

“Opportunities to Connect: Integrative Learning Communities”

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Abstract

The primary role of designing a Learning Community model is to promote collaborative teaching and learning that connects individual courses from separate academic disciplines to enrich the intellectual life and sense of community for students and participating faculty. From both an epistemological and pedagogical perspective, learning communities are an invaluable strategic blueprint that fosters a social context for learning, provides interdisciplinary learning opportunities, makes explicit curricular connections through themes or texts and promotes an integrated and interactive learning experience.

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The unique role of learning communities in promoting student engagement and providing meaningful opportunities for students to actively participate in their own learning is receiving renewed attention in higher education these days. Learning communities feature collaborative teaching and learning opportunities that connect individual courses from discrete academic disciplines to enrich campus intellectual life and create a profound sense of community for both students and faculty. Learning communities also play a major role in providing a positive introduction to campus life and enhance student retention initiatives.

The learning community model, however, is not new. Learning communities may have originated as early as 1927, when Alexander Meiklejohn designed a two-year comparative literature program of study at the University of Wisconsin. In Meiklejohn's initial model, students and faculty were engaged in reading, analyzing and discussing classical literature in the first year and that was followed by a second year program drawing parallels between classical literary works and contemporary American literature. The innovative program also included a summer writing assignment between the first and second year that asked students to translate key reading and discussion points into a comparative paper on a topic of interest. The deeper undertones and integration of texts explored in Meiklejohn's pedagogical approach has been subsequently interpreted as one of the first principles of a learning community: students and faculty are fellow traveling companions in the learning enterprise.

Familiar Models

Today, of course, learning community models have taken a number of different forms. Learning communities now include “linked courses,” with groups of two or more basic

courses offered across academic disciplines. One course may be typically content based while another may be an applied course, or one course may have a theoretical foundation that is translated into an experiential or performance based project in another course. Although the faculty of each course teach independently, there is a team coordinated syllabus of reading, writing and reflective assignments that compliment and reinforce the linked courses to enrich a student's intellectual life and promote the sense of an engaged community of learners. Students co-register as a cohort in linked models of learning communities, and the close association is intended to foster an integrative learning experience that explores curricular and co-curricular experiences that draw meaningful relationships between academic disciplines and experiential learning opportunities.

“Learning clusters” are a frequent variation of the linked courses model and promote a broader academic perspective. Instead of linking two courses together, however, the cluster model enrolls one cohort of students and provides an equivalent quarter or semester course load of three or more courses. Learning clusters are generally based on a common theme, political or social issue, historical period, or introduction to a career related field of study. Using a common syllabus, three or more faculty team teach and design collaborative student assignments that are shared weekly or bi-weekly in a seminar or open forum setting. The cluster model may feature a supplementary reading list, faculty/student research, field trips, tutorials, guest speakers, public presentations, service learning projects and social events.

“Coordinated studies,” a more complex program designed by a team of faculty as a fifteen or more credit hour interdisciplinary sequence of courses, is also a popular learning community model. Most closely related to the Meiklejohn concept, the coordinated studies model is team taught by several faculty in set blocks of time each week and may continue for a quarter, semester or an entire year. Decidedly more content specific, coordinated studies are diverse in scope to provide a more interactive learning environment in which faculty and students from several academic disciplines work closely together as a learning team. In addition to texts, lectures and presentations, a typical coordinated studies model might include selected plenary sessions, small group projects, field trips and tutorials.

Freshman Interest Groups

Although traditional learning communities feature cooperative teaching and learning techniques as well as group process learning activities, the evolution of the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) model has had a more significant impact on the praxis of teaching and learning for first year students. The FIG curriculum model integrates three or more academic courses into a single program of study that may include reading assignments, informal social events, panel discussions, culminating paper, public presentations, service learning projects and a peer advising or mentoring component.. In the FIG model, faculty serve as facilitators who elicit responses, promote reflective learning principles and encourage collaborative problem solving. The focus is holistic, weaving together academic knowledge as well as personal and practical experience to enhance the group learning dynamic.

The FIG model provides an immediate support system for first year students and is essential in laying the foundation for academic success and social engagement that enhances student retention initiatives. Traditionally, FIG courses are those that would be taken by first year students and typically serve as basic foundation courses for an anticipated field of study, e.g. liberal arts major, teacher preparation, business and pre-law, medicine or health sciences among others. The FIG model may be used to deliver general education course requirements or prerequisite courses to institutional programs e.g. freshman honors, diversity issues, women's and gender studies, environmental studies, global or international programs and allied health professions.

Targeted FIG models may also serve traditional first year student populations, e.g. athletes, at-risk students, transfers, adult learners, special admits, historically under-represented students, international students or students with disabilities. These FIG models are a good example of learning communities that integrate different skills and modes of inquiry and may include writing and speaking courses linked with courses in philosophy, sociology, politics, history or anthropology; courses designed to link basic communication skills and experiential activities; or critical thinking and speaking intensive courses that emphasize research, analysis and interpretation.

An ideal FIG template might include a residential component as well. Residential learning communities, or living-and-learning environments, include theme based residence floors that reinforce the academic content of a learning community with frequent daily interaction of faculty and students living and working together in a shared space. The residential component promotes independent student growth and presents an unlimited number of educational and social engagement opportunities e.g. small group dining, panels, forums, film series, guest speakers, musical concerts, theatre productions, athletic events, art exhibitions, new book discussions, poetry readings and field trips to libraries, museums or historical sites.

The residential FIG model emphasizes a focused and integrative perspective for students to translate course theory into actual practice through group study assignments, service learning projects or volunteerism initiatives. Residential faculty also play a more active role in planning collaborative co-curricular events or community based projects that enrich the learning community theme. Residential FIG models also encourage first year students to identify their own supportive peer groups and engage in more purposeful activities outside the classroom environment.

Summary

The primary role of institutional learning communities is to promote collaborative teaching and learning that connects individual courses from separate academic disciplines to enrich campus intellectual life and enhance a sense of community for participating students and faculty. From both an epistemological and pedagogical perspective, the learning community models discussed here are invaluable strategic planning blueprints that foster a social context for learning, provide interdisciplinary learning opportunities, make explicit curricular connections through themes or texts and promote an integrated and interactive learning environment for both students and faculty.

References

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