessions to develop and improve their essays, they submit their papers, along with all earlier drafts, for an “initial” evaluation. Vicki and I discuss each paper together, and complete a one-page evaluation that addresses strengths and weaknesses in the areas of content, organization, and grammar. The student uses these comments to revise the paper for inclusion in a culminating portfolio, submitted at mid-term or the end of the semester, that contains several papers for which the student will receive one grade. As a result of the combined case study/portfolio approach, student papers generally convey thinking at a deeper level and involve more complex ideas than are typically found in papers produced in stand-alone composition classes.

Students also work on a semester-long project, done individually or in groups, called “Stories of American Community.” This assignment, taking the place of a conventional research paper, requires students to investigate in their community a specific, unique point of social conflict and the means being attempted to resolve the conflict. The students conduct their investigations through interviews and document the experience with black-and-white photographs. For example, one student who wrote a paper on a local women’s center support group interviewed not only the counselor but also several participants. Another student reported on the attempts of the Lumbee Indians to gain recognition as a tribe; her photographs showed a local swamp where a famous skirmish took place, burial sites, and the inside of relatives’ homes decorated in the Native American style. A third student interviewed a county commissioner who offered insight into local government politics. When the projects are completed, students present their results in an oral report to the entire class; they also submit a typed report that is evaluated and returned for revision and final submission using the portfolio format.

The learning community setting helps the sociology instructor achieve the primary goal for the students in any Introduction to Sociology class, which is to grasp the concept of the sociological imagination—for each student to see beyond his or her self into a larger, more diverse world. Everything Vicki does centers on this goal, and students’ writing demonstrates whether they are able to apply sociological concepts to their own experience as well as the experience of others.

Conclusion

Teachers in learning communities at Fayetteville Technical Community College have been changed by the experience. We carry the lessons from our learning community experiences into teaching in stand-alone classes in ways that emphasize:

- *community-building strategies*, which make it easier for students to work together and support one another, both academically and personally
- *writing versus traditional objective tests to measure learning* so students can experience writing as a means to stretch, focus, and deepen their thinking
- *facilitating instead of lecturing* since active engagement in learning encourages students to discover, individually and through group work, the academically-appropriate questions to ask and processes to use to answer their questions
- *creative and innovative approaches and activities* that spark student interest and open possibilities for student learning unavailable through traditional means
- *collaborating with teachers from other disciplines*, a value, that once discovered, benefits students and faculty if pursued in practice. Opening a dialogue with a teacher from a different department that results in shared activities or a full-blown learning community creates opportunities for significant professional growth

Website: <http://www.faytechcc.edu>

Contact: Ben Sloan, bsloan@pvcc.edu

Learning Community Coordinator: Vicki Pate, patev@faytechcc.edu