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Multidisciplinary Collaboration Through Learning Communities: Navigating Anxiety

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A problem common to university faculty and students is an implicit sense of inadequacy regarding institutional hierarchies and disciplinary boundaries. Through a focus on multidisciplinary learning communities enable members to navigate multiple points of view within, between, and beyond apparent institutional boundaries. After having led a workshop that placed participants in the positions of both students and faculty members negotiating multidisciplinary through learning communities, we conclude that learning communities' methodological leveling of traditional hierarchies implicit in higher education leads to a sense of belonging that enables students and faculty to take risks essential for authentic learning. Anxiety over participation in academic discussions both inside and outside the classroom, and from within and beyond one's disciplinary expertise, thus becomes productive rather than debilitating.

In higher education, we often think of learning communities as groups of undergraduate students who are enrolled in a common set of courses or who share common academic interests. However, student learning communities share features with other social groups that might be defined as communities of practice, such as faculty learning communities or research teams (Wenger, 2000). Of particular significance are those features shared by all learning communities, which aim to address a common problem for faculty and students: anxiety. That anxiety, we suggest, is motivated by the implicit sense of inadequacy often felt by individuals engaged

in higher education. For students, the inadequacy arises from the transition to a different social context and to new perspectives; for faculty members, it arises from collaborations with other teacher-learners that suggest the limitations of disciplinary expertise. Learning communities have the power to engender an increased sense of connectedness through mutual respect and equality, and to encourage reciprocity that can decrease the sense of divisiveness within the university. Through a focus on multidisciplinary learning communities enable individual members to navigate multiple points of view within, between, and beyond institutional and conceptual boundaries.

The value of learning communities might be understood from an administrative point of view – students engaged in a learning community tend to persist in the university system¹ (Tinto, 1997) – or from a pedagogical point of view – students involved in a learning community tend to demonstrate higher levels of engagement in the learning process (Kuh, 2008). In this paper we focus on the latter because the methods and practices common to faculty and students involved in a learning community often blur the lines between teaching and learning – expert and student – and prompt participants to create their own place within the university system. Likewise, the methods and practices of student learning communities illustrate how the university community might address anxieties surrounding place through collaboration and multidisciplinary. We suggest that the methodological leveling, through multidisciplinary learning communities, of traditional hierarchies implicit in the term and instantiation of higher education, leads to a sense of belonging that enables students and faculty to take risks essential for authentic learning². Following Bain (2004), we believe that authentic learning requires that “learners feel a sense of control over their education; work collaboratively with others; believe that their work will be considered fairly and honestly; and try, fail, and receive feedback from expert learners in advance of and separate from any summative judgment of their effort” (p. 18). Anxiety over participation in academic communities thus becomes productive rather than debilitating.

First-Year Learning Communities

First-year learning communities at the University of Saskatchewan are groups of 20 to 40 students who enroll in a common set of either two or three first-year courses. In addition to seeing each other in class on a regular basis throughout the fall term, each learning community meets weekly outside of class for one hour with two senior student peer

mentors. The weekly groups have four main goals: 1) community engagement within, between, and beyond the communities; 2) collaborative learning as a means to study more effectively; 3) program and career exploration through mentorship, networking, and academic advising; and 4) academic enrichment within, between, and beyond first-year courses.

One of the cornerstone events of the first-year learning community experience at the University of Saskatchewan is a public multidisciplinary panel discussion. Each year, the learning communities host a series of public multidisciplinary panels on big topics such as “The Digital Self” (2008), “Pandemics and Poverty” (2009), “Human Rights” (2010), and “Sustainable Energy” (2011). Each panel discussion involves three to four faculty members with disciplinary perspectives representative of the Humanities, the Social Sciences, or the Sciences. First-year students brainstorm questions in advance of these panels and are encouraged by their peer mentors to engage fully in this public academic event. Success is measured by the degree of participation in the event and the number of public lectures and academic debates first-year students subsequently attend.

The common objective of multidisciplinary panel discussions is to strengthen connections between ideas and people in order to widen participation in an academic spirit of inquiry. The goals for students are to: 1) reduce the anxiety surrounding participation in public talks and academic debates; 2) increase students’ sense of self-directed, democratic learning; and 3) foster a sense of connectedness between new students and the university community. The goals for faculty are to: 1) facilitate multidisciplinary connections between university colleagues; and 2) share their research interests and passion for lifelong learning with new students.

The overarching aim of the Learning Communities Program at the University of Saskatchewan is to increase a sense of connectedness, *within learning communities*, through building a sense of identity, *between learning communities*,

¹ Empowering students (and faculty) to create their place in the university system will naturally result in higher retention; thus we see retention as an outcome of learning communities rather than a goal.

² The stated mission of the Learning Communities Program at the University of Saskatchewan is “inspiring authentic learning through community.”

through nurturing a sense of belonging, and *beyond learning communities*, through increasing a sense of social responsibility. Multidisciplinary panel discussions demonstrate these various layers of connectedness. *Within* learning communities, students come together to confront real world issues via the disciplines that often seem disconnected at the first-year level. Because these events are open to the wider university community, other student groups or clusters of graduate students participate, fostering connections *between* different kinds of learning communities. Further, issues raised in the context of multidisciplinary panel discussions connect ideas in ways that extend *beyond* anticipated learning outcomes.

We have collected evidence that suggests we are beginning to reach our goals with the Learning Communities Program and, in particular, with the multidisciplinary panel discussion series, which is systematically designed to strengthen both conceptual and institutional connections, to enrich the academic experience, and thereby to transform debilitating anxiety into productive anxiety. In a survey administered to 40 University of Saskatchewan faculty members who participated in the 12 panel discussions for the 2011 learning communities, 40% of respondents (n=30) felt the multidisciplinary panel discussion was very successful in helping students to feel comfortable attending and asking questions at public talks. The other 60% agreed that the panel discussions were somewhat successful in achieving this objective. In addition, one respondent stated that the best part of participating in a multidisciplinary panel discussion was “tackling a common problem from multiple perspectives and demonstrating to students that faculty can agree to disagree without rancor.” Another suggested that “engaging with faculty and students on a topic that is of direct relevance to all of our lives in a way that provided opportunity to consider multiple social positions and perspectives” was an enriching experience.

Data collected from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2011 indicates that

students who participated in learning communities reported much higher levels on the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark than students who were not part of learning communities (26.7 versus a score of 20.0) (University of Saskatchewan, Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2011). Learning community activities that are specifically designed to increase academic enrichment, such as multidisciplinary panel discussions, likely have an impact on the corresponding NSSE benchmark. We are continuing to assess the Learning Communities Program using a mixed-methods approach, and a longitudinal study on the impact of early participation in public academic talks on retention rates and NSSE’s Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark is currently underway.

Such findings indicate that multidisciplinary panels and learning communities in general provide genuine opportunities for navigating multiple points of view; however, anxieties are associated with that process for students and faculty members alike. The challenging aspects of multidisciplinary were explored in our workshop on learning communities.

Multidisciplinary Through Learning Communities

In a workshop at the 2011 Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) conference in Saskatoon³, we invited participants to experience the Learning Communities Program from the perspective of both students and faculty members faced with the challenges of multidisciplinary collaboration. Our goal was to move from theory to practice by modeling connections that become possible in a learning community as well as a multidisciplinary panel. After introducing learning communities at the University of Saskatchewan, we initiated a small-group activity that replicated a first-year student’s experience. Workshop participants were placed in the position of students, encountering

³ The authors would like to thank the participants in the STLHE workshop, and in an April 2011 workshop at the University of Saskatchewan, for their contribution to this project.

reading material from three different courses, and were tasked with finding common ground in that material, to make connections between different fields, and to see course material as linked to issues outside the classroom.

Each participant was given a handout that contained short readings or excerpts from three first-year courses involved in a learning community: an early Canadian history class, an English class on reading culture, and an introduction to Native Studies. The handouts contained readings that had been assigned within the first few weeks of classes with common themes that the instructors had neither intended nor planned. Participants were divided into groups of three. Each member of the group was given the task of reading and summarizing the major points, concepts, issues, or methods raised in one of the three excerpts, and then explaining his or her assigned excerpt to the other members. Finally, group members were asked to apply their understanding of the materials in order to establish common themes, ideas, or issues that arose from these three readings.

The second part of the workshop invited participants to put themselves in a very different position: that of faculty members challenged with encouraging students to make connections between disciplines. They were asked to imagine themselves as one of three presenters in a multidisciplinary academic panel to be attended by first-year learning community members. Their task was to take a topic derived from the first exercise (as students), and to link their own research or field of expertise to that panel topic (as faculty members). A few participants were encouraged to share their ideas with the larger group, spurring discussion that spilled outside of the session's classroom walls, as it does when successfully enacted by first-year learning communities.

The points that these groups identified included different disciplinary perspectives on what is classified as knowledge, and distinctions between objective and subjective ways of knowing. The panel topics included creative responses to the readings, including one, from a business professor, questioning the necessity for a "more is better" model

of economics. Not surprisingly, the 17 workshop participants engaged with the tasks, and with other members of their groups, with differing levels of comfort. Perhaps most interesting to us as organizers were the questions that arose, both during the session and in the workshop feedback form, concerning how to encourage multidisciplinary: How do we overcome resistance (by faculty and students) to multidisciplinary? How do we engage faculty members in those kinds of learning groups, beyond bringing their expertise to a panel? How do we reduce the intolerance between communities?

Three main learning outcomes for workshop participants were identified: 1) to understand the challenges that face students and faculty members who participate in first-year learning communities; 2) to find common ground between diverse disciplines by generating new topics for multidisciplinary collaboration; and 3) to leave with tools to apply to their own institutions' efforts to introduce multidisciplinary to first-year students.

On our feedback forms, participants identified some of the challenges of learning communities, as well as three main concerns about multidisciplinary exchanges: 1) existing resistance to collaboration on the part of students and faculty, (i.e., worry about "tolerance within communities" and "disciplinary silos"); 2) difficulties on the part of both students and faculty in making connections across disciplines; and 3) ongoing questions about the use and meaning of those connections, expressed in one feedback form as a desire to model "potential student learning outcomes."

Rather than closing off questions, then, the workshop helped to promote the kind of inquiry that can provide productive learning space. The comments shared by participants spoke to the extent to which academia is invested in disciplinary differences and in departmental structures, an attitude echoed by students' investment in a singular disciplinary or career focus. Like multidisciplinary learning community panels, the workshop caused some anxiety by placing faculty members and student programming professionals into positions where they were no longer solitary experts but rather learners exploring the value of multidisciplinary.

Why Multidisciplinary, not Interdisciplinarity?

While there can be overlap between the terms, multidisciplinary is often defined as an attempt to connect rather than combine different perspectives (Lattuca, 2003), as collaborators operate within their own disciplinary boundaries (NSERC, 2009). In contrast, interdisciplinarity is often used to denote “a mode of research that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines...to solve problems that are beyond the scope of a single discipline” (COSEPUP & PGA, 2005, p. 2). As multidisciplinary communities, the University of Saskatchewan’s Learning Communities Program enables students to draw connections between disciplines to gain a fuller understanding of common themes and problems.

In our experience, the term interdisciplinarity can ignite another sort of anxiety about loss of disciplinary autonomy. Indeed, one of the reasons first-year learning communities curricula focus on multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinarity is to anticipate, acknowledge, and avoid as much anxiety on the part of faculty members as possible. Disciplinary expertise is all one needs to bring to bear to a panel discussion; one need not acquire any special knowledge of other fields represented. We do not ask faculty to integrate their research (i.e., information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories), but rather collectively to construct a common pedagogy.

Concluding Remarks

As our explorations demonstrate, the open-ended nature of multidisciplinary collaboration represents a source of anxiety for faculty because of its challenge to established disciplinary divisions – divisions that enable a sense of place and belonging based upon a hierarchy of expertise. Instead of leading to a specific outcome that has been externally determined and allowing academics to remain within the safety of their

own discipline, the multidisciplinary embodied by learning communities invites a form of learning that involves discomfort and risks. This type of learning has less to do with placing an individual and more to do with enabling an individual to create a place.

After our workshop, and taking into account our experiences in the Learning Communities Program at the University of Saskatchewan, we are committed to exploring the role that is played by discomfort and resistance when faculty and students are asked to participate in activities that may take them outside of their comfort zones. We suggest that there is a cost involved in *not* finding points of intersection or integration of disciplines for students and faculty alike, since addressing common problems requires multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity approaches. As experienced in our workshop, the multidisciplinary inherent in learning communities can ignite connections within, between, and beyond individuals and institutional boundaries. In our view, these benefits of authentic learning are worth the initial anxieties associated with multidisciplinary collaboration.

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