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A Dynamic Program Assessment Framework for Learning Communities

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Abstract

This research builds upon Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino's (2014) investigation of students' reflections on their learning community (LC) experiences. Adapting their Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol for use at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY, we present a framework for dynamic LC program assessment. To obtain feedback about theory-practice connections in our English as a Second Language (ESL) LCs, students were asked to consider whether their experiences reflected the sociocultural tenets underlying the program (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Students provided individual responses in writing and engaged in a communal conversation facilitated by a professor, program director, and campus administrator based on these writings. Using conversation analysis, our examination of responses to one program principle in the discussion context uncovered two related phenomena: students talked about what collaboration meant to them in their LC (collaboration-in-content), and also engaged in the act of collaboration in the conversation itself (collaboration-in-process). The exploratory nature of these interactions as part of a growing community support and extend the findings of Malnarich et al. (2014). We conclude by arguing for the continued investigation of ways to bridge theory and practice in our LC program work by bringing assessment activity and classroom activity together, and inviting various campus stakeholders to this dynamic process.

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Inspiration for the Study

Collaborative learning activities through which “learning unfolds in the most public of ways” (Smith & MacGregor, 1992, p. 10) are at the heart of the learning community (LC) movement. In the LC mission, collaborative learning activity is foundational to a curriculum reimaged as collectively constructed and dynamically shared. However, Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino (2014) point to a fundamental mismatch between this view and typical assessment practices in learning community settings. “We were struck by an anomaly,” they write. “While LCs are associated with collaborative learning, LC assessment of student learning, in keeping with assessment practices in general, elicits individual not collective responses” (p. 22). Malnarich et al.’s (2014) study involved the use of an online student survey addressing students’ experiences in learning communities from both two- and four-year institutions. In addition to the quantitative data collection, the investigation included students’ qualitative written responses about their LC participation at four campuses, with students further engaging in reflective discussions based on the written feedback they had provided. Findings from a case study at one of these schools, Holyoke Community College, were provocative: students’ group discussions were rich, extending the content of their individual responses and mirroring the kinds of educational discussions they reported having in their LC classrooms as they probed their understandings of individual knowledge building as a shared activity. As the authors report: “exploratory talk, or the facilitated discussion itself, promoted the collective construction of knowledge, thus refining, deepening, and transforming students’ understanding of their learning experience in LCs” (p. 18).

Based upon their study results, Malnarich, Pettit and Mino (2014) put forth a Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol (PRP) and encouraged other learning community practitioners to draw upon it in the assessment of their own LC programs. By implementing the PRP and refining its prompts over time, the authors note, “we hope that, as a field, we will discover more about students’ individual and collective experiences of collaborative learning” (p. 22). The research that follows takes up this call. Building upon Malnarich, Pettit and Mino’s investigation, and adapting their PRP for our program, this study explores the development and implementation of a framework for dynamic program assessment in English as a Second Language (ESL) Learning Communities at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. At the heart of our analysis are two central questions concerning theory and practice: how are we doing, as administrators and teachers, at enacting the sociocultural theoretical principles grounding our learning community

program design? And, based on students' exploratory reports on their experiences, should we be rethinking any aspects of these program principles and/or practices?

ESL Learning Communities at Kingsborough: A Sociocultural Approach

Kingsborough Community College's commitment to learning communities dates back to the 1990s with the inception of the Intensive ESL Program. This highly successful semester-long offering served as a springboard for additional LC programs at the college for a variety of populations, and established Kingsborough's national reputation in the field (Babbitt, 2006; Babbitt & Mlynarczyk, 2000; Song, 2006). Beginning in 2010, however, program administrators began to re-evaluate aspects of the ESL LC structure and curriculum, focusing on both qualitative and quantitative data collection. Based on reports from English faculty, ourselves included, gaps seemed to be widening between the standards of our departmental assessment protocols, including reading and writing exams and an essay portfolio, and students' demonstration of the ability to meet these standards. Speech professors were also reporting that they did not have enough time to work with students on both accuracy and fluency of expression. At the same time, data from Kingsborough's Office of Institutional Research showed a significant number of students exiting from the ESL Learning Community environment with good grades but not thriving in the same way in subsequent developmental English coursework. Upon graduating from the highest level of the three-tier ESL sequence and taking classes with native English speakers, too many students were receiving Repeat grades, often multiple times. In a number of these cases, students dropped out of the college, seemingly because they had lost their financial aid.

To explore and work to address these complex issues, we formed a small interdisciplinary group of ESL Learning Community faculty and administrators, representing Departments of English, Communications and Performing Arts, and Behavioral Sciences. Despite our challenges, we knew that the linked program model was more effective for our community college students than stand-alone coursework; our aim was not to abandon the one-semester curriculum, but rather to enhance it to better meet our learners' needs. We turned to our experiences as educators and also to scholarship, sharing our own classroom narratives and revisiting the sociocultural tenets underlying the learning community movement and current best practices in second language education. What emerged from these conversations was a blueprint for a two-semester, inter-leveled program model based on our renewed commitment to two foundational beliefs: 1) thinking, learning, and the use of language are interwoven processes that cannot be viewed in isolation from one another, and 2) new knowledge is socially constructed between experts and novices over time (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

As we considered modifications to our program structure and curriculum, we went back to the central ideas of the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose work is often cited as foundational to the learning community reform movement. Drawing upon Marxian principles in post-revolutionary Russia, Vygotsky's research explored the social origin of the human mind. His central insight was that human mental processes are mediated by our engagement with culturally produced sign systems, including oral and written language. It is through our relationships with other people and cultural artifacts—our “lived experiences” (Moll, 2014)—that Vygotsky believed our intellectual capacities take shape. In this view, a learner's environment is not just a setting for development, but rather its very foundation.

Vygotsky's genetic law of cultural development states: “every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). Internalization is therefore understood to be gradual process whereby activity on the external plane becomes transformed as new knowledge inside a learner. This process does not occur in a linear or measured fashion but rather is believed to evolve unpredictably and dynamically—“*the result of a long series of developmental events*” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). From a sociocultural perspective, humans' use of language not only allows individuals to construct meaning jointly, it also serves as a tool for thought as communication becomes internalized, regulating individuals' cognition “through the discourse of inner speech” (Moll, 2014, p. 33). This internal dialogue becomes transformed once again as it is externalized through dialogue in the social sphere. Our voices, thoughts, and actions are seen as mutually constitutive of one another.

Drawing upon Vygotsky's ideas, we made two foundational shifts to our program structure. The first sought to honor the notion of the time required for learning to occur, and the inextricable links between reading, writing, speaking, and listening for literacy development. Maintaining the rigorous schedule of the fall semester—including courses in ESL, Speech, an academic discipline (Sociology, Psychology, History, or Health Education) a Freshman Seminar, an Integrative Language Seminar, and a tutoring component—a second program term was added. The ESL course would continue into the spring, linked with an additional Speech class and continued tutoring.¹ The second shift, reflective of our understanding of knowledge building as co-constructed by novices and experts, was inter-leveled student placement. Rather than designating students as members of an ESL “level” within a hierarchical sequence, we brought students

¹ The revised program structure also functions to support students' broader integration into the college, as they are able to enroll in courses of their choosing outside of their learning community in Winter and Spring semesters.

together into a single learning community cohort. If students were found to require English language support based on their incoming CUNY Reading and Writing exam scores, they would bring their unique strengths and weaknesses together, encouraged to assist one another in collaboration with their professors and tutors, throughout the yearlong LC experience. Our commitment to a dialogic view of education had additional practical impacts on the program curriculum as well, including the transformation of the tutoring experience into a “Reading Lab” for students’ extensive reading, an emphasis on project-based activities, and the integration of multimodality through digital storytelling.

The revised LC structure was piloted in two learning communities in 2012-2013 and now serves as the model for all ESL links in Kingsborough’s Learning Community Program. Before expanding the two-semester program, we measured whether or not the modifications we had made were successful. This assessment began with our broadest, most quantitatively measurable goal: to prepare students for successful entrance into credit-bearing English classes at the college. Students participating in the two-semester LC experience were found to accelerate through their English coursework at faster rates than students enrolled in one-semester ESL LCs, and demonstrated significant pre- and post-program gains in CUNY Reading and Writing exam scores.² We also have students fill out qualitative surveys, and reports at the end of the two-semester experience were positive. However, while such outcomes proved useful at showcasing the effectiveness of the program for outside evaluators—producing “credible summary data” for college administrators, funders, and other LC stakeholders (Malnarich, Pettitt, & Mino, 2014, p. 9)—as administrators and teachers we found there to be an incongruity between the nature of these data and the work we had done to redesign our program based on theory. While the quantitative and qualitative results looked good on paper, they did not provide us with enough feedback on how well we were doing at enacting our sociocultural principles in the classroom, or whether or not, in fact, these were the principles we should be using as a guide to maximize students’ opportunities for learning. Program assessment that would result in meaningful curricular and pedagogical reflection required a more dynamic approach.

Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino’s (2014) Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol (see Appendix A) spoke to us as a tool we might use to engage in program assessment at this deeper level. The development of the PRP arose from a validation study of the Washington Center’s Online Survey of Students’ Experiences of Learning in Learning Communities. Following the administration of this survey, researchers at participating colleges also had students produce responses in writing about

² In the first two years of two-semester ESL Learning Communities, the majority of students (51.7%) exceeded the pace they would have achieved had they progressed at expected levels in stand-alone classes.

select survey items, and engage in a follow up facilitated discussion with faculty members or designees who recorded proceedings through note taking. In addition to providing individual feedback, students were therefore given the opportunity to “develop a collective understanding of their learning community experience” (Malnarich et al., 2014, p. 20). The PRP suggests two stages for facilitating discussions. First, students are introduced to the whole process. Next, they engage in guided discussions with four main phases: 1) a listening round with students asked to share examples from their written responses; 2) a “making connections” phase, with students invited to point out relationships between ideas or common themes from the round robin sharing; 3) “wondering,” with students asked to raise questions or aspects of what they noticed relative to the learning experiences described; and 4) “uncovering complexity,” with participants invited to consider what “lies beneath the surface” of their experience. Finally, they are invited to appreciate each other for their contributions and their shared insights.

Results from Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino’s (2014) work showed students exploring not only their experiences in learning communities but also how these experiences reflected an underlying view of education as a social event. Our commitment to uncovering information from our students about the relationship between theory and practice in our LC program led us to the adaptation of this instrument for our own use. The Protocol also spoke to us as a tool we might use to blur the line that is typically drawn in higher education settings between assessment and teaching. A growing body of research in second language classrooms based on Vygotsky’s work considers teaching and assessment to be shared practices. For dynamic assessment to occur (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011; Poehner, 2008; Poehner & Lantolf, 2010), teachers are called upon, through dialogue, to at once evaluate students’ needs, orient to these needs, and work to guide students towards development. Inspired by this work, we were interested in exploring a methodology for program assessment that was educational as well as evaluative. Could assessment be instantiated as a cooperative dialogue that provides learning opportunities for students, teachers, and administrators to best meet students’ needs at a programmatic level?

The research questions thus serving to set this study in motion were:

- How might we use and adapt Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino’s (2014) Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol to dynamically assess our LC program from multiple perspectives?
- What might we learn about the quality of our program through our use of this feedback tool in order to improve it?
- Might findings from communal assessment activity at our community college support Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino’s?

- What additional insights might we uncover by examining participants' communal conversations on a turn-by-turn basis?

A Methodology for Dynamic Program Assessment

Our methodology for a dynamic learning community program assessment, based on Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino's (2014) research included an individual writing and a reflective discussion component. In their English classes, students in two ESL Learning Community sections (n=16) were asked, near the end of their two-semester participation, to write individually, with evidence to support their ideas, about whether or not their experiences in the LC program reflected four learning principles of the program:

1. Language learning takes a long time.
2. Reading – a lot – is important.
3. Students with different strengths and weaknesses should work together, in collaboration with teachers and tutors.
4. When we learn a new language we construct a new identity.³

Using Malnarich et al.'s (2014) Peer-to-Peer Protocol as a guide, students were invited to participate in a communal conversation based on these writings during a later class session. Various LC stakeholders at the college were included in this activity: students, their English professors over the full year of the program, and administrators. One or both ESL Learning Communities co-directors and Kingsborough's Associate Director of Institutional Research (IR) were present for the conversations. Both co-directors had also served as the students' English teachers: one for the fall semester only, the other for the duration of the program. Our intention in bringing these individuals together was not only to encourage a meaningful conversation about the LC experience that would result in insights beyond what students could bring about individually, but also to situate students' responses within the context of a dialogue enriched by a diverse community of learners with various points of view. As teachers and administrators we saw ourselves also as learners, with the aim of being educated by our students in order to improve our shared program through a dynamic program assessment.

Communal conversations began with a program co-director introducing the IR professional to the group, and briefly explaining the activities of the day. Students' reflective writings were then returned, and as a review, individual students were called upon to read each of the four program principles aloud. Students were next instructed to form pairs and discuss their written responses to

³ We worked to ensure that the language we used to describe our program principles would be accessible to students.

one program principle with a partner. Participants then formed a circle and students, in a listening round, were asked to share with the whole group what had been reviewed with their peers. Students, in moving from pair work to sharing out with the class, engaged in a process that mirrored the discussion format that had become familiar to them in their learning community classrooms. We intended for students to experience this conversation not as a formal assessment exercise, removed from educational activity, but rather as another opportunity to build knowledge.

The next phase of activity aimed to deepen our collective understandings of the relationship between theory and practice in our program. Students were first asked to connect common themes they had heard in the listening round. Professors and administrators subsequently followed up with questions and comments in an effort to point out new connections, or to solidify ones students had already made, based on the four program principles. While the IR professional, program co-director, and ESL instructor facilitated the conversation, their prompts and comments were intentionally non-prescriptive, allowing students to freely initiate questions, explore ideas of their choosing, and build upon others' contributions. At the conclusion of the session, students were invited to suggest improvements for the program and thanked for their participation.

The student participants were diverse. Many were from Central Asia and former Soviet Union nations, while others were from Bangladesh, Haiti and China. Their language abilities were at various stages of development. Some were full-time students of college age; others were parents who worked in addition to attending classes. Participating teachers and administrators also brought their unique sociocultural, positional, and professional identities and histories into the conversations. English instructors had a particularly close relationship with participating students having spent eight hours each week with them for a semester or year, and therefore brought with them an intimate knowledge of students' personalities, idiosyncrasies, and talents. ESL LC co-directors, who understood the history of the program as well as its goals and challenges, viewed the conversations through this lens as well. While the IR professional was the only participant entirely unknown to the students prior to the conversations, as a foreign-born native-Spanish speaker he was the only facilitator who shared a similar language acquisition history with participating students.

A critical component of our program assessment procedure was audio-recording the communal conversations. Both classroom discussions, approximately three hours total, were audio-recorded. We chose this method for data collection in order to capture and honor students' contributions as part of the group—turn by speaking turn. Audio-recording also allowed us to capture all contributions made by the non-student participants. We could not predict how the discussions would unfold, or how conversational content might be influenced by

students' relationships with one another or the presence of the research team. By audio-recording, we were able to ensure that noteworthy aspects of the conversations would not be lost.

After we collected the data, we reviewed students' written responses, looking for common themes, and we compiled rough transcripts and transcript summaries of the recorded conversations. Our purpose at this stage of analysis was to arrive at a general understanding of what was important to the participants. We then looked more closely for evidence of what Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino (2014) noted as "the most significant finding to surface" from students' reports in their study: "that collaborative learning activities and classroom conversations ... promoted the collective construction of knowledge, that is, students making meaning together, thus deepening students' understanding of the subject matter, themselves, and the world around them" (p. 19). To assess whether or not collaborative activity had a similar impact on the students in our study, we looked for places in both their individual writings and in the conversation transcripts where students were responding to our third program principle: *Students with different strengths and weaknesses should work together, in collaboration with teachers and tutors*. In the transcripts, we also looked for moments where students were visibly expanding their thinking about their learning community experiences as part of the group dialogue. We flagged notable issues and dynamic exchanges that arose from this initial review of the assessment materials.

Highlighted moments became starting places for more detailed transcription, following conversation analysis conventions (see Table 1). Conversation analysis transcripts aim to represent real-world events as closely as possible, including notations for pauses, overlaps, and laughter, to show how participants negotiate their communication contingently through turn taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).⁴ Researchers in second language classrooms have used conversation analysis to examine how teachers and students make particular aspects of language relevant to one another on a moment-by-moment basis (Kahn, 2015; Ohta, 2001; Waring, 2016). By examining select data excerpts through this microanalytic lens, we were looking for insights into how students might co-construct their interpretation of the theory undergirding our learning community program as the result of taking part in a collaborative discussion.

Findings and Analysis

Collaboration-in-Content and Collaboration-in-Process

⁴ In transcribing students' written language, we also chose not to gloss what the students had produced, representing this language exactly as it had been written.

One central finding from students' reflective contributions in both formats—individually written and produced as part of a communal conversation—was that collaboration is important to them for learning. This phenomenon, *collaboration-in-content*, refers to students' articulation of the significance of collaboration to them within their LC experience. However, while meaningful examples of collaboration-in-content were found throughout our dataset, the communal conversations were shown to elicit deeper and more nuanced explorations of the meaning of collaboration to students and the layered effects that working closely with others had on their education. This finding extends Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino's (2014) insight that facilitated discussions “turned out to be even more generative than writing a response to a prompt on one's own” (pp. 19-20), as the discussions “encouraged further elaboration with examples and complicated students' reported experiences” (p. 18).

In their individual written reports, students had positive things to say in response to our stated program principle: *Students with different strengths and weaknesses should work together, in collaboration with teachers and tutors*. However their assessments in this context tended towards the general. Examples such as: “cooperative learning helps us learn more” and “we had a lot of fun doing assignments, doing group works, helping us to understand each other more,” highlighted the value of the kinds of active pedagogies emphasized in our program without providing much explanation of why or how. In particular, students noted the importance of assistance from other individuals—peers, tutors, and teachers—in their LC classrooms. One comment, “we had the same teachers and tutors. They knew me openly. They will better understand what I was trying to said,” appeared to address the value of relationship building over time with instructors and support staff in enhancing their quality of communication. This statement was followed by an example, “especially, Prof. Tara,” who “helped me a lot at writing, and understanding.” However, the student did not elaborate on the topic further.

Unsurprisingly, as students were asked to complete this piece of writing as an assignment in English class, their individual responses also revealed an understanding of their writing activity as an academic task. Produced at the end of two semesters of English coursework, responses showcased students' developing identities as academic writers aware of the conventions of essay composition. Examples can be seen in students' use of collaboration-in-content language. One learner shared: “we get warm's not only from each other, but also from our professors and tutors. They are always ready to help us with the challenges that appear in our path.” The student is expressing the positive feelings she has as a result of working with her learning community peers and mentors through the use of a correlative conjunction often seen in formal writing contexts to connect two related pieces of information (“we get warm's *not only* from each other, *but also*

from our professors and tutors”). We also see her use of metaphoric language: professors and tutors are available to lend support *with the challenges that appear in our path*. Painting a picture of her and her classmates’ experience as a journey with roadblocks that assistants help them overcome, the student sophisticatedly employs a literary tool employed by expert writers to engage their audiences. However, her paragraph ends there. Examples such as these, while notable, gave the students’ writings a forced quality. Students seemed more interested in impressing their audience—understood to be members of an academic community—than in providing raw data about their LC experiences.

In the communal conversation context, however, students’ collaboration-in-content voices were less polished and more exploratory, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

Table 1
Conversation analysis transcription symbols adapted from Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, and Seedhouse, 2004

[]	overlapped speech
=	latch or continuing turn
(4.0)	interval between utterances, in seconds
(.)	very short untimed pause
<u>easy</u>	speaker emphasis
my:::	sound lengthening
-	sudden cutoff
?	rising intonation
,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
< >	slowed speech
> <	quickened speech
()	unclear speech
(guess)	transcriber’s uncertainty
.hh	in-breath
hh	out-breath
(())	nonverbal actions or transcriber’s comments

Figure 1
Excerpt 1

[Excerpt 1 50.13]
 01 Student 1: I think the biggest possibility from
 02 this class is that we had the f- (.)
 03 freedom of speech that we can ask
 04 teachers if you don't understand it.
 05 They can share their- we can share
 06 our thoughts, and they can they can
 07 give us our (0.4) their thoughts and
 08 how to make it better or change.
 09 That's all. Because (that's true for)
 10 every class we had.
 11 Chris: um hm
 12 Gabrielle: hmm
 13 Student 1: cuz I heard some friends who had like
 14 the other Englishes, their teachers
 15 are tough they don't like to suggest
 16 thought

The student in Excerpt 1 provides an explanation of learning community collaboration and what it means to him. His point, shared in Lines 1-10, appears to be that the “freedom of speech” he experienced in his classes was the program’s most beneficial aspect, helping him and his classmates “understand” course content better (“we can ask teachers if you don’t understand it”), and allowing for more tailored feedback through open communication (“we can share our thoughts, and they can give us...their thoughts and how to make it better or change”). Conversation analysis details show that making this argument, the student exhibits moments of tentativeness in his pauses (Lines 2 and 7) and self-corrections (Lines 5 and 7). The contribution is less formal than the collaboration-in-content examples using academic language we saw in students’ written work, and appears to be unplanned. The emergent nature of this contribution can also be seen in the voices of two other participants in Lines 11 and 12: Chris, the Institutional Research administrator, and Gabrielle, the students’ first-semester English teacher and program’s co-director. Their motivational backchannel responses (“um hm,” “hmm”) serve as prompts for the student to continue (Tannen, 2005), and in Lines 13-16, the student does just that, providing additional explanation about the nature of collaboration in his learning community by contrasting his experience with those of his friends in other English classes (“their teachers are tough they don’t like to suggest thought”). This elaborative statement was not present in his original contribution, but grew dynamically from the developing discussion.

Throughout the communal conversation data, we see such instances—of students not only *talking about* the importance of collaboration to them in meaningful ways, but also *engaging in* the act of collaboration on a turn-by-turn basis, a finding we are calling *collaboration-in-process*. The spontaneous contributions of teachers, administrators, and other students in the room are found to stretch students’ reflections on the learning community experience, and as this occurs, the formation of a new community that includes these varied participants can be seen in the unfolding discourse. In Excerpt 1, a student probes an aspect of his linked program participation—freedom of speech—as he explains what the term means to him and then develops his idea in response to others’ supportive utterances. These utterances, produced by a Kingsborough administrator and professor, contribute to the creation of a new community by demonstrating their alignment with the student and giving him an expert role in the conversation. It is the student who serves as “teacher” here, educating others about what is important to him as a college student and receiving the message that what he has to say is valued. The collaboration-in-process phenomenon continues in Excerpt 2 as a new student takes the floor in response to the feedback shared by Student 1.

Figure 2
Excerpt 2

[Excerpt 2 51.36]

01	Student 2:	I’m agree with Student 1 that uh
02		you are giving us <u>freedom</u> that we can
03		express ourselves, .hh like even like
04		tho- even like with our digital
05		movies we can like <u>see</u> :, (.) like
06		try look at ourself from different
07		sides (.) and you also look at us
08		like from different size .hhh
09	Student 3:	sides
10	(Student):	hhhhhh
11	Gabrielle:	m [hm
12	Student 4:	[sides
13	Student 2:	sides. A:nd um (0.4) also when we’re
14		uh write <u>essays</u> you can uh you: say
15		you have to uh add your own
16		experience, your opinion, but like
17		ssome of professors ours are say
18		nobody <u>cares</u> about your opinion you
19		write with (who [you are) like give=
20	Chris:	[hm
21	Student 2:	=like <u>facts</u> not your opinion.=
22	Student 5:	=Yeah=
23	Student 2:	=But here we <u>express</u> , we have you
24		know freedom.

Excerpt 2 shows a student building upon her peer's contribution in Excerpt 1 by affirming his freedom of speech idea in Lines 1-8 ("I'm agree with Student 1 that uh you are giving us freedom that we can express ourselves"), and applying it to a new aspect of LC collaboration significant to her: the creation of their "digital movies." The redesign of our ESL Learning Communities included a new project in the two-semester curriculum: digital storytelling. Our primary objective in implementing this assignment was to encourage students' development of self in and through their second language by investing in the language, not only academically, but also emotionally, culturally, and socially (Kramsch, 2010). In this particular LC link, students produced and narrated a story in a multimodal format about a life-changing event in their lives and applied a concept from their Psychology class to the narrative. Student 2's statement—that the freedom afforded by this project allowed her and her classmates to see themselves from varying perspectives ("we can like see like try look at ourself from different sides"), and also allowed professors to view them in new ways ("and you also look at us like from different size")—provides evaluative feedback about a key curricular component of the program. The digital storytelling project promoted personal and relational investment as was our intention. We also see the unrehearsed, exploratory nature of this feedback in the student's use of the filler "uh" in Line 1, her false starts in Lines 3-4 ("even like tho- even like with") and Lines 5-6 ("we can like see like try look at ourself"), and her pauses and in-breaths. The gradual unfolding of this contribution, and the imprint of other voices upon it, can additionally be seen when a classmate, Student 3, points out that the word "size" should be pronounced "sides" in Line 9 and Student 2 incorporates this correction into her developing thinking in Line 13. Another student, Student 4, is found to utter this corrected word in Line 12 ("sides"), indicating that it is notable to him as well. Students are demonstrating their co-construction of knowledge in action.

Student 2 provides a second example in Lines 13-16 of how her learning community professors work with learners to encourage freedom of expression: in their essays ("also when we're uh write essays...you say you have to uh add your own experience your opinion"). Like the student in Excerpt 1, she adds weight to the value of this kind of collaboration by contrasting it with the actions of other professors at the college—in this case professors she and her peers have taken classes from—who say that "nobody cares about your opinion" (Line 18), and who expect students to "give...facts not your opinion" (Lines 19 and 21).⁵ After a new student chimes in with an agreement token in Line 22 ("yeah"), Student 2 reiterates the value of creative activity in her learning community: "but here we

⁵ Students in ESL Learning Communities have the opportunity to choose additional courses in Winter and Spring semesters which operate autonomously from the LC.

express, we have you know freedom.”

In Excerpt 2, we see the instance of collaboration-in-content and collaboration-in-process initiated in Excerpt 1 develop and deepen. Students continue to address collaboration in the content of their contributions, and, as a new student builds upon a peer’s interpretation of what collaboration looks like in their classrooms, a fuller picture is painted of the original view. Freedom of speech in this learning community is a layered experience. It concerns the openness of expression between learners and teachers to clarify one another’s thinking and make improvements to students’ work, as Student 1 put forth. It also addresses the kinds of assignments given by linked instructors—digital stories and essays—that call upon students to share their experiences and opinions, as shared by Student 2. This contribution of Student 2, as demonstrated with Student 1 in the previous example, is not monologic, but dialogic. Interjections by other participants include corrective pronunciation feedback, uptake of this feedback not only by Student 2, but also another learner, and an agreement token. As in the previous excerpt, we also see supportive backchannel responses from Gabrielle and Chris (Lines 11 and 20). In the moment-by-moment development of one student’s commentary, we see evidence of collaboration-in-process as the individuals in this group do the very activity they are talking about: co-constructing meanings and sharing aspects of themselves.

Thus far we have seen the presence of a learning community professor/program administrator and college administrator in the conversational background, supportively signaling to students that they are active listeners. As the topic of one particular English course text emerges in the excerpt that follows, the voices, and personalities, of non-student participants in the group become more visible.

Figure 3
Excerpt 3

[Excerpt 3 34.39]

01 Student 6: now in this semester we had one book
 02 that we didn't like, (.)
 03 Slaughterhouse [Five,
 04 John: [heh heh heh heh (.)
 05 heh heh
 06 (Students): ((laughter))
 07 Student 6: we ask professor=
 08 Gabrielle: ((referring to Chris)) =he likes [it
 09 Chris: [one
 10 of my favorite books
 11 (Students): ((escalating laughter))
 12 Student 6: oh my God
 13 John: so:: infamous
 14 Chris: that's a hard book (.) that's a
 15 really tough book
 16 John: but they liked a harder book >well
 17 anyway sorry<
 18 Group: ((laughter, commenting))
 19 Student 3: we didn't understand the humor of the
 20 writer so
 21 Chris: hm[mmm
 22 Gabrielle: [mmmm
 23 Chris: yeah it's very subtle
 24 (Students): ((laughter))
 25 Student 6: so we stopped ((laughing voice))
 26 reading this book
 27 Chris: wuhhow
 28 Student 6: and uh (.) yeah professor Keller
 29 started giving us short stories, (.)
 30 and uh I think they also really
 31 interesting, and it's good that he
 32 change this book and now we like the
 33 stories that we read and we enjoy
 34 reading it=
 35 Student 2: =yehehs

Excerpt 3 begins with Student 6 confessing a problem from the current semester of their linked program: students were asked to read *Slaughterhouse Five*, and this book was not well received (“now in this semester we had one book we didn't like...Slaughterhouse Five”). The laughter that ensues in Lines 4-6, initiated by John, the English professor who introduced the book, and followed by multiple students, indicates that this shared experience was a source of humor for them. In Line 7, Student 6 makes an attempt to continue her story, but Gabrielle interrupts, pointing out that Chris, the IR administrator present for the conversation, actually likes this book (“he likes it”). Chris, in partial overlap with

Gabrielle admits this himself in Lines 9-10 (“one of my favorite books”), sparking escalating laughter from multiple students, and a disbelieving exclamation from Student 6, “oh my God,” in Line 12. John follows with what is seemingly a joking comment (“soooo infamous”), with Chris then found to express his understanding about why the book could be disliked (“that’s a hard book...that’s a really tough book”). In Lines 16-17 John appears to challenge Chris by stating that the students liked an even more difficult text than *Slaughterhouse Five* (“but they liked a harder book”). However, his dramatic tone—with word stress on “harder” and quickened pace in the seeming apology and attempt to change the subject that follows (“well anyway sorry”)—indicate that he may be speaking in jest, an interpretation confirmed by the participants when additional laughter and commentary follow his turn in Line 18.

The levity in this episode continues. Unidentifiable students erupt in laughter again in Line 24 after Student 3, seemingly in an attempt to explain the group’s negative reaction to this book, shares in Lines 19-20 that it was author Vonnegut’s sense of humor that mystified them (“we didn’t understand the humor of the writer”), and Chris agrees in Line 23 that this humor is not easy to grasp (“yeah it’s very subtle”). Within this sequence, we also see Chris and Gabrielle demonstrate they are listening to Student 3 in their supportive backchannels. In Lines 25-26 Student 6 finally gets back to her story by revealing that *Slaughterhouse Five* was abandoned by the group (“so we stopped reading this book”), eliciting an elongated “wow” amazement token by Chris (“wuhow”)—an exclamation that can serve to develop a storyteller’s narrative by encouraging the teller to continue (Norrick, 2000). Student 6 does further explain the events in her story in Lines 28-34 that follow: there was a book change in the course (“Professor Keller started giving us short stories”), and there were positive effects resulting from the change: students are happy with the “really interesting” short stories they are reading now (“we enjoy reading it”)—a sentiment validated by another student, laughingly, in Line 35 (“yehehs”).

In Excerpt 3, participants exhibit a lighter tone than we have seen in Excerpts 1 and 2. Their comedy, however, is reflective of the same interactional phenomena we have been seeing. Collaboration-in-content is showcased as students address a real curricular conflict and shed light on how the issue, with the support of their instructor, was resolved. A new aspect of meaningful collaboration within this learning community is uncovered: students’ ability to influence the very content of their course. While this episode could have undermined the LC experience for both students and teachers, it appears from their reactions in the telling that it had the opposite effect. Participants’ sense of community seems to have grown as students have taken ownership over their learning process with their professor’s assistance: their laughter and humor is indicative of this (Glenn, 2003).

Excerpt 3 highlights a particularly vivid example of collaboration-in-process. It is through the spontaneous contributions of students, teachers, and administrators that this story of collaboration is told. In the telling, we see participants reveal personal aspects of who they are and their relationships with one another. John's laughter and apparent joking stance indicate an informality and closeness in his relationship with his students. He has not only negotiated an aspect of his curriculum with them as has been reported, he appears to be comfortable in this role. Apparent intimacy can also be seen in students' relationships with one another as they laugh together (Lines 6, 11, 18, 24) expand on one another's ideas (e.g., Student 3's addition in Lines 19-20 to the story initiated by Student 6), and agree with one another (Line 35). Aspects of participants' intellectual tastes are additionally made known: not only do students reveal their feelings about a particular novel, so does Chris, a college administrator who has just met the students for the first time. We also see Chris as an empathic listener when he expresses how challenging this book must be for the students to read (Lines 14-15 and Line 23), and utters a supportive backchannel (Line 21). Chris' personal investment in the discussion is further found in his exclamation of surprise in response to the news that the group stopped reading an assigned text. He is growing his understanding of students' experiences in the program. All of these contributions indicate participants' commitment to this communal conversation. As students, teachers, and administrators talk together with the joint aim of reflecting on the LC experience, the formation of a new group dynamic can be seen. The establishment of this growing community, in turn, affects the quality of the reflective conversation, encouraging participants to share more of who they are.

The conversation analysis examples of Excerpts 1, 2 and 3 illustrate two central findings of our study: collaboration-in-content and collaboration-in-process. Students, as part of communal conversations with other LC stakeholders, were found to be affirming a foundational theoretical principle of their program: collaboration is important to them for learning. In the content of their utterances, students were articulating the value of their collaborative learning experiences, and demonstrating a growing expertise at making clear distinctions between these experiences and the kinds of interactions occurring in classrooms outside of their learning community. While students also had positive things to say about collaboration in their individually produced written work, responses in this context were not as generative. Students seemed more concerned with saying the "right" thing to an academic audience than in probing more complex aspects of their LC participation.

When we initiated our two-semester ESL LC model, one concern expressed by college administrators was that its inter-leveled structure might have negative effects, with weaker students having the potential to hold back stronger students.

In the communal conversations, however, this issue did not come up. Students talked instead about the benefits of working with their peers, using language that drew attention to their identity as a group (the term “family”; the pronoun “we”) in coming together to overcome challenges. Collaboration-in-content examples included the help they provided one another in completing “harder... assignments” (even calling each other “really late,” or at “4:00 am, 5:00 am,” to do this), and the moral support they gave to one another, as when it was time to do a presentation in front of class in their Speech course and there could be fear, but “everyone actually...help” and say “okay go up.” Rather than portraying classmates through the lens of individuals’ language “levels,” students were found to talk about one another as whole persons, highlighting one another’s strengths and recognizing that there were important roles to play in their community other than academic ones. As one student noted about the high achiever in their link: “she’s the smarter one, she’s our brain, I’m the heart one.” The programmatic suggestions we heard from students that addressed collaboration focused on providing additional collaborative opportunities through a further extended LC experience. One student asked for linked cohorts to be together for “two years, three years,” connecting students with the same majors together.

Our finding that these communal conversation data were richer than data from students’ individual writings, while notable, was not surprising. Using Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino’s (2014) Peer-to-Peer Protocol as a guide, students were asked to use their writings as a tool for thought within the discussions, and conversation facilitators were actively promoting students’ deeper explorations of the principles they had written about. What did stand out to us, however, was just how rich these data were—how much the organic format of the turn-by-turn context appeared to lend itself to the production of students’ more honest and thoughtful explorations. This fuller picture of students’ LC experiences emerged with the input of others who, through dialogue, were demonstrating their interest in learning from them—peers, and also members of students’ broader campus community. In these collaboration-in-process interactions, we saw the language from which conversations are made: supportive utterances, agreement tokens, laughter, interjections, elaborations, jokes, and self- and other- corrections. Participants demonstrated their high involvement in one another’s contributions in their echoing of words and ideas, utterance latching, overlap, and co-construction of thoughts across speaking turns (Tannen, 2005). These communal conversations, evidently a natural extension of students’ instructional conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) in their LC classrooms, point to the full range of what a dynamic program assessment can reveal about the learning community experience.

Discussion

According to Vygotskyan scholars James Lantolf and Matthew Poehner (2014), “the true test of their [Vygotsky and colleagues’] theory... was determined by the power of the theory to make a difference in the practical behavior of a community” (p. 27). In embarking on this study, we wanted to test our theory of the social origins of teaching and learning by hearing from our students about whether or not “the practical behavior” of their learning community reflected this underlying view. Taking a step back to look more closely at the core principles of our ESL Learning Communities with our students, we knew, would give us the opportunity to think more about, and possibly rethink, aspects of these principles, and their applications in practice.

Community-in-content and community-in-process data provide evidence that the educational theory grounding the design of our ESL LCs is serving our students well. In these data, students demonstrated their support of our collaboration principle in the examples they shared of working closely and productively with their professors, tutors, and one another. They also showed their support for this principle by being expert collaborators themselves, revealing a history of productive dialogue in their communal conversations. Data from these lively conversations made it clear to us that students had become comfortable collaborating through social interaction over time as part of their two-semester learning community experience, and that these interactions were providing them with fruitful opportunities for development. While, as LC practitioners, we knew that collaboration is important for learning, as a result of this dynamic program assessment, our commitment to a view of learning as a social, deeply human process, has become stronger. We are more aware of how complex, nuanced, and wide-ranging the effects of LC collaboration can be. This awareness grew from our own participation in an assessment experience that allowed us to collaborate with our students. The valuable feedback we received came about through shifts in traditional classroom roles. In our communal conversations, students were experts, and teachers/assessors became listeners and learners. This shift is also at the heart of the LC movement. Teachers in learning community classrooms are not understood to be the sole authority, but rather individuals who share responsibility for learning with their students, working to create spaces in which learners can “discover, construct, and reconstruct their understandings of the world” (Malnarich, G., with others, 2003, p. 38).

Evidence was provided in our communal conversations that teachers and administrators were not only sharing the speaking floor with students, but also listening to what students had to say. A teacher was told by his students that they didn’t like a course text, and he changed it. A college administrator, making a personal connection to this text, was impressed that the change had occurred. A program director signaled to students that she was hearing their contributions, and

encouraged them to speak more. From their individual perspectives, participants in the group were found to be blurring traditional lines between teacher, administrator, and student. In this way, our dynamic program assessment can be seen as an extension of the LC mission. Bringing various campus representatives together for a collaborative discussion that informs the group as a whole reflects the view that the roots of quality higher education are found in community.

Conclusion

This study challenges the mainstream view of academic assessment as a static and discrete practice that focuses on examining lag measures—historical measures that are easily captured but difficult to influence directly (McChesney et al., 2012)—such as students’ grades, retention and graduation rates, and progress through curricular sequences. After analyzing these types of measures with an interest in assessing the quality of ESL Learning Communities at our college, we were still left with several key questions: Which components of the program should be reinforced? Which should be modified? How can we improve our students’ experiences? While we take pride in these metrics showing students in two-semester ESL LCs progressing at faster rates through their developmental English coursework, we are also aware that these results do not offer much meaningful feedback on whether the principles behind the program actually maximized students’ opportunities for learning in their classrooms. This is particularly true since our program principles reflect a view of learning that is understood not to be adequately measured by an individual’s solitary performance on a test or task, but, more importantly, by what learners can do with others’ assistance: an understanding of learning as a collaborative, fluid, and ongoing process (Vygotsky, 1978).

Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino’s (2014) Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol allowed us to examine key curricular questions that reflected the sociocultural principles central to classroom practices in our learning communities. The PRP also gave us the opportunity to explore a view of assessment that speaks to us as learning community practitioners: the unification of instruction and assessment into the same whole process through dynamic assessment (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). In adapting the PRP as a tool for our learning community program assessment, we were interested both in helping our students arrive at new understandings about their experiences in our program as part of a group dialogue, and in obtaining valuable feedback from students in our ongoing efforts to tailor our programmatic work to their needs.

For this assessment activity, we invited a college administrator from our Institutional Research office to participate in the discussion with students, teachers, and program directors. Learning communities, by providing

opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, break down the barriers erected by higher education organizational structures which assign instructors to separate academic departments. Yet, foundational to the success of LC programs is not only collaboration among faculty, but also collaboration between faculty and campus administrators. We wished to explore an assessment methodology designed to bring these various LC representatives together. As assessment is too often considered a task produced for an outside audience as opposed to an activity informing pedagogical practice and program development, we hoped our research would speak to our LC work on the ground, and also inform our larger campus community about this work.

By including these various individuals in an intentionally designed, reflective conversation about the LC experience, program assessment became a dialectical cooperative process that was integrated into pedagogical practice rather than imposed on it. Data from our communal conversations showed the IR administrator being folded into learning communities by participating students and teachers, changing his potential ‘outsider’ status to one of ‘insider’ as he searched for meaningful qualitative feedback about an LC program. We see the implementation of this kind of inclusive assessment framework as having the potential to affect college-wide policymaking in positive ways. Because Chris participated in the PRP process, he has become more deeply aware of the value of incorporating multiple voices into campus-wide program assessments—not just hearing these voices, but interacting with them. He sees the bridging of theory and practice that occurred through such interactions in this study as not only having the potential to drive pedagogical and administrative change in our learning community classrooms, but also to broaden the ways in which we define and practice the activity of assessment itself.

Our dynamic program assessment framework was designed to springboard a conversation that would not only be enlightening to us, but also educational for our students. In our adaptation of Malnarich, Pettit, and Mino’s (2014) PRP, we therefore sought to mirror our typical LC classroom practices as closely as possible. Review is especially important to us as ESL instructors, so one aspect of the assessment activity involved asking students to read aloud the program principles they had written about. Additionally, as we usually ask students to work together in small groups before coming to a teacher-fronted discussion, students shared a piece of their writing in pairs before joining the whole-group listening round. We also carved out space for ourselves in the discussion to point out possible connections we saw between students’ contributions, and curiosities we had as teachers and administrators, to encourage students to dig more deeply into aspects of their LC experiences. The quality of the feedback we received through all of these activities—an extension of students’ regular LC activities—has given us the opportunity to initiate important conversations with colleagues

about the quality of our work as LC professionals. Reflective of the assessment protocol we followed, we see how critical it is that we design our lesson plans with the aim of opening up classroom conversations in intentionally designed ways. We will be bringing the topic of group reflection to a faculty development session, and are considering a new principle for our ESL LCs addressing the relationship between reflection and learning. Findings from this study have also informed our understanding of students' needs once they exit the ESL Learning Community setting. Based on students' feedback, we are working with other members of Kingsborough's Learning Community Program team to give as many students graduating from ESL LCs as possible the opportunity to enroll in new LCs for continuing students based on their majors.

Another aspect of our dynamic program assessment framework was the use of a data collection and analysis process that captured the richness of conversation as it emerged. By audio-recording the communal conversations, we could listen to them, and listen again. What we heard was participants doing the activity of collaboration in their conversational details. Students' individual thinking processes were also revealed in their speech. Evidence was provided of how students learn, and how communities are built.

Perhaps above all, the close examination of our communal conversation transcripts revealed a finding that we already know as learning community practitioners, but discovered that we still have a lot to learn about: "not to be overlooked or underestimated, students' sense of community seems to be foundational to [their] exploratory talk" (Malnarich, Pettitt, & Mino, 2014, p. 18). In their communal conversations, we saw—through product and process—how important students' relationships with one another and their teachers were. This finding continued to resonate in the year subsequent to our data collection. While they had moved on from their first-year LC program, students were still found to display a strong desire to continue their collaborative educational experience in a multitude of ways. They became academic mentors to incoming ESL LC students, and enrolled in new classes taught by previous LC professors. They visited past instructors with questions about present and future college classes, and continued to offer academic support to classmates from their ESL LCs. As we continue to evolve our learning communities, we will continue to remind ourselves of the lasting effects that strong collaborations can have on our students' futures.

In sum, we offer three interrelated conclusions from this investigation. First, programs as dynamic as learning communities are best assessed dynamically. When asked to reflect on their learning experience, students of a program designed around the view that knowledge is socially constructed will provide more thoughtful assessments in a cooperative, community setting than in individual, isolated writing exercises. Second, the program assessment practices we engaged in contribute to the potential broadening of existing definitions of

assessment. Based on the results of this study, we argue for a program assessment framework that goes beyond being “the systematic collection, review and use of information about educational programs” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 3), and becomes an integral part of the teaching and learning process itself. Third, data from this research highlight the importance of broad participation in the assessment of LC programs. Participants in our dynamic program assessment brought their sociocultural and positional identities into the conversation as well as their different perspectives and questions. Each communal conversation member contributed significantly to the co-constructing of meaning as ideas were built across speaking turns. In moving from the linear data collection-analysis-strategic pedagogical change model of traditional academic assessment to a dialectical model of dynamic program assessment, conventional lines between teacher/student/assessor are blurred. To apply Tönnies’ (2001) sociological terminology, our dynamic program assessment allowed the group to evolve from students participating in a learning community and the professionals assessing their experience (*gesellschaft* – society) to a true community of learners (*gemeinschaft* – community).

Based on our implementation of a dynamic learning community program assessment using Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino’s (2014) Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol, we encourage practitioners in other LC programs to take up the authors’ call to draw upon this tool with the hope that, as a field, we learn more about students’ collaborative learning experiences. Our adaptation of this Protocol gave us the opportunity to reconnect with the theory of collaborative learning at the heart of the learning community mission through the activity of collaboration itself. As we explored sociocultural theory in practice, we educated one another about what learning communities are, and what they can do—students, teachers, and assessors—together.

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Appendix A: Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol

This peer-to-peer reflection protocol is a companion tool to the *Survey of Students' Experiences of Learning in Learning Communities*. Its aim is to provide

LC Programs with a method which invites students—in the company of peers—to further explore their experiences and perceptions of integrative learning as well as collaborative learning.

Designed to be used *after* students do the online survey, the protocol builds on individuals' anonymous survey responses. It has two distinct and related parts. The first is a written reflection exercise based on a section from the online survey which focuses on integrative learning. The second uses what students' write as a starting-point for a facilitated, exploratory conversation where the intent is to deepen students' *collective understanding* of their learning community experience.

Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol (PRP) for Exploring Students' LC Learning Experiences

Part I – Post-Survey Written Reflection Exercise

1. Once the online survey has been administered, distribute the handout in the box below which asks each student to provide examples or situations which support their rating of two questions from the survey most related to integrative learning. *This post-survey written reflection exercise can be done in the same class or in a time-frame which suits the LC Program. You will want to add additional spacing after each prompt; the handout should be around one and a half to two pages in length.*

Directions: For each of the survey questions below, provide one or two examples or occurrences in your learning community that came to mind as you were responding to the question.

In my learning community, I:

- a. Work on connecting or integrating ideas, strategies, or skills from classes (or disciplines) included in this learning community*
- b. Reflect on how these connections lead to new insights or understanding*

2. After all students have had a chance to write responses, facilitate a discussion with students based on their responses and insights (see page 2). This can be done in the same class or in a time-frame which suits the LC program. *We recommend that facilitation be done by a member of the teaching team or someone knowledgeable about the LC class.*

3. You may want to note down or record highlights of the discussion for future in-class use and/or professional development conversations.

Part II – Facilitated Discussion

The purpose of this part of the protocol is to provide an opportunity for students to develop a collective understanding of their learning community experience by considering both the individual and collaborative nature of learning in LC classrooms.

1. Introducing the process

The facilitator reviews the role of the facilitator, i.e. to make sure the conversation stays focused on each step in the reflective discussion: 1) listening round; 2) making connections; 3) wondering; and 4) uncovering complexity.

2. Discussion agenda

Listening round: One by one, without interruption, students share examples or situations from their written responses in a round robin fashion.

Making connections: Once everyone has shared their responses, the facilitator asks students to point out any connections or common themes given the range of experiences and situations.

Wondering: Students are invited to raise questions or name anything they are curious about in relation to the kind of learning their fellow students are describing.

Uncovering complexity: The facilitator invites everyone present to share any thoughts they have about “what lies beneath the surface” of their experience.

3. Appreciating students’ contributions to the LC Campus Program

The facilitator thanks students for sharing their insights with classmates and their contributions to improving the LC program on campus.