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A Workbook for Designing, Building, and Sustaining Learning Communities

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Abstract

To address the professional development needs of learning community instructors at Kingsborough Community College, faculty coordinators and program directors developed a workbook for instructional teams. This workbook walks instructors through the collaborative process of creating and sustaining successful links and focuses on what we believe is the heart of learning community work—transparency, relationship building, integration, assessment, and reflection. It both emerged from and encourages a backward design approach—starting with student learning outcomes and working backward to provide the collaboration, integration, and knowledge-construction that define learning communities and make the learning outcomes achievable. It further reflects the ongoing and cyclic nature of the collaborative process necessary for strong learning communities (Graziano & Kahn, 2013), taking collaborators from initial meetings through the development of deep and sustained integration, to assessment, reflection, and redesign. This workbook has been central in campus-wide efforts at Kingsborough to maintain philosophical and pedagogical integrity while intentionally developing and scaling learning communities; it is presented here as a resource that may be adapted to help serve the professional development needs of programs and instructors at other campuses.

Introduction

In 1995, the ESL program at Kingsborough Community College embarked on a mission to engage instructors in building learning communities for their students. As that relatively small initiative developed and grew and served other student populations, both internal data and external evaluation (Sommo, Mayer, Rudd, & Cullinan, 2012) clearly pointed to improved student outcomes and successful instructor participation across the disciplines. Over the next twenty years, learning communities became recognized as the single most successful pedagogical approach to student success on our campus. As the number and types of learning communities increased, policies and processes throughout the college were impacted, leading to more student-centered advisement, changes in registration procedures, collaborations among academic departments for the scheduling of classes, and the development of a faculty-run Center for Teaching and Learning.

With the growth of our learning community program, faculty coordinators and program directors recognized the need for coherent, scalable, professional development that would support the alignment of instructional practices across semesters. To address this need, we designed a workbook, *Designing, Building, and Sustaining Learning Communities* (see Appendix). The workbook promotes a cyclic, collaborative process that includes pre-semester, within-semester, and post-semester conversations, taking instructors from initial meetings through the development of deep and sustained integration, to assessment, reflection, and redesign. This workbook further reflects our deepening understanding of the intentionality required for successful learning communities. It is not meant to be prescriptive but instead to serve as a guide for instructors who are working together with the aim of designing, building, and sustaining a learning community. We see this work as necessarily open-ended and creative, based on the particulars of individual teaching teams and campuses. We do not present it as a static document but rather as a dynamic tool for faculty development that continues to evolve with input from its users.

Below, we present the workbook in its current iteration and discuss the philosophical underpinnings for the various worksheets that comprise it. Just as we recognize differences among instructors, learning community types, and disciplines, we also recognize that all institutions are unique. Our hope is that this workbook can be adapted to serve the professional development needs of learning community instructors across a variety of contexts.

Pre-Semester Conversations

Worksheet 1: Transparency & Relationship Building

We learned early on, mostly by trial and error, that if teams were not able to begin their collaboration in healthy and productive ways, they were often doomed to fail. It became clear that, before instructors could take on the work of identifying learning outcomes and integrating courses, they needed to begin building professional relationships with their linking partners. As Penn (2007) notes, "Trust is the foundation of a relationship. Transparency is the currency of trust, the open sharing of information among parties involved." Therefore, the focus of our first worksheet is fostering the development of trust through transparency. In it, we ask instructors to reflect on their own practices and preferences with respect to three areas—collaboration, teaching and learning, and classroom management—and to share these reflections with their team.

Worksheet 1 begins by inviting instructors to think about the logistics of collaborating—how they prefer to communicate, how much time they can commit to planning, and when, during the semester, they are available to meet with the team to discuss how courses, course integration, and students are progressing. The importance of discussing these nuts-and-bolts issues *at the beginning* of the collaboration cannot be overstated, yet it is a step that is often overlooked as instructors jump into the more academic work of linking their course content. Questions 1 through 3 on Worksheet 1 carve out a space for instructors to address these kinds of issues before the failure to address them creates problems that can undermine the collaboration.

To help instructors begin conversations about approaches to teaching and learning, Worksheet 1 asks them to read *Good Teaching: One Size Fits All?* by Daniel Pratt (2002). Pratt defines a teaching perspective as "an inter-related set of beliefs and intentions that gives direction and justification to our actions….a lens through which we view teaching and learning" (p. 1). He identifies five main teaching perspectives—Transmission, Developmental, Apprenticeship, Nurturing, and Social Reform—and offers a free online survey that instructors can take to help them identify their own dominant teaching perspectives (Pratt & Collins 2001-2014). Worksheet 1 invites instructors to take this survey. It has been our experience that the paired activity of reading Pratt's article and reviewing their survey results gives instructors a starting point for meaningful discussions about teaching and learning and helps them find the places where they overlap with and diverge from their linking partners.

Following Pratt, Worksheet 1 does not ask instructors to change their teaching perspectives but rather to consider whether their perspectives align with their classroom actions for coherence of practice. For example, traditional lecture may be appropriate if an instructor holds to the Transmission Perspective, where "learners are expected to learn the content in its authorized or legitimate forms and teachers are expected to take learners systematically through a set of tasks that lead to mastery of the content" (p. 3). However, it would not be appropriate

for the Apprenticeship Perspective, which sees learning as "more than the building of cognitive structures or the development of skilled competence" and includes, in addition, "the transformation of the learners' identity that occurs as they adopt the language, values, and practices of a specific social group" (p. 5). We believe it is important to ask instructors, as they initiate their collaboration, to consider perspective/practice coherence in their own pedagogy to raise awareness about who they are as teachers and to encourage a reflective stance towards their teaching approaches.

Worksheet 1 also asks instructors to consider and discuss the kinds of activities and assessments they will use in their classes as well as their policies regarding classroom management. It is important that similarities and differences in classroom management policies be transparent. If policies are the same, coherence within the learning community is strengthened. However, differences in policies may exist. If so, it is helpful for instructors to be aware of these differences and make them salient for students so that they know what to expect. Further, giving students a rationale for differences in classroom policies helps avoid students' perception that an instructor with more restrictive policies is "the bad guy." Worksheet 1 also suggests that instructors consider inviting students to contribute to establishing standards for classroom behavior, a move consistent with the goal of building community.

Worksheet 2: Creating Shared, Integrative Assignments

Institutions often choose to implement learning communities because of data that show their positive effects on retention. But, as Lardner and Malnarich (2008a) point out, "while improved retention is a welcome consequence of learning-community work, it has never been its aim." Instead, they argue, "the camaraderie of co-enrollment may help students stay in school longer, but learning communities can offer more: curricular coherence; integrative, high-quality learning; collaborative knowledge-construction; and skills and knowledge relevant to living in a complex, messy, diverse world."

Lardner and Malnarich see integrative assignments as central to this work. The value of integrative learning is further supported by the American Association of Colleges and Universities' National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP). The Council, which is composed of educational, business, community, and political leaders, has identified integrative learning as one of the four essential learning outcomes students must achieve to succeed in the twenty-first-century.

With the goal of fostering integrative learning, Worksheet 2—based on *Designing Integrative and Purposeful Assignments*, an exercise developed for the National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities—moves the focus of pre-semester teamwork to the creation of the shared assignment. This

shared assignment becomes the focal space for students in learning communities to grapple with integrative thinking and with making their learning visible. Worksheet 2 first asks instructors to consider student learning outcomes for each course and then, following Lardner and Malnarich (2008b), invites them "to discover common ground…in terms of what matters most for students' learning" (p. 22). This involves exploring, and then selecting, student learning outcomes for each course that, when brought together in the assignment context, allow students to demonstrate that all chosen outcomes are achieved. It also asks instructors, "in the tradition of democratic education" (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008b, p. 22), to frame the shared assignment around a real-world problem, issue, or theme.

By completing Worksheet 2, instructors therefore have the opportunity to begin engaging in the defining practice for successful learning community teamwork, as they are guided to create an assignment that will serve both as an invitation for students to learn and as evidence of their integrative learning By completing (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008a). An additional resource for designing shared assignments can be found in Appendix A of the Workbook, the *KCC Guide for Creating Integrative Assignments*, which takes instructors through the step-by-step process of creating an integrative assignment and offers suggestions for writing assignment prompts.

Worksheet 3: Working Backward: Selecting, Scaffolding, and Synchronizing

Once the student learning outcomes for the shared assignment have been articulated and the assignment has been designed, Worksheet 3 prompts instructors to use backward design—an approach developed and popularized by Wiggins and McTighe (1998) and extended by Fink (2013)—to create and integrate courses that support students' achievement of the desired outcomes. To do this, Worksheet 3 guides instructors to work backward from the shared assignment in order to brainstorm supporting materials, create scaffolding activities, and synchronize course topics. Worksheet 3 treats these as separate actions, but in reality, they are highly interrelated and each should be considered in light of the others.

Instructors are first asked to brainstorm and select artifacts—e.g., readings, films, websites, and local resources—that can be used in the linked courses to connect to the learning community's public issue and support students' assignment-based work.

Next, they are asked to deconstruct their integrative assignment, identifying the knowledge and skills needed for students to successfully complete it. For example, in a learning community that linked Philosophy of Religion and Freshmen Composition, the linking team developed an integrative assignment that asked students to do four things: 1) choose four philosophers and writers they

read that semester (e.g., Freud, Marx, Hume, etc.); 2) decide if each, given their view of religion or some religious issue (e.g., miracles), would agree with the saying, "Everything happens for a reason," in its cosmological sense; 3) choose the view they think is the most reasonable; and 4) argue why they think that view is more reasonable than the others. The team recognized that, among other things, students would need sufficient knowledge of each author's view on religion or some religious issue. They would also need to be able to apply these views to the saying, which requires that students make inferences regarding how each writer might consider the saying. Further, they would need to be discerning in deciding what to include about the views of each author, being sure to select only what would be relevant to the saying. And, finally, they would need to be able to compare various views, pitting one against the other in order to argue for the view they found most reasonable. Meeting all of these needs is quite a daunting task for students to accomplish in a single paper.

Worksheet 3 asks instructors to consider incorporating small, targeted, manageable assignments and activities through which students could practice articulating the knowledge and skills needed to complete an integrative assignment. So, when instructors design their courses, they should choose readings that are directly relevant to the assignment and work well with each other. Using our example above, instructors may ask students, through collaborative activities or low stakes writing assignments, to explore one author's view and apply it to the saying. Students might, for example, collaboratively list points that summarize the view and then decide what is relevant to the task and what is not. Ideally, this could be repeated for each author. Then students could be asked to compare just two of the views, arguing for the more reasonable; they may then revise and develop this argument as they bring in additional authors. In this way, the integrative assignment is *scaffolded*. By working backward from the student learning outcomes, course design becomes intentional. Content and activities are woven into the fabric of the course with the sole purpose of supporting students' achievement of the student learning outcomes as demonstrated by their work on the integrative assignment.

Instructors are therefore encouraged, in Worksheet 3, to focus on scaffolding activities that are *collaborative*, as described by Malnarich with others (2003), who see collaborative learning as a core learning community practice (p. 38). Returning to the notion of coherence argued for by Pratt and encouraged in Worksheet 1, Worksheet 3 expresses the view of learning communities as a particular approach to teaching and learning, one that depends on the development of community and that assumes that knowledge is socially constructed. Just as our beliefs about teaching and learning in learning communities should align with our classroom practices, so should assignments and activities invite students to work together.

Worksheet 3 also stresses scaffolding the integrative assignment with other assignments that are *low stakes*. By assigning work that has little to no potentially negative impact on final grades, instructors offer students a safe place to take intellectual risks. Additionally, as Elbow (1997) notes, it is often the case that student writing for such assignments is clearer since students "don't tie their syntax in so many knots…because they aren't worrying so much about the grade or whether they are writing exactly what the teacher was looking for" (p. 7). Elbow further explains, and this is particularly important given the integrative nature of learning community work, that:

> low stakes writing helps students involve themselves more in the ideas or subject matter of a course. It helps them find their own language for the issues of the course; they stumble into their own analogies and metaphors for academic concepts…their own lingo, in their informal home or personal language—language that, as Vygotsky famously observed, is saturated with sense or experience. (p. 7)

Instructors are then asked to think about the degree of flexibility they have regarding the sequencing of course topics and how best to synchronize topics across courses. Clearly, there are some courses with little flexibility in topic sequencing, and if synchronization is difficult, instructors are encouraged to look for places to reference topics that have been or will be addressed in other courses.

Finally, Worksheet 3 suggests that instructors consider creating a shared syllabus that either replaces their individual syllabi or augments them. In this way, the learning community is presented to students as a coherent whole, with goals and expectations that go beyond individual coursework. If instructors choose not to create a shared syllabus, it is suggested that they at least reference the learning community on their individual syllabi.

In sum, Worksheet 3 asks instructors to work backward from the integrative assignment they have created using Worksheet 2 and the *KCC Guide for Creating Integrative Assignments* (Workbook, Appendix A). By engaging in backward design, instructors are provided with meaningful opportunities to create courses that support students' achievement of desired learning outcomes. This occurs as instructors are prompted to consider how they can offer students safe places to explore their shared course content and integrate the knowledge and skills required to demonstrate that shared learning outcomes have been achieved.

Worksheet 4: Grading: A Shared Responsibility

Worksheet 4 asks instructors to consider some key issues concerning the evaluation of shared assignments. For example, depending upon the degree to which the integrative assignment has been scaffolded, students will likely need to produce multiple drafts. While this is the usual practice in a composition course, it is only sometimes employed in other subject areas and may be new to instructors

teaching these classes. Worksheet 4 asks instructors to consider allowing students to draft and revise, and, should they do so, to decide how the instructors will divide the work of collecting drafts and providing feedback.

When it comes to grading, it is a reasonable assumption that instructors from different disciplines, while converging in some areas, may focus on different criteria in evaluating student work. Consider, for example, a learning community that links Political Science and Art History, where the shared assignment asks students to consider some work of art in light of the political context in which it was created. Because individual students may be more fluent in one subject area than the other, instructors may grade differently for the same work.

Since integration is both the intention and heart of the shared assignment, we believe there is a good argument for the instructors to give a single, integrated grade that reflects students' understanding of both subject areas as well as their ability to show evidence of integrative thinking. For many of us, an efficient way to share grading is to construct a rubric with criteria that represent the priorities of all instructors and for each instructor to evaluate student work only in light of the criteria each has identified. A single shared grade can then be determined by totaling points across all criteria articulated on the rubric. We have seen this strategy work for as many as four instructors in a four-course link. Providing a single grade underscores the integrative nature of the assignment and the coherence of the link. So, although integrative assignments may be graded individually by each instructor in the same way as assignments in stand-alone courses are graded, Worksheet 4 asks instructors instead to consider shared grading.

Within-Semester Conversations

Worksheet 5: Maintaining Collaboration

Instructors' ongoing collaboration throughout the semester is essential to maintaining the integrity of the learning community. Worksheet 5 serves as a prompt to facilitate the work of "staying on the same page" with a view to keeping students engaged and promoting team cohesiveness and coherence.

If the integrative aims of the learning community are addressed only on the first day of class, students may lose sight of the need to make connections between and among courses. Continually reinforcing the learning community—its theme, content, and objectives—in all courses fosters a sense of its importance in our daily work. It is also critical that as learning community instructors we model effective communication and collaboration for our students. Worksheet 5 prompts instructors to sustain integration in their individual classrooms and course-related documents and sites and through teacher collaboration.

The real work of sustained integration is made possible through ongoing communication between and among team members. If, for example, the integrative assignment for a Beginner's Spanish and Culinary Arts learning community requires students to write a recipe in Spanish, yet the basic vocabulary of cooking has not yet been covered in the Spanish class, we have set our students up for unnecessary struggle. As instructors, we are familiar with the slippage that can occur over the course of the semester. Our most carefully crafted course outlines must be adjusted to accommodate what cannot be predicted; however, while a one-day delay in a reading or a one-week extension on an assignment may be accommodated within our stand-alone courses, the consequences and ripple effect are greater in a well-integrated learning community. As Worksheet 5 suggests, regular meetings and conversations can prevent team members from losing track of how their curricula are progressing. Moreover, by sharing information about students' progress in one class as it pertains to their possible success in another part of the learning community, instructors are best able to support each student's efforts overall.

Worksheet 5 also encourages instructors, when possible, to visit each other's classes and to teach together, when feasible, as these are powerful ways of reinforcing the learning community over the course of the semester. Such coordinated, integrative activities go a long way to engage students, support the community, and foster deeper integrative learning—the ultimate goal of this worksheet.

Post-Semester Conversations

Worksheet 6: Assessing Student Work for Evidence of Integrative Thinking

Lee Shulman (2007) suggests that "assessment that is useful for both instruction and accounting will be actively embedded and used continuously," an aspiration that speaks to the purpose of Worksheet 6. The cyclical nature of our professional development model asks instructors to improve their collaboration as they work to elicit evidence of intentional, sustained, and deep integrative thinking from their students. Worksheet 6, therefore, asks the learning community team to assess samples of student work collectively using the *KCC Decision Tree for Assessing Integration & Revising Joint Assignments and Activities* (Workbook, Appendix B). The Decision Tree was designed to help instructors "not only in assessing student work for evidence of integration but also, when necessary, in reexamining their prompts and course curricula for ways to promote deeper integrative thinking" (Graziano & Kahn, 2013, p. 6). As such, it provides concrete suggestions for revising assignments and course activities.

Further, in Worksheet 6, instructors are asked to document their assessment each semester by creating a record of the assignment prompt, the assessment

findings, and the revisions applied in light of the assessment. We refer to this archive as the *Ongoing Assessment Narrative.* In this way, a constructive culture of reflection is sustained and successive iterations of the assignment can be improved by the application of lessons learned, making future students the direct beneficiaries of the assessment process.

Worksheet 7: Reflecting and Troubleshooting

In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey reminds us that we do not learn from experience but from reflecting on experience. The purpose of Worksheet 7, the second in the Workbook's Post-Semester section, is to continue to develop meaningful instructor collaborations through guided reflection, recognizing that successful team building does not end when classes are over. Rather, the inextricable link between practice and inquiry (Washington Center Editorial Team, 2013) extends beyond the semester's work. Worksheet 7 encourages teams to look inward and consider their recent experiences as learning community practitioners: what they feel was most successful and least successful and how their communication might change for the better. Teams are asked to examine the past, and also the future, as they consider actions they might take to strengthen their collaborative process. By providing space for these kinds of reflective conversations, we recognize, as we do throughout this manual, that the very activity of working together in a learning community deserves attention. The dynamism and complexity of instructor teamwork means there is always room for improvement. However, by making a commitment to reviewing our shared practices over time—acknowledging successes, troubleshooting problems, and considering how we might act upon such insights when we link again—we see the potential for building stronger communities of teachers and students.

Best Practices Checklist

Gawande (2011) makes the point that, no matter how experienced and skilled a practitioner is, errors of omission are inevitable. By using a checklist—a simple and effective tool for encouraging good habits and supporting best practices—instructors can help fill these gaps. With this insight in mind, we created our *Best Practices Checklist*, which pulls together the essential suggestions made throughout the Workbook in an accessible format that teams can refer to quickly.

The Workbook offers many suggestions, not all of which can be implemented by a new team the first time they link; certain practices may develop over the course of a number of semesters. So, for new and even experienced teams, the Checklist serves both to reinforce current collaborative work and to guide deeper integration, sharpening focus on areas that need attention. The

Checklist also functions as a summative assessment—a resource for post-semester reflection.

Conclusion

Teaching in a learning community is a complex undertaking. Even college instructors who have participated in a good deal of professional development around teaching and learning may not know how to begin, and sustain, this work. Collaborating with linking partners to create strong learning communities involves much more than simply sharing the same students. We must also understand our approaches to teaching and learning and make these beliefs and practices transparent to our teaching partners as we build professional relationships with them. We must identify student learning outcomes and create opportunities for students to integrate course content and skills. We must assess the degree to which students achieve our shared learning outcomes and demonstrate evidence of integrative thinking. Finally, to develop our craft as learning community professionals, it is vital that we reflect on our team collaborations. Our aim in creating the *Workbook for Designing, Building, and Sustaining Learning Communities* was to guide learning community instructors on our campus through these dynamic and evolving conversations. We invite faculty on other campuses to use and adapt the tool presented here to further this important work in the field.

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