

**Learning How to Learn:
A Foundation for Developmental Learning Communities**
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While participating in these paired courses, I not only came to terms with my biases regarding the sciences, I also came to terms with myself. I discovered that I was capable of achieving in the sciences.

— A student

Our learning community program for developmental learners focuses on learning strategies that will help students become effective learners in the multiple contexts of college-level and developmental courses.

Spokane Falls Community College, located in a metropolitan area in eastern Washington, is a commuter college with 5,700 students, 80 percent of whom are full-time. The student population tends to have the average age of approximately twenty-six years; 11 percent are students of color and 1 percent are international students.

In 1990, Spokane Falls Community College (SFCC) offered its first learning community that integrated three transfer-level courses. Today, our typical fall quarter schedule includes a coordinated studies offering and twelve paired and linked courses. Since our learning community program's inception, developmental level skills courses, paired or linked with a content course or another developmental course, have been a significant component. In particular, developmental learning communities have focused on helping students learn—about specific subject areas, about their community, and about themselves as learners.

While we want students to use the skills they learn in our study strategies classes in other areas of school and their lives, transfer rarely happens. Our learning community program for developmental learners focuses on learning strategies that will help students become effective learners in the multiple contexts of college-level and developmental courses. The majority of our offerings include a reading and/or study-strategies course paired with a course such as Introduction to Biology or Elementary Algebra, as well as core courses in professional/technical programs such as Early Childhood, Deaf Interpreter, and Gerontology.

SFCC's paired courses integrate two or more courses, which are fully team-taught, with faculty participating as learners as well as teachers. A cohort of students, usually forty, registers for a particular section of a study strategies course and a particular section of a content class. The students meet with both instructors present for a two-hour block each day; sometimes, the learning community includes a lab.

The first learning-to-learn pairing, "Biology: How to Study It and How to Write About It," integrated a developmental study skills with a transfer-level biology class. This pairing came about when a life science instructor approached me with her concerns about her biology students' reading and writing abilities. They struggled with their complex textbook, which like most introductory science textbooks, is written for expert, not novice, readers. Much to her students' dismay, she required them to read *Never Cry Wolf* and write an essay (they couldn't imagine having to write an essay in a biology class!). This conversation took place just as I was learning about learning communities, and combining study skills with biology seemed an excellent way to support this instructor and her students. I had no idea how much it would change the way I taught study-strategies classes.

A Washington Center seed grant funded reassigned time so I could attend the biology class to prepare for the pairing of my study skills course with Biology 101. My role was much like that of the master student in a supplemental instruction model. I attended all lecture and lab classes, took notes, read the assignments, prepared for, and took the tests. By participating in the biology class with a focus on how to learn the subject, I learned a great deal about the *real* world of studying and learning. My colleagues and I realized that to be effective developmental educators, we needed to be in conversations with content faculty and in classes other than our own, discovering the realities with which students struggle.

I learned what it was like to be a student with a desire to learn but little time to study. Before the first biology test, I *intended* to review my notes and other materials every night. Since I am a developmental learner in life sciences, when I did *not* practice daily, I had to study eight hours the day before the test. Suddenly, daily study sessions became a priority. Likewise, even though I was using my best listening and note-taking practices, it was hard to keep new information from “bouncing off” me—each lecture brought a great deal of new information, and terms from the previous day were used to define that day’s new concepts. I needed mental time-outs every fifteen to twenty minutes to process what I had just heard and to check my understanding. These insights helped shape the activities I designed for future quarters to ensure that students monitored their learning and reviewed lecture material daily.

The two-hour block on lecture days gave the biology instructor more time to lecture on complex concepts. We broke the lectures into twenty to thirty minute chunks; in between, students engaged in activities that helped them think through the information they had just heard. They compared lecture notes, collaborated on key words or questions, and then orally tested each other. Early in the quarter students were urged to form study groups outside of class. When the encouragement to form groups proved ineffective, we held in-class reviews in my portion of class time, focusing on effective strategies for group work. An earlier suggestion to form a study group outside of class “before the next test,” now became a study skills course requirement. Students reported that required group work was one of the most effective activities in helping them learn.

While a traditional biology text is required, students created their own resource notebooks of study strategies, handouts, and materials relating to time management and test-taking instead of purchasing a “study skills” textbook. I carry the lesson I learned in this first paired course—that a skills textbook could be replaced with the students’ own resource notebook—to most subsequent learning communities. Students monitored their learning by completing weekly journal assignments on topics such as their learning difficulties and successes, study habits, and attitudes. We also assessed the latter two with Claire Ellen Weinstein’s e-LASSI, an electronic *Learning and Study Strategies Inventory*.

By practicing new and various study strategies, students were better able to learn biology; likewise, a difficult-to-master content provided students with extra incentive to try new strategies and learn about themselves as learners. It was enormously rewarding, then, to read what Joe, a forty-year-old nursing student

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who had failed biology the previous quarter, wrote in his journal: “by using all of these methods and doing the group study and these methods, I *know* I learned biology.”

Learning to learn does more than help students pass a course; it can also open doors previously closed to them. Such was the case with Regina Corkery, an English major who opened what she thought had been a locked door when she discovered she was capable of “learning” science:

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Prior to taking the combined courses, I had no thought of taking any more science classes than were absolutely required of me to gain an associates degree and get on to a more palatable field of study. I had a biased view of the sciences, anyone who achieved in them, and anyone who pursued them . . . sciences were for a certain breed of people—namely those with extraordinarily high I.Q.s or photographic memories . . . (but) biology became fascinating to me, and breaking my old self-image opened up new avenues for me. After completing this combined course, I signed up for more science courses . . . I decided to change to a major requiring a significant science background: nursing . . . I attribute (this) experience with cracking a terrible myth for me that I know many others are struggling with.

Once the other reading instructors and I turned our focus outward, we realized that recent hires in some of SFCC’s professional/technical programs were eager for our help in teaching their students critical reading and study skills, and organizational and literacy skills required in the workplace. We paired the study strategies course with Interpersonal Communications, a course required by most Human Services professional/technical programs. Because of the range in students’ reading and writing skills when they enter Human Services programs, we offer two levels of the study skills course: a transfer (elective) course for students with reading skills at or above college level, and a developmental course for students with below college-level reading scores. Students do basically the same curriculum but at a different proficiency level.

In the professional/technical learning communities, the need for assistance from a counselor was clear early on. We incorporated a service-learning component in a paired study skills/Interpersonal Communications learning community by adding a two-credit Human Services Seminar. While this seminar did not require additional in-class time, students did ten hours of service learning plus reflection. SFCC’s Service Learning Coordinator, who has a counseling background, coordinated the component, worked individually with students, and referred them to other resources in the community. Based on this experience, we want to build counseling support into other developmental learning communities.

SFCC’s linked classes are those in which faculty coordinate syllabi and assignments, but usually teach their classes separately. We have linked a study strategies course with content courses such as Elementary Algebra, Early Childhood Development, Gerontology, and Deaf Culture. We have also linked a reading/study skills course to a lecture-centered course, which has a twenty-student capacity, and each course counts as one class for each instructor.

Generally, the reading/study skills instructor receives compensation or reassigned time to sit in on the content course the first time the link is offered to determine which study strategies to emphasize.

The lessons we have learned about the importance of providing an authentic context for learning various study and reading strategies is borne out in the research. Learners do not naturally transfer information or concepts where we most expect this transfer to take place: school knowledge to everyday practice; sound everyday practice to school endeavors; and across school subjects. As Sue Berryman and Thomas Bailey (1992) indicate in “Five Incorrect Assumptions About Learning,” the most prevalent incorrect assumption is that people predictably transfer learning to new situations. Another incorrect assumption is that knowledge and skills can be more readily transferred to new situations if they are acquired independent of use. The reality, though, is that *context* is critical for understanding and for learning. Integrated courses give students practice applying the new study strategies they are learning in a content field.

L. Dee Fink (2002) notes that we need to focus on *what* students learn as well as the changes that occur in the learner. Combining study strategy courses with content classes focuses on what Fink describes as *a change in connecting*. For Fink, connecting is “the ability to connect and integrate, for example, different kinds of information and ideas with each other, classroom learning with other parts of one’s life, etc.” (2). When students are involved in interdisciplinary work, they make connections and deepen their learning. Vincent Tinto’s retention study on students in learning communities reveals that developmental education students are 26 percent more successful in their studies if they are involved in integrated courses (1997).

The success students experienced when we focused on strategies to help them learn particular subjects led us to offer a paired developmental level reading and writing learning community and a linked reading and writing LC each year. Whether linked or paired, College Survival is a ten-credit program that helps students improve their understanding of what they read and their ability to communicate ideas orally and in writing. Class activities are designed to prepare students for English 101 and for professional/technical or transfer-level academic programs. Throughout the quarter students reflect on themselves as learners and discover their learning preferences; they leave the learning community with this self-awareness as well as a personal study plan for future quarters.

A comprehensive assessment of SFCC’s learning community program from spring 1997 to spring 1999 indicates that students were satisfied with their learning community experience and felt it important to their success. They increased their confidence in reading and writing, developed a deeper understanding of course content, and recognized their responsibility for their learning. A 2000 SFCC Outcomes study in the professional/technical division shows that students in the Interpreter Training program who successfully completed a study skills course in conjunction with Deaf Culture persist longer and are more successful in the Interpreter Training program than students who do not take the linked study skills course.

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For SFCC faculty members, students' success has not been the only reward of teaching together in learning communities. Participating in another instructor's class, preferably in an area outside one's own discipline provides content teachers with sustained faculty development. Teachers of developmental courses use multiple strategies to promote active student learning, and these strategies become a permanent part of the content teachers' repertoires. For example, after the first paired biology and study skills course, the biology instructor began spending more time at the beginning of the quarter engaging students in community building and time management activities that helped students get acquainted and plan for the necessary two hours of study outside of class for every hour in class. She also periodically provides more pre-reading assignments (such as survey maps of the biology chapters that the students also later use as review maps from which to study) and active learning assignments such as flashcards that portray biology terms and concepts with definitions and student illustrations. To teach basic chemistry concepts early in the quarter, she assigned jigsaw group work in which students become "experts" on a concept by working collaboratively with others assigned to the same concept, then, in turn, they "teach" their original group.

Teaching in learning communities elucidates the applicability of course material. Pairing my course with another course forced me to reassess the most critical elements of the study skills curriculum. I found that some study strategies that I usually taught in my study skills course, such as SQ3R, were not efficient or effective for learning biology. Similarly, the Gerontology instructor and I discovered that many goals of the learning skills course address important but unarticulated expectations of the professional/technical instructors and future employers. Through their study skills assignments, students learned and practiced organization, responsibility, and reliability—invisible but essential parts of their curriculum. In subsequent quarters, the Gerontology instructor has been much more explicit about teaching these habits. Instructors in the Interpreter Training program have modified the way they teach summary writing. Students now have guided instruction and support from the reading instructor as they work at understanding and summarizing ideas. As a result, we are seeing better comprehension and more accurate written summaries.

Our learning communities continue to change and evolve. We face new challenges as budgets are reduced and more students with significant learning problems enroll in our college. However, we steadily move forward and offer the following suggestions for other colleagues interested in creating learning communities that focus on students learning how-to-learn:

- a) Pair or link developmental skills courses with a high demand course that students are likely to need for a degree or certificate since students may opt for the learning community solely because it enrolls them in the required course.
- b) Choose a course taught by an instructor committed to improving student learning who wants to participate in a learning community. Pairing or linking a course with someone else's involves more planning and preparation than teaching a stand-alone course. Ask for a commitment

from your colleague(s) to meet outside class time at least one hour each week to debrief, plan, and adjust your plan.

- c) Involve a counselor in your learning community. Many schools add a one to two credit career planning course that counselors teach as a way to involve the counselor. Another possible format is to assign a counselor to a developmental level learning community as a part of his/her contact time.

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