

Exploring Students' Experiences in First-Year Learning Communities From a Situated Learning Perspective

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This study looked to situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in order to explore students' participation in the social practices of first-year learning communities. Wenger's (1998) elaboration on "communities of practice" provides insight into how such participation transforms learners. These perspectives frame learning as a socialization and identity shaping process in which learners gain knowledge and skills contextualized, and legitimized, by their communities. We used a survey method and open-ended questions to examine three facets of participation: students' access and motivation to join the community, meaning of their experiences within the community, and trajectory of learning – that is, how participation influenced their later academic or professional decisions. Our findings emphasize that students are motivated by, and find value in, the academic content and engaged pedagogical approaches offered by first-year learning communities; the meaning of their experiences, however, is negotiated through social relationships.

The growing trend in learning communities at our own institution – and nation-wide – draws from contemporary educational models that emphasize the value of holistic, collaborative, co-constructed learning experiences and environments on undergraduate education (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Simply creating a group-based structure and calling it a learning community does not necessarily achieve these aims, however (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Lichtenstein, 2005). Rather, it is the "sense of community" (Lichtenstein, p. 353) fostered through supportive social and academic environments, connections between students, peers, and caring teachers that leads to powerful learning outcomes.

While the social impact of first-year learning communities has been well documented (e.g., Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Domizi, 2008; Jaffe, Carl, Phillips, & Paltoo, 2008; Tinto, 1997, 2003), less is known about the social process of learning that happens within communities. Our research looks to situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which describes learning as participation in the social practices of communities, to examine this process. Wenger's (1998) elaboration on "communities of practice" provides insight into how such participation transforms learners. These perspectives frame learning as a socialization and identity shaping process in which learners gain knowledge and skills contextualized, and legitimized, by their communities.

The purpose of this study was to describe students' perceptions of participation within first-year learning communities from a situated learning perspective. To do so, we explore three facets of participation: access to membership, students' experiences of membership (i.e., meaningful practices and relationships within the community), and their learning trajectory (intentions for "next steps" in their learning process). The specific research questions guiding this study were

1. How and why do students gain access to learning communities?
2. What are students' perceptions of their experiences of membership in learning communities?
3. How does participation in learning communities influence students' next steps as learners in general, as college students, or future professionals?; and
4. How do these facets vary across different types of learning communities?

Background

Prior research has identified multiple positive student success outcomes related to learning communities in higher education, particularly first-year learning communities. Participation in learning communities has been shown to improve persistence beyond the first semester or first year and into the sophomore year (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Russo, 1994) and to enhance academic performance, as measured by grades and improved study habits (Lord, Coston, Davis, & Johannes, 2012; Zheng, Saunders, Shelley, & Whalen, 2002). Additionally, research shows that learning communities impact important outcomes such as student engagement and involvement, satisfaction with the college experience, and even career preparation (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007; Kuh, 2008; Lord et al., 2012; Rocconi, 2012; Stassen, 2003; Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Lindblad, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

First-year learning communities provide both academic and social support, and the socially supportive peer group environment has been seen as key to many positive benefits. Tinto (1997) asserts that learning communities provide a support network that "bond[s] students to the broader social communities of

the college while also engaging them more fully in the academic life of the institution” (p. 613). Researchers have described how first-year learning communities allow for friendship formation and create a sense of community (Jaffe et al., 2008), as well as the development of educational citizenship (Tinto, 2003). Moreover, learning communities promote the development of academic and social support networks for students (Domizi, 2008), enhances involvement in the classroom and in social activities resulting in better integration of students' academic and personal lives (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 1998), and enhances feelings toward collaborative learning (Tinto, 2003). Learning communities also foster connections and interaction beyond the first year, which contribute to students' ongoing campus involvement, including taking on leadership roles (Firmin, Warner, Johnson, Firebaugh, & Firmin, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

Situated learning and communities of practice.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, as well as Wenger's (1998) elaboration on communities of practice, offers educators a framework to explore and describe the relationships between the self and the social world in higher education. Situated learning shifts the focus from learning *about* the social world to learning *in* and *through* it. Theories about human learning in relation to social culture and context are certainly not new. Vygotsky's (1978) cultural-historical perspective suggests that learning and development cannot be dissociated from their contexts. Lave (1988) describes the knowledge in our head as “indivisible” from the social world outside our head (p. 1). Both Dewey (1916/1980) and Holland (1966, 1985) theorizes human behavior and experiences as an interaction between the individual and the environment, and others have advanced the perspective that the “fit” between an individual's personality and their environment is especially important for college student success and academic decision making (Astin, 1993; Feldman, Smart, & Ethington, 1999; Porter & Umbach, 2006). Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) suggest that learning is an enculturation process, advocating that formal education include not only learning *about concepts*, but the authentic *practice of concepts* within the cultures and contexts in which they will be used.

Communities of practice represent the engagement in authentic practices within a particular place and set of relationships (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A situated learning perspective assumes that as learners participate in the social and cultural practices of a community, they foster social relationships and gain mastery of knowledge and skills that move them from the position of “newcomers” towards the role of “full participants”

(Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). This developmental process, called legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), is an identity formation process.

Applying a situated learning perspective to examine the LPP process within communities of practice in the context of higher education learning communities provides a language to describe, and a lens to analyze, first-year students' transition into college as well as their identity development within various communities of practice. There are several key tenets of LPP that are especially relevant to college student development, in particular the first-year experience.

Access to membership. First, LPP proposes that as “newcomers” (i.e., first-year students) gain access to a community, their participation is that of an observer. Theoretically, it is from this point of view that students begin to gain a general idea about what acceptable practice looks like in the community (e.g., what to do, how to conduct their lives, how to talk and who to talk to), and begin to see who and what they could become from interaction with more mature role models (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Applied to our context, we defined access as how students learned about, and made the decision to enroll, in learning communities.

Experiences of membership. Next, LPP suggests that as newcomers engage in the “everyday life” of a community, they gain legitimacy through access to information, resources, and opportunities for participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 95). Participation *is* learning. Through engagement in the practices of a community, newcomers make meaning of their experiences, expand their sense of motivation and belonging, and thus initiate a natural change in identity toward a “full practitioner” (p. 95). Within higher education communities, the meaning of participation becomes a critical component of learning assessment: What practices or activities do students find meaningful in first-year learning communities, and why?

Wenger (1998) further describes meaning-making as a social activity. As a member of, and learner in, a community, one's individual perspectives and understandings are shaped not only by participation, but also by reification, the process by which a person gives form to her experience (e.g., naming, interpreting, categorizing as a result of experience) (1998). Thus, we examined first-year students' interpretations and representations of their meaningful and memorable community experiences for insight into their engagement and learning process.

Trajectory of learning. Dewey said, “Every experience is a moving force” (1938, p. 38). Education as a growth process involves practical preparation for future professional duties through rich and significant experiences in the present, as well as a developmental process to “unfold” various qualities of the self towards some definite goal (Dewey, 1916/1980). The meaning

and significance of these processes both rely on movement towards something. Wenger's (1998) description of learning trajectories within communities of practice provides a language for this movement. The communities in which we participate provide a field of possible trajectories that emerge from experience and give form to "what's next"; over time, our forms of participation create a path for identity development (Wenger, 1998, p. 155). Applied to the transition to college, the socialization process involves taking on the practices of the various communities in which students belong and participate. First-year learning communities are designed to be a space where new ways of thinking and doing interact with past experiences and future aspirations, and therefore they create trajectories of learning. Thus, we explored students' choices about their own next steps.

Methods

Participants

Learning communities were introduced in 2010 as a signature component of a first-year experience program at Kansa State University, a large state land-grant university in the Midwest. We used a First-Year Interest Group (FIG) model in which a cohort of students take two general education classes, linked by an interdisciplinary connections course. Each learning community of approximately 20 students is facilitated by a lead instructor, supporting instructor(s), and an undergraduate learning assistant (LA) serving in a peer mentor role. The program grew from six initial communities in the fall semester of 2010 to fourteen different learning communities by the fall semester of 2012. As described below, these communities were characterized as "liberal arts," "pre-professional," "residential," and "study abroad."

Participants were first-semester first-year students enrolled in first-year learning communities during the fall semester of 2012. The majority of these students were of traditional college age, female (62%), White (73%), and from communities in the state in which the university was located (81%). These demographics mirror the demographics of first-year students at the university in general (with the exception of sex for which first-year students university-wide showed a more equal distribution of male and female students). It should be noted that demographic information was not collected as part of, or connected to, participants' responses in the study to protect the participants' anonymity. Each learning community was comprised of a set of three connected courses. Two of these courses were normal introductory courses in academic disciplines, and they were comprised of both students enrolled and not enrolled in the learning community.

The learning community was identified around the third "connections" course, comprised of only a small number of students (maximum enrollment was 22), which was designed to use active learning techniques to integrate and extend the skills and content from the other two courses.

Fourteen learning communities were offered in four different categories. Five of the learning communities were categorized as "pre-professional" learning communities (e.g., Pre-Physical Therapy, Profitability in Livestock), and consisted of groups of students who took a common set of three courses focused on providing the foundation for a specified concentration of academic study. Six of the learning communities were categorized as "liberal arts" learning communities (e.g., Gender, Race, and Class in America; Understanding the Weather), and consisted of groups of students who took a common set of three courses focused on a broad topic of interest, but not specifically designed as a foundation for future academic study. Two were living learning communities (i.e., Psychology of Prejudice, The American Story) and consisted of groups of students who not only enrolled in a common set of three courses focused on a broad topic of interest, but also lived together in the same residence hall. One learning community was categorized as a study-abroad/service-learning community (i.e., Spanish in Action). Students in this community took a set of common courses during the fall semester of 2012, and then traveled together over the winter break to another country to practice foreign language skills and complete a service-learning project. At the time this study was conducted, this learning community had not yet participated in their international service experience.

All students enrolled in these learning communities ($N = 226$) were invited to participate in this study, and 103 of the students participated (46% response rate). The sample consisted of students from each of the fourteen learning communities, with three to 12 students from each learning community participating. Forty-three participants were from pre-professional learning communities, 32 were from liberal arts learning communities, 20 were from residential learning communities, and 8 were from the service-learning community.

Procedure

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, a survey methodology was used to collect and describe students' perceptions of their experiences of membership in learning communities. All students were sent an email invitation to participate in an online survey during November of the fall semester of 2012. Completion of the surveys took participants less than 30 minutes. No incentive was provided for their participation. Survey responses were collected anonymously and were not

shared, individually or collectively, with the instructors of the learning community courses.

Guided by the research questions, we designed survey items to capture both quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide insight into three categories, or components of learning in communities, which may contribute to students' identity development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998). These categories were identified as the following: a) access and motivation (exploring how and why students entered into communities); b) meaning of participation (exploring students' perceptions of experiences of membership in communities); and c) learning trajectories (exploring how participation in a learning community influenced students' next steps as learners in general, as college students, or their professional aspirations) These items were inspired by past research on situated learning, but were written for use in this study with the goal of maximizing the items' face and content validity.

Access, motivation, and expectations. Students reported how they accessed the information about the learning communities by completing several items referring to the sources that may have provided information about the learning communities to them. Students first responded by selecting "yes" or "no" to report whether or not they had heard about the learning communities from materials they received in the mail, resources they read online, advisors on campus, faculty or staff on campus, other students, parents, or other family members. Students then reported how much influence each of these sources of information had on their decisions to enroll in the learning communities using scales from 1 (*Not at all*) to 9 (*Very much*). Students then reported which of four possible influences (i.e., "I did," "An advisor/faculty/staff member did," "My parents/family did," and "Another student did") had the largest role in their decisions to enroll in the learning communities. Finally, students reported both their motivations for enrolling in the learning communities and their expectations for the learning communities in free response formats.

Meaning of membership. To assess the meaning they found in their learning community experiences, participants completed several items related to those experiences. Participants reported how connected they felt to the other students in the learning community, the course content and topic, the instructor, the learning assistant, and the university as a whole using a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 9 (*Very much*). Using free-response formats, students reported the strongest bonds or connections they formed in the learning communities, as well as their most memorable and most meaningful experiences in the learning communities.

Learning trajectory. To assess how the students perceived the experiences in the learning communities to have impacted their learning trajectory, students reported if the learning community changed their outlook or plans for the future by choosing "yes" or "no." Students also reported how much the learning

community changed their outlook or plans for the future using a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 9 (*Very much*), and explained how the learning community changed their outlook or plans for the future using a free-response format.

Analytical procedures. Ratings made by participants on numerical scales were compared to midpoints of the response scale using one-sample *t*-tests. Comparisons between participants enrolled in the different types of learning communities on their quantitative ratings were made using between groups one-way analyses of variance using the type of learning community as a four-level factor for each item. The comparison of ratings of how much each of the sources of information was an influence in participants' decisions to enroll in the learning communities was made using a repeated measures analysis of variance. Bonferroni-corrected multiple comparison procedures were used when appropriate to probe effects. The alpha level of all analyses was set at .05; however, we reported and probed marginally significant effects when they occurred due to our relatively small sample size (and reported these as such). Given that these general linear model procedures are robust to violations of the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance, we conducted no transformations on our data, nor did we replace missing values. All analyses were thus conducted using the responses provided by our participants, and only those responses provided by our participants, without alteration.

Qualitative descriptions generated by the free-response questions were analyzed initially by three independent coders, who categorized items and created a common coding scheme. Once a list of common themes was agreed upon, all items were then categorized for the presence or absence of each theme by two independent coders. The themes were coded reliably, *phi product moment correlations* $\geq .70$, and the remaining coding discrepancies were resolved by discussion. It should be noted that participants may have replied to the free response items in ways that addressed more than one of the coded themes (i.e., the percentages of participants reporting themes for an item may sum to more than 100%). The extents to which these themes were reported by students in the different types of learning communities were compared using χ^2 tests of independence. The items are available by request from the authors.

Results

Access, Motivations, and Expectations

Access to learning communities. Survey items related to access examined how and why students enrolled in learning communities. Participants indicated

that advisors on campus were most instrumental in providing them with resources about the learning communities (60% indicated that advisors provided them with this information). Fewer participants indicated that materials they received in the mail (29%), other faculty or staff on campus (25%), resources they read online (15%), other students (4%), parents (3%), or other family members (0%) provided them with resources about the learning communities. Participants reported differences in how much influence each of these sources of information had on their decisions to enroll in the learning communities, $F(6, 594) = 48.80$, $p < .001$, *partial eta squared* = .33. Bonferroni multiple comparison procedures indicated that advisors ($M = 6.70$, $SD = 3.01$) were significantly more influential than any other source of information. Further, the mean rating of the influence of advisors was the only mean rating among the sources to exceed the value of the scale's midpoint, and it did so significantly, $t(99) = 5.64$, $p < .001$. Other faculty or staff on campus ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 3.52$) were significantly more influential than any other sources, excluding advisors. The other sources of information were rated as having little influence on the decisions to enroll in the learning communities ($M_s < 2.71$, $SD_s < 2.87$), and each of these mean ratings were significantly lower than the midpoint of the scale, $t_s(99) > 6.92$, $p_s < .001$. Participants reported that they themselves had the most influence on the decisions to enroll in the learning communities (58%), with fewer participants indicating that an advisor, faculty, or staff member did (36%), their parents or family did (6%), or another student did (0%), $\chi^2(2) = 40.88$, $p < .001$.

Comparisons among the different types of learning communities revealed that students differed in how they accessed the information. The majority of students in service-learning (88%), residential (75%), and liberal arts (66%) learning communities reported that advisors on campus were most instrumental in providing them with resources about the learning communities, but this was not true for students in pre-professional learning communities (44%), $\chi^2(3) = 9.13$, $p = .025$. Students in the pre-professional learning communities were relatively more likely to report getting resources from faculty or staff on campus (37%) than were students in the service-learning (25%), liberal arts (22%), and, most notably, residential (5%) learning communities, $\chi^2(3) = 7.80$, $p = .050$. Students in the pre-professional learning communities rated that their decisions to enroll in the learning communities were more influenced by resources they read online, $F(3, 96) = 2.78$, $p = .046$, *partial eta squared* = .08, and by faculty or staff on campus, $F(3, 96) = 4.49$, $p = .005$, *partial eta squared* = .12, and less influenced by advisors, $F(3, 96) = 2.76$, $p = .046$, *partial eta squared* = .08, than were students in the other types of learning communities. Students in all learning communities were

similar in reporting that they themselves had the most influence on the decisions to enroll in the learning communities, $\chi^2(6) = 5.50$, $p = .481$.

Student motivations. Analysis of the participants' free responses regarding their motivations for enrolling in the learning communities revealed the emergence of four themes. First, participants were motivated to enroll in learning communities because of the *academic content contained in the set of courses*. One student stated, "I expected to learn a lot about physical therapy and what I have to do as a student to apply for physical therapy school." Students were also motivated to participate in the *educational environment* (e.g., smaller class, hands-on content) offered by a learning community. One student reported, "I was expecting a small course with students who are experiencing their first year of college just like me." Many students hoped to *establish relationships* (e.g., with other students and/or the professor) in the learning community. *Other extrinsic factors* were also identified as motivators for enrollment (e.g., because they were told to enroll, to get into a specific residence hall, or to get into required classes for their program of study). Comparisons among the different types of learning communities revealed that students in the service-learning learning community being more likely than those in the other learning communities to report being motivated to enroll for the educational environment, while being less likely to report being motivated to enroll to establish relationships. See Table 1 for the percentages of students within the learning communities overall, and within each type of learning community, who reported the respective themes in their free responses to this item and the items below.

Student expectations. Analysis of the participants' free responses regarding their expectations for the learning communities revealed the emergence of five themes. Similar to the findings for the participants' motivation for enrolling in the learning communities, participants reported that they expected *engagement with specific academic content*, specific features of the *educational environment*, and/or to *form relationships* in the learning community. For example, a student said, "I expected academic support and professors that cared about my success." Another student described her relational expectation was to "get to know people and build confidence." A small number of participants indicated that they had *low or negative expectations* or that they had *no expectations* for the learning community. Comparisons among the different types of learning communities revealed that students in the pre-professional learning communities were the most likely, and students in the liberal arts learning communities were the least likely, to report expectations about the academic content of their learning community courses. Further, students in the residential learning communities

Table 1
Students in Learning Communities Reporting Motivations, Expectations, and Experiences

| Free Response Items and Themes Communities | Percentage of Students Reporting the Themes by Types of Learning | | | | |
|---|---|-----------------|-------------|---------------------|---------|
| | Pre Professional | Liberal Arts | Residential | Service Learning | Overall |
| Motivation for Enrolling | | | | | |
| Academic Content | 54% | 28% | 35% | 50% | 43% |
| Educational Environment* | 30% | 44% | 45% | 88% | 43% |
| Relationships+ | 42% | 31% | 35% | 0% | 31% |
| Other Extrinsic Factors* | 12% | 44% | 35% | 13% | 26% |
| Expectations for Learning Communities | | | | | |
| Academic Content* | 67% | 28% | 35% | 50% | 48% |
| Educational Environment+ | 33% | 53% | 35% | 75% | 43% |
| Relationships* | 19% | 31% | 45% | 0% | 26% |
| Low/Negative Expectations | 12% | 3% | 15% | 13% | 10% |
| No Expectations | 12% | 16% | 25% | 0% | 15% |
| Strongest Connections | | | | | |
| Other Students | 70% | 72% | 50% | 88% | 68% |
| Instructor | 26% | 31% | 45% | 25% | 31% |
| Learning Assistant | 14% | 9% | 20% | 13% | 14% |
| Course Content+ | 2% | 9% | 20% | 0% | 8% |
| University | 5% | 3% | 0% | 0% | 3% |
| No Strong Connections | 12% | 9% | 10% | 0% | 10% |
| Memorable Experiences | | | | | |
| Out of Class Activities* | 56% | 22% | 55% | 75% | 47% |
| Academic Content* | 47% | 28% | 20% | 75% | 38% |
| Relationships | 23% | 28% | 40% | 50% | 30% |
| Educational Environment | 26% | 31% | 20% | 13% | 25% |
| No Memorable Experiences | 14% | 19% | 10% | 0% | 14% |
| Negative Memorable Experiences | 2% | 10% | 5% | 0% | 5% |
| Meaningful Experiences | | | | | |
| Academic Content | 26% | 38% | 40% | 50% | 34% |
| Educational Environment | 28% | 41% | 35% | 13% | 32% |
| Out of Class Activities+ | 30% | 16% | 10% | 50% | 23% |
| Relationships | 21% | 25% | 10% | 25% | 20% |
| Preparation for Success | 19% | 6% | 20% | 13% | 15% |
| No Meaningful Experiences | 12% | 16% | 25% | 0% | 15% |
| Negative Meaningful Experiences | 2% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 1% |
| Learning Trajectory | | | | | |
| Academic/Career Decisions | 40% | 19% | 20% | 13% | 21% |
| Awareness/Thinking | 7% | 16% | 15% | 25% | 13% |
| Preparation for Success | 5% | 13% | 20% | 13% | 11% |

Note: Percentages refer to the proportion of students within each type of learning community who reported the respective theme in their free response to that item. Because students could report more than one theme in their free response, the percentages may sum to more than 100%. Symbols indicate that a χ^2 test of independence indicated that the percentages of students who did versus did not report the theme in their free response to the item differed at marginally significant (+) or significant levels across the types of learning communities

were the most likely, and students in the service-learning learning community were the least likely, to report expectations about the relationships they expected to form in their learning communities. See Table 1.

Meanings of Membership

To understand how students made meaning of their membership in learning communities, items explored students' perceptions of their experiences. Participants reported feeling connected to the other students in the learning community, the course content and topic, the instructor, the learning assistant, and the university as a whole. Mean ratings of their levels of connectedness to each of these targets ($M_s > 6.24$, $SD_s < 2.46$) significantly exceeded the midpoint of the response scale, $t_s(98) > 5.20$, $p_s < .001$. Further, participants reported similar levels of connectedness to each of the targets, $F(4, 392) = 1.71$, $p = .148$, $partial\ eta\ squared = .02$. Among the different types of learning communities, no significant differences emerged among the different types in their reported levels of connectedness to the other students in the learning community, the course content and topic, the learning assistant, and the university as a whole, $F_s(3, 95) < 1.22$, $p_s > .12$, $partial\ etas\ squared < .06$. A marginally significant difference emerged among the learning community types on their reported levels of connectedness to the instructor, $F(3, 95) = 2.46$, $p = .068$, $partial\ eta\ squared = .07$. Bonferroni multiple comparison procedures revealed that students in the residential learning communities reported more connection to their instructors ($M = 7.70$, $SD = 1.59$) than did participants in the service-learning learning community ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 2.00$), $p = .070$. Students in the pre-professional ($M = 6.63$, $SD = 2.23$) and liberal arts ($M = 6.60$, $SD = 2.40$) learning communities did not differ in their reported levels of connection to their instructors from each other or students in the other learning communities.

Strongest connections. Analysis of the participants' free responses regarding the strongest bonds or connections they formed in the learning communities revealed the emergence of six themes. Participants reported the strongest connections to the *other students* in the learning community. One student found a "best friend on campus" in her community. Another student elaborated on the value of these personal connections:

The friendships that I have made are absolutely amazing, and the sense of unity that we all have I feel is crucial and important. I feel like it has made learning a little easier, and I am no longer afraid to

speak out in class for fear of being judged because we all understand each other.

Students also reported strong connections to the *learning community instructor* and the *learning assistant*, as the example below illustrates:

The teachers really care about whether or not we understand the material and they are even concerned about our personal needs. I love being able to walk by one of my instructors or the [learning assistant] and be able to have a real conversation.

Participants reported their connections to the *course content* or to *the university as a whole* at lower rates. Relatively few participants reported that they *did not form any strong bonds or connections* in the learning community.

Comparisons of the different types of learning communities showed little variability among the learning communities in their reports of strongest connections. Only a marginally significant effect emerged on the students' connections to the course content, with students in the residential learning communities being more likely to report connections to course content than were students in the other learning communities. See Table 1.

Memorable experiences. Analysis of the participants' free responses regarding their most memorable experiences in the learning communities revealed the emergence of six themes. Participants reported the most memorable experiences were *out-of-class learning community activities*, which included activities such as field trips, study sessions, service learning, and guest speakers. As one student explained, "It was nice to be able to get with the class outside the classroom and talk about things that related to the class itself."

Many students described how the *academic content* covered in the learning community was particularly memorable. Examples include exposure to new ideas or drawing connections between courses.

Participants described how *relationships formed* with their teachers, learning assistants, or peers were the most memorable, and they identified memorable experiences related to aspects of the *educational environment*. This included class discussion and activities; for example, one student reminisced about an interaction where the "whole class was laughing and enjoying the excitement of class that day." Relatively few participants reported that they had *no memorable experiences* or had *negative memorable experiences* in the learning communities.

Comparisons of the different types of learning communities revealed that reports of memorable

experiences did vary in the students' reports of out-of-class activities being more memorable (most common for students in the service-learning learning communities and least common for students in the liberal arts learning communities). Reports of memorable experiences also varied in the students' reports of academic content being more memorable (most common for students in the service-learning learning communities and less common for students in the liberal arts and residential learning communities). See Table 1.

Meaningful experiences. Analysis of the participants' free responses regarding their most meaningful experiences in the learning communities revealed the emergence of seven themes. Similar to the findings for participants' memorable experiences, participants reported that their most meaningful experiences came from the *academic content* covered in the learning community. For example, one student reported the following:

The most meaningful event that we have done is when we speak in class on prejudice ... This is most meaningful to me simply because it gives a big insight on society today and the ways in which people still decide to partake in prejudice events and shows that there are ways in which they can be stopped.

The *educational environment* created by the learning community, the *out-of-class learning community activities*, and the *relationships formed* within the learning community were also meaningful to participants. One student explained, "We have had some great conversations within the [community] discussion hour. I value the opinions and thoughts of my peers ..." A few participants reported that their most meaningful experiences related to *preparation for college success*, or making progress toward acquiring the skills, knowledge, and/experiences that would contribute to their future success as college students. One student described this as "the information about campus and [University] in general. It has helped with any issue facing me as well as other students." Another described how it was meaningful "when we talked about the enrollment process in class because that has helped prepare me to make my own class schedules and to work with my advisor." Relatively few participants reported that they had *no meaningful experiences* or had *negative experiences* in the learning communities.

Comparisons of the different types of learning communities showed little variance in the students' reported meaningful experiences. Only for reports of out-of-class activities as meaningful did a marginally significant effect emerge, with students in the service-learning learning community being more likely, and students in the liberal arts

and residential learning communities to be relatively unlikely, to report that out-of-class activities were most meaningful to them. See Table 1.

Learning Trajectory

We assessed the students' learning trajectories as a result of their learning community experiences. In other words, we wanted to understand more clearly how participation in a first-year learning community influences students' next steps as learners in general and as college students, as well as the influence on their professional aspirations. Just under half of the participants (49%) indicated that their experiences in the learning community changed their outlook or plans for the future. The extents to which participants indicated that their experiences in the learning community changed (versus did not change) their outlook or plans for the future did not vary significantly across the different types of learning communities, $\chi^2(3) = 0.94, p = .815$. Mean ratings of how much the learning community changed their outlook or plans for the future ($M = 5.92, SD = 1.56$) significantly exceeded the midpoint of the scale, $t(49) = 4.16, p < .001$. These ratings did not differ across the different types of learning communities, $F(3, 95) = 0.07, p = .976, partial \eta^2 < .01$.

In the participants' free responses about how the learning community changed their outlook or plans for the future, three themes emerged. The most common theme reported was that the learning community experience influenced their future *academic and/or career decisions*, such as by increasing their interest in a topic, major, or career direction. One student explained in general terms, "The [classes] have helped me make some decisions as to what I may want to go into as a future career and to possibly choose a major." For another student, the influence was more specific: "This course has changed my outlook on making future business decisions on my family's farming operation."

Other participants reported that the learning community experience changed their perspective by *increasing their awareness and broadening their thinking*, for example, "The [class] has given me a new outlook on music, and has opened my eyes to the issues going on in the world today." Finally, the learning community experience made them *better prepared to succeed in college*. One student's description summarizes well this category of response:

I came to college scared of almost everything that had to do with academics, people, and life here. I was scared that I didn't know anyone and I'd never get friends. I was scared that the classes would be too hard and I would fail. I was even scared that I wouldn't be able to live away from my parents.

This class has made me feel ready and prepared to take on my next three and a half years of college.

These results indicate that, while not all participants reported that their learning community experiences changed their future outlook or plans, several participants did attribute positive changes in their learning trajectories to their experiences in the learning communities. The extents to which students reported these themes did not vary significantly across the different types of learning communities. See Table 1.

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge about learning communities by exploring students' participation in a first-year learning community through the conceptual framework of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Assuming learning is a process of participation within a community of practice, we used a survey method and open-ended questions to examine students' experiences of membership within first-year learning communities, including access and motivation to join the community, meaning of their experiences within the community, and trajectory of learning, specifically how participation influenced their next steps of "becoming," academically or professionally. This study reinforces how first-year learning communities offer a situated, social place, people, and processes for student learning and development (Dewey, 1916/1980; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger 1998).

Limitations

There are limitations to this study, namely that our study was conducted at a single educational institution and employed a relatively small sample size, limiting our ability to generalize. Additionally, the use of one-time, post-test, self-report data limits our ability to explain other factors (developmental, environmental, or otherwise) that may influence students' experience and perceptions not captured by the survey. Despite these limitations, however, our results document the utility of applying a situated learning perspective to better understand the role of students' social and academic experiences within first-year learning communities.

Conclusions and Implications

Access to membership. Advisors played a key role in supporting students' access to learning communities. This finding is not surprising, given that first-year students are "newcomers" to not only the learning community, but also to the campus. Students

look to those in positions of leadership for guidance in decision-making. We were surprised by the relatively small impact of parents and families on the decision to join these communities – a result that perhaps complicates the assumption that over-parenting (in the form of "tiger moms" and "helicopter parents") is reshaping students' college experience (Levine, 2006; 2012). Indeed, many participants reported that they made the decision themselves.

Students were motivated to enroll in learning communities because of their interest in the academic content, the type of course environment, and the desire to establish relationships. These interests demonstrate a shared understanding or expectation of what they will be doing within the community and what it means for their own lives. Understanding the motivations of students can help in the creation of new learning communities, as well as inform the construction of a "teaching curriculum," - the structures of learning and best practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 97).

Meaning of membership. A situated learning perspective also acknowledges a "learning curriculum", or the learners' own perspectives on characteristics of the community that shape meaning and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 97). Our participants described how their learning community experiences helped them to develop broad and strong connections to each other, to the academic content, to the instructor and learning assistant, and to the university as a whole. Additionally, they reported that their experiences in the learning communities were both memorable and meaningful, particularly as these experiences related to the academic content, out-of-class activities, educational environment, and opportunities to build relationships within the learning communities.

Legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998) helps us interpret the dynamics found between the content, the environment, and the relationships. Students in our learning communities were engaged in learning practices that included more than just knowledge acquisition; rather, they engaged in experiences situated in classroom relationships, campus life, and professional preparation. As new members move towards full participants in a community, they experience shifting views of self, belonging, and motivation (Lave & Wenger).

Unfortunately, not all students will develop connections within or derive satisfaction from their learning community experiences. Situated learning and LPP may be useful in helping us to understand how and why particular students benefit from learning communities more than others. Thus, future research should explore the experience of students who did not feel connected, which may lead to understanding better the barriers to participation in the activities and practices of learning

communities. Critical questions around participation might include: Who determines legitimacy? And how does participation contribute to legitimacy? (e.g., how and when do students interact and/or use information and resources as a means of gaining legitimacy?)

Trajectory of learning. Meaning that was made through these experiences empowered students to consider or make decisions about the next steps in their education. For some students, their learning trajectory changed dramatically (e.g., *I realized what I don't want to do*), while for others it was more of a subtle strengthening of their confidence in a subject, major, or profession. Either way, the situated perspective allows us to see that these decisions are influenced by the students' interactions within their learning community.

Our study indicates the need for longitudinal data collection to understand how learning community participation influences learners over time. For example, how does the shared history of a learning community influence campus involvement and/or lead to further connections with students, faculty, and other campus or industry professionals?

Our results show that students often are attracted to learning communities by their academic interests and that the learning community experience may yield academic advantages in the students' trajectory at the conclusion of the learning community experience. What is most compelling from our results is that these initial academic aspirations and subsequent academic advantages are bridged by the subjective and meaningful experiences of community in the situated learning contexts provided by first-year learning communities. Simply put, to be successful, the *experience of community* must be emphasized in design and delivery of such programs. Creating the structure of common courses does not automatically foster community; the experience of community is negotiated through social relationships. Learning communities can function as communities of practice when they are designed as not just a form of learning, but a process of learning in which academic content is made meaningful through the shared practices and relationship of the community. This community learning process will nurture the development of first-year students' identities, helping them to transition from being newcomers to becoming full participants in their own higher education and beyond.

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