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The Impact of Learning Communities on the Experiences of Developmental Students in Community College: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of a first-semester learning community (LC) program on the experiences of developmental students in community college. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, students shared four central benefits of beginning their college careers in an LC program, including: 1) access to a supportive social and intellectual community, 2) opportunities for interdisciplinary thinking, 3) changes in perceptions of remediation and enhanced self-efficacy, and 4) the occasion to experience a more active and engaging pedagogy. Students also articulated what they experienced as drawbacks of their LC experience, underscoring a perceived lack of opportunity to connect with the larger college community and hyperbonding among peers. I consider the implications of these findings for future research and practice in providing developmental students in community college LC programs with quality learning experiences.

In this article, I seek to understand the impact of a first-semester learning community (LC) program on the experiences of developmental students in community college. Specifically, I solicit and reflect upon students' voices, with a focus on what they perceive as both the benefits and drawbacks of beginning their college careers in an LC. As many readers know, first-semester LC programs aimed at supporting developmental students in community college often include a course in reading and writing, a general education course, and a "Student Success Course" aimed at helping students acclimate to college (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Schnee & VanOra, 2012; Tinto, 1998). Ideally, LC courses are coordinated around an interdisciplinary theme, facilitate interdisciplinary and critical thinking abilities, encourage more active and collaborative constructions of knowledge, and foster a sense of community among students who might otherwise feel isolated (Cross, 1998; Levine & Shapiro, 2000; Tinto, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). A number of studies demonstrate the positive impact of LC programs on academic outcomes and student retention (Bailey, 2009; Hurvitz, Benvau, & Parry, 2015; Mickelson & Makris, 2017; Tinto, 2003). These positive outcomes appear particularly salient for developmental students enrolled in LC programs (Barnes & Piland, 2010; Minkler, 2002; Price & Tovar, 2014; Schnee, 2014; Weiss, Mayer, Cullinan, Ratledge, Sommo, & Diamond, 2015). Yet, surprisingly few studies have helped us to understand the personal and phenomenological experiences of developmental students in an LC program. By asking students to reflect explicitly upon these experiences, I aim to fill this gap in the literature.

I begin by exploring what we already know about the benefits of LC programs for developmental readers and writers in community college. Following, I draw upon a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with developmental readers and writers at a community college—all of whom were enrolled in a first-semester LC program—in an attempt to understand their experiences and highlight their voices. Finally, I consider the implications of this study for future research and our continued efforts to support developmental students in community college.

Learning Communities, Developmental Education, and Positive Outcomes

There is little doubt that students enrolled in LC programs experience more positive outcomes than those enrolled exclusively in stand-alone courses (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Olds & Miller, 2004; Tinto, 2003; Weiss et al., 2015; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Tinto (2003) finds that, compared with students outside of learning community programs, LC students remain more actively engaged in their studies, spend more time studying with peers outside of class, are more likely to recognize their own intellectual growth, and are more likely to persist into the next semester. Additionally, Baker and Pomerantz (2000) find that LC students had higher grade point averages, accumulated more credits, and were more likely to express

satisfaction with their college experience, as compared with students not enrolled in learning communities. Research by Zhao and Kuh (2004) supports these findings, revealing that, when compared with students outside of learning communities, LC students report more positive beliefs about the quality of the academic advising that they receive, as well as a greater overall satisfaction with their college experience. The benefits of LC programs appear to extend to faculty members as well, with LC faculty articulating deeper and more trusting collegial relationships, enhanced opportunities for professional development, and an overall increased satisfaction with teaching (Minkler, 2002).

It is critical to acknowledge that the benefits of LC teaching and learning might be greatest for those students who have been identified as underprepared for college-level reading and writing (Bailey, 2009; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Minkler, 2002; Raftery, 2005; Tinto & Love, 1995). In fact, LCs have often been described as a most critical intervention for those students most at-risk of "stopping out" of college (Tinto, 1998). Not surprisingly, both retention and graduation rates are considerably lower for those students initially placing into developmental reading, writing, and/or mathematics classes (Adelman, 1999; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Bailey, Crosta, & Jenkins, 2007; Crosta & Calcagno, 2005). In fact, the majority of students placed in developmental coursework do not appear to complete the full sequence. According to Bailey (2009), only 44% of community college students placed in developmental reading classes complete the sequence and move on to credit-bearing English classes, and this accounts for only those two-thirds of developmental readers who enroll in at least one developmental reading course. These numbers are consistent with Adelman (1999), who finds that students taking remedial courses are almost 30% less likely to earn a bachelor's degree. Moreover, the lowest retention and graduation rates have been identified among those developmental students with particularly low reading abilities (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000).[1]

Nonetheless, passing a developmental reading course is a significant predictor of retention, the chances of which increase exponentially when developmental students begin their college careers in an LC program (Fike & Fike, 2008; Tinto, 1998, 2003). Tinto's (1998) research reveals that developmental readers and writers in an LC program were more likely to persist into their second academic year, more likely to pass their first-semester classes, and more likely to earn higher grades, when compared with developmental students outside of the LC program. Researchers also find that LC students in community college are more likely to become involved in academic endeavors

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[1] There is evidence that lack of adequate preparation in high school, rather than remediation per se, causes these poorer outcomes among developmental students (Adelman, 1999; Attewell et al., 2006).

both within and outside of the college classroom, pass developmental English courses, and report feeling supported by faculty, staff, and advisors (Barnes & Piland, 2010; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Levin & Calcagno, 2008; Minkler, 2002). As Engstrom and Tinto (2008) write, "Simply put, students in the learning communities were more academically and socially engaged. At the same time, they perceived themselves as having experienced significantly more encouragement, support, and intellectual gain than did similar students not enrolled in these programs" (p. 47).

Why LC Programs Promote Student Success: What the Literature Tells Us

While the picture is far from complete, a number of scholars have theorized why LC programs yield the positive outcomes described above. Some scholars attribute these positive outcomes to the critical and integrative thinking promoted by interdisciplinary (and multidisciplinary) LC programs (Schnee, 2014; Tinto, 1998, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). By bringing together disciplines that might otherwise remain unrelated for students, LC programs "promote higher levels of cognitive complexity that cannot easily be obtained through participation in unrelated courses" (Tinto, 2003, p. 2). Moreover, because students in LC classes are compelled to think through a variety of disciplinary perspectives on a particular issue or theme, they learn quickly that there will never be one simple, concrete, or "correct" answer to any question. Thus, the interdisciplinary nature of LC programs promotes greater abstract reasoning abilities, without which students would be unlikely to complete upper-divisional courses and earn a college degree. As Zhao and Kuh (2004) write:

> Done well, the interdisciplinary and interactive nature of learning communities introduces students to complex, diverse perspectives, as contrasted with expecting students to come up with the "right" answer, which is characteristic of traditional pedagogical approaches such as the large lecture class. The structure of learning communities also promotes thinking and contextual learning, skills that are increasingly important in an era of information overload. (p. 118)

When thinking explicitly about why LC programs facilitate positive learning outcomes for community college students in developmental classes, Malnarich (2005) underscores the unique opportunities that LCs afford students to discover their intellectual and theoretical voices and experience "academic apprenticeships." Malnarich also believes that LCs make available an approach to pedagogy—one promoting "intellectual and cultural diversity through team teaching and classroom activities"—much better suited to the needs of developmental students in community college (p. 58). Consistent with this notion, Schnee (2014) contends that traditional development classes, with an emphasis on "rote skill and drill methods," fail to provide students with the critical thinking,

reading, and writing abilities that they will need to succeed in credit-bearing classes (p. 256). By providing developmental students with a more rigorous curriculum, alongside many opportunities for both abstraction and integration, LCs facilitate the concomitant development of both "basic skills" and higher order thinking abilities.

Additionally, it is likely that LCs "work" for developmental students, in part, because they often enable students to participate in credit-bearing classes and "earn real credits" sooner than they might otherwise (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Schnee, 2014; Tinto, 1998). This is consistent with evidence that the number of credits earned in one's first academic year remains one of the strongest predictors of first to second year retention rates (Adelman, 1999, 2005). Finally, many scholars attribute the success of LC programs for developmental students in community college to the opportunities afforded for both social and intellectual collaboration (Malnarich, 2005; Minkler, 2002; Price & Tovar, 2014). Specifically, those connections among LC peers, grounded in friendship, as well as a shared sense of both *knowledge and knowing*, are likely to counter those feelings of alienation and unfamiliarity with which developmental students in community college might otherwise associate higher education (Tinto, 1998; 2003).

The Current Study

Despite all we know, there remain gaps in the literature. Few studies have asked developmental students in community college to reflect explicitly upon their experiences in an LC program. Moreover, developmental students' reflections upon what they find *most and least* beneficial about participating in an LC program is virtually absent from the literature. Yet this information is critical if we are to enhance those most beneficial components of LC programs and understand some of the challenges that the LC may pose for this population of learners. In this study, I seek to address this gap in the literature by listening to students' narratives and learning more about the impact of a first-semester LC program on students' experiences in community college. Ultimately, I consider the implications of this study for future research and practice in providing developmental students in community college LC programs with quality learning experiences.

Methodology

Recruitment

Dr. Emily Schnee, my colleague at Kingsborough Community College, and I were the two principal investigators on this study. The learning community

under investigation was comprised of three courses. I taught the psychology course in the LC, Dr. Schnee taught the developmental English course, and a third faculty member taught the one-credit Student Success Course. This third faculty member also served as students' first semester advisor. After receiving approval from our institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB), both Dr. Schnee and I made recruitment speeches in our courses and followed up with students via email. We described this study as "an attempt to better understand LC students' first semesters of college, how students felt about beginning their college careers in developmental English, and what students believed were the most and least useful aspects of participating in an LC program." Because Dr. Schnee and I were both students' instructors and principal investigators on the study, we took additional care to reiterate that participation was voluntary and would have no impact on grades. Moreover, we did not ask students to confirm their willingness to participate until all grades had been submitted for the term. We assured students complete confidentiality and provided each with a Barnes & Noble gift card as compensation for their participation.

Sample

The sample consisted of fifteen students (6 women, 9 men) who enrolled in an LC program for students placing into the lowest level of developmental English at Kingsborough Community College. All students were between 18 and 30 years of age at the time of the interviews, with the majority of students between 18 and 22 years. Three students identified as English Language Learners and the remaining 12 spoke English as their native language. Six students identified as white, three as Black or African American, one as Asian, one as biracial, and four as either Black or White Latino(a). All students were assigned pseudonyms, which are used throughout this paper.

The Local Context

The first-semester LC program in which these students participated provides a number of benefits to developmental students at the college, not necessarily available across developmental LC programs. These included a lack of pre-requisites, opportunities to earn "real college credits" in credit-bearing classes sooner, weekly contact with an advisor who also served as the instructor of the Student Success Course, and additional academic supports in the form of tutors, college librarians, and a "lab period," which provided students with time to read, study, and complete required assignments.

Moreover, my colleagues and I conceived of this LC as a highly integrated one. As such, we provided students with multiple opportunities to collaborate in their reading, writing, and comprehension of critical course concepts. We also

required integrative thinking by asking students to bridge concepts from our various disciplines in three drafted essays and in a final presentation at the end of the term. Twice during the semester, instructors from the three LC courses came together and facilitated "joint learning sessions" in which students engaged in activities aimed at enhancing their capacities to think across our disciplines. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the majority (13/15) of students who chose to participate in this study passed all three courses in the LC and eventually placed into the first credit-bearing English Composition course.[2] Admittedly, this local context had an impact on students' narratives, and needs to be considered in evaluating the robustness and generalizability of findings.

Semi-structured Interview

Dr. Schnee and I each conducted half of the interviews one month following the completion of students' first semester of college. We interviewed each student individually, in our campus offices, and for approximately one hour. During each interview, we asked students to reflect upon 1) why they chose to attend college; 2) how they felt about their initial placement in developmental English; 3) what they believed were the "most and least beneficial parts of being in an LC"; and 4) anything else that the interviewer should know about them. The sequencing and formatting of interview questions varied, as students often took the lead in guiding the discussion. Both Dr. Schnee and I recorded and transcribed each interview.

Data Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), to assist in my interpretation of the data. Initially, I coded the data inductively, without trying to fit the data into any pre-existing coding frame. Next, I coded each interview in a more "top-down" or theoretical manner, specifically highlighting those aspects of the data that spoke most directly to my research questions. I combined initial codes into two overarching themes, which I refined and revised as I continued to analyze each of the interviews. As the analysis progressed, I identified a number of subthemes, which added both richness and nuance to each overarching theme. It is important to note that, unless indicated otherwise, I identified all themes and subthemes across the majority of interviews. To ensure analytic rigor, a colleague read a de-identified subset of interviews and confirmed the themes outlined below. A subsample of participants also read a

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[2] I determined students' placement into English Composition by reviewing their institutional records. Kingsborough Community College's IRB approved all aspects of the current study, including the review of students' academic records.

draft of my interpretations, corroborating the central findings. It is important to note that although Dr. Schnee and I served as co-principal investigators in the current study, I am solely responsible for the findings and interpretations that follow.

Findings

Across interviews, participants in the current study reflected upon their experiences in a first-semester LC program, highlighting what they identified as the central benefits and limitations. I begin by discussing what students perceived of as the central benefits of the LC program, which included access to a supportive social and intellectual community, opportunities for interdisciplinary thinking, changes in one's perceptions of remediation, improved self-efficacy as learners, and the chance to experience a more active and engaging pedagogy. As I will discuss, although the majority of students extolled having access to a supportive community of peers, as well as opportunities for interdisciplinary thinking, some also struggled to carve out a safe space of belonging and to overcome the challenges inherent in integrative thinking and writing. Following, I describe what students experienced as the drawbacks of their LC experience, underscoring a perceived lack of opportunity to connect with the larger college community and hyperbonding among classmates. Finally, I consider the implications of these findings for both research and practice.

Central Benefits of the LC Program

A Supportive Social and Intellectual Community

Across interviews and consistent with the literature, students described both the social and intellectual benefits of an LC program that enabled them to take courses with a common cohort of peers. In fact, 80% (12/15) participants attributed these peer-oriented connections to feeling less alienated and considerably "more comfortable" in their classes. For example, Hakeem says:[3]

> You're gonna know everybody and you develop a relationship with them . . . you know them, those familiar faces . . . it makes learning easier and it takes a lot of the stress off of the students because they don't have to worry about being laughed at or criticized or just feeling stupid. I mean, everybody feels stupid, but feeling stupid amongst friends is okay, you know?

Similarly, Gabriella affirms that without the support of her LC cohort, she would have been "more in my shell, more to myself." Maria affirms that although

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[3] All excerpts reflect the exact language that students drew upon to articulate their experiences. I chose not to correct their grammar or rephrase any parts of their discourse.

students in the LC program were "uncomfortable for the first couple of days," they ultimately "got adjusted to it" and "became like, like really close knit, like family." She also affirms that "once you got comfortable with everyone . . . you could joke with them, and you could take it serious, and you could like, ask them for help." Even some students who declared not having personal and intellectual connections in their high schools described the significance of the connections that they forged in the LC program. Questa tells us:

> Like, I met friends, people I could trust. And it's just that I was thinking in senior year, when I was a senior back in high school, I'm thinking you know, I'm not gonna make any friends in college, 'cause that's not me . . . and I did meet people. So that's significant to me.

Of potentially greater significance, students consistently reaffirmed that their LC friendships helped to bridge that "academic-social divide," which might otherwise have led them to feel "torn between two worlds" (Tinto, 1998). Consistent with Tinto's belief that LC programs help "draw these worlds together," students overwhelmingly asserted that their classmates provided critical academic supports, without which they might not have persisted beyond the first semester. Ramon proclaims, "You learn from people, you feed off of people, you know, I learned from a lot of people in the class." Similarly, Ronnie declares, "You can share things . . . you can share knowledge." Furthermore, more than 50% (8/15) of participants underscored that it was especially helpful to be part of a cohort of students who placed into the same level of developmental English, affirming that they were better able to engage intellectually with peers who were "on the same level." Abdul tells us, "(The LC) would help me because I would get to know students more and we would all be (on) the same level. Like, if I don't understand something, I could go over to this person because they all know what we're doing in the same (developmental English) class." Jessica confirms this when she describes connecting through a "shared process" of working with students who "understand" the challenges of developmental coursework. She says:

> It's a good feeling 'cause you know (your peers) were with you through the process. It's like, they understand. Like, it's not just like, any student . . . It's like, we have a connection . . . even those who probably didn't even pass (the first developmental English class), I told them, I spoke to a couple, like, I was like, listen, I can be here, I can help you too.

And yet, it is important to acknowledge that for a small minority of students, the LC did not foster a sense of social and intellectual engagement. Not surprisingly, the three students who reported feeling ostracized differed from the rest of their cohort in terms of religion, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability status. These students appeared to feel relieved that they would no longer be taking linked

classes with the same cohort of students. For example, Namir, the only student in the class from an Orthodox Jewish community, tell us:

> I feel like I intimidate certain people in class. Or probably the entire class. I don't know . . . I feel left out. Not, not, not part of something. Not, not, I don't feel like I'm part of it, but I don't know. Not part of something. That's what I feel like.

Luis, a young gay Latino man in the class, articulates a similar level of isolation and discomfort:

> *Interviewer*: How did you like moving from class to class with the same students?
> *Luis*: I didn't like it . . .
> *Interviewer*: What were your feelings about the students you were studying with?
> *Luis*: (Pause) (Whispers) They were all right.
> *Interviewer*: Did you feel like it helped to have a community of students that were taking the same classes?
> *Luis*: Not really. There wasn't that, you know, those type of people.
> *Interviewer*: The type of people that you felt really . . .
> *Luis*: Comfortable with.
> *Interviewer*: So even in that learning community set up, you felt separated?
> *Luis*: Uh-huh.

Overall, students revealed that their first-semester LC program enabled them to develop deep and meaningful connections with peers. Consistent with the literature, these connections helped them to feel connected both socially and intellectually at the college. Peers also provided needed supports as students attempted to grasp difficult concepts and complete required writing assignments. Nonetheless, for three participants in the study, the LC appeared to foster feelings of alienation, potentially reinforcing the sense that they do not belong in college and creating a barrier to persistence.

Opportunities for Interdisciplinary Thinking

Over 90% (14/15) of participants declared that they benefited from the opportunity to draw purposeful and meaningful connections across their courses. In fact, the vast majority of students believed that these opportunities for integrative, interdisciplinary thinking helped them achieve higher order thinking abilities. For example, Maria states, "It made me think about how two subjects can like, be similar . . . And it actually got us thinking, like, how can we put English and psychology together? And put it into just, a paper." Additionally, Boris, linking interdisciplinary integration with self-expression, proclaims, "Let's say, we had a linked assignment together, so I had to do one for one class, but

then again, it was the same assignment for the (other) class . . . I got to express myself in two classes, but with one paper." From Hakeem's perspective, the LC helped him to develop better writing abilities *and* a more sophisticated understanding of psychology than would have been possible, had he enrolled in either developmental English or psychology as stand-alone classes. He tells us:

> We learned to write, but we also learned to like, write about what we're learning . . . Basically, you know, you get to, you get to put two, two things together at one time. Like, when you're writing a paper, you're like, how am I gonna write this paper, this paragraph has to be here, and then you're like, what can I write about OCD and depression now, how do I write this out. It's really good because . . . you use a lot of critical thinking.

Similarly, Abdul believes that each class in the LC facilitated mastery of the others. He says, "One essay I wrote about intelligence . . . So, when I was writing my essay, it wasn't so clear, the definition of intelligence, it wasn't so clear in the reading . . . I went back to my psychology to get a clear definition . . . and then (used what I learned in English) to put it back into my own words into the essay." Anastasia, a relatively new language learner in the current study, also believes that applying the psychological concepts to the texts that she read in English helped her reading, writing, and comprehension of critical course concepts. She says:

> Yeah, it was, it was good that English and psychology was connected, because the books we read, the Flowers for Algernon, because it was a lot, a lot about the intelligence . . . And we did, the first thing we did in psychology was about intelligence, right . . . And it was connected and it was like, easier to write about the (character), what was her name? His name? Yeah, Charlie.

Importantly, 87% (13/15) of students expressed that they *enjoyed* the integrative thinking and learning opportunities made available by the LC. Jeremy proclaims, "It made it interesting, that we had to incorporate certain things that we learned in English into, psychology and then vice-versa, you know?" Similarly, Shanice affirms that the novels in her English class supplied concrete anchors through which she could make more meaningful connections with the otherwise abstract concepts in psychology. The opportunity to draw these connections made the material more interesting and thus, motivated her to go further (and deeper) in both her thinking and writing. She says:

> If it was just a psychology paper I know I would have been bored. As interesting as it is to write about the intelligences, without having a real person to connect it to, a subject, it would be boring . . . Charlie (the character in the English novel), he was the subject . . . so, it was easier (to draw on) these examples of psychology.

And yet, despite the enthusiasm expressed about the integrative opportunities afforded by the LC, approximately 53% (8/15) of participants expressed anxiety about having to satisfy the requirements of multiple faculty members (and disciplines) in a single essay. For example, Shanice, who above describes the intellectual stimulation with which she associated integrative thinking and writing stated that writing a paper for two classes "was a little bit tough because I had to go by both of (the instructors') standards. It was hard to figure out at first . . . I was trying to please both . . . I was like, it has to be an English paper, but it has to be a psychology paper, and I didn't know how to do it." Luis felt a similar struggle, affirming, "When (both instructors) gave the essay . . . (One instructor) was giving feedback and (the other instructor) was giving feedback, and you know, it was like, who do I listen to, who do I got by . . . It felt like too much."

In short, students appeared to appreciate the opportunity for interdisciplinary thinking and connections facilitated by their experiences in the LC. Students reiterated that by reading and writing in their developmental English class about the concepts that they were discussing in psychology, both their ability levels and mastery of course concepts increased. The majority of students also attributed their enjoyment of both courses to the "bringing together" of different disciplines. However, despite students' overwhelmingly positive responses to their first experience of interdisciplinary learning, more than half described difficulties attempting to satisfy what they perceived of as the distinctive requirements of multiple instructors and disciplines.

The LC Program as a Vehicle for Changing One's Perceptions of Remediation and Increasing Academic Self-Efficacy

Not surprisingly, most students reported responding negatively to their initial placement into the lowest level of developmental English. Virtually every student expressed both surprise and disappointment that the college had identified them as underprepared for college-level reading and writing courses. Ramon affirmed, "I felt, you know, real bad," Shanice declared, "it really bothered me," and Gabriella said that she "wasn't expecting to like, start from scratch." Yet, despite these initial reactions, 87% (13/15) of students ultimately affirmed that because of beginning their college LC program, they transformed their notion of developmental coursework, recognizing it as a unique opportunity to develop the writing and thinking abilities they would need for long-term academic success. For example, Gabriella affirms, "The program was really useful because I got strategies I could use in the future when I'm doing any kind of writing." Similarly, Anastasia affirms:

I never (knew) about the writing before (developmental English). I never write about a book before, (or) the characters. And about the

whole idea of a book, I never read such things. That was the good experience to learn how to, how to write my opinions about a book.

Shanice also revised her original opinion on remediation, arguing, "I think, maybe, like how everyone has to take Health before they can graduate, maybe everyone should take (developmental English)."

Another finding not previously identified in studies identifying positive outcomes among developmental learners in LC programs is the following: Once students recognized that remediation was not intended to be punitive and in fact, might *help them* progress toward their college degrees, they subsequently developed a markedly improved sense of self-efficacy as learners. In fact, 87% (13/15) of students identified significant improvements in their academic abilities, which led them to believe that they were now better positioned to succeed in future semesters. This is strikingly apparent in the following excerpt from Ramon:

> I'm better at writing. Yes. I, I wouldn't, I'm not really all that comfortable, like, I wouldn't say like, oh, let's write an essay, let me write an essay for the fun of it. I'm not at that point yet, but I'm getting better. You know, I feel a little bit more comfortable, you know, today someone tells me to write an essay, you know, I can write one. You know. I feel comfortable. Before I was like, I was scared. I didn't want to look dumb, I don't want to look like I can't write. But now it's like, yeah, I can do this. You know, my vocabulary, my punctuation. Everything has improved. My grammar and all that stuff, of course.

Similarly, Maria describes changing her position on remediation as she developed greater confidence in her capacity to structure and essays and convey her ideas in a way that would be understandable to a larger audience. She says:

> And, I mean, when I, when I went to the first class, I'm like, I don't wanna be here, I don't, you know, I don't want to take remedial English, I don't think I need to be here, but then it actually, it helped me along the way, so, I mean, I, I think now I could write a decent paper . . . instead of, instead of being all over the place. I mean, it actually helped me structuralize like, everything that I write and put it into like, formation . . . Like (before developmental English) if I was to write something about the beginning of the chapter, I'll have to write about the middle first and I'll put the ending in the middle, and the middle in the ending.

Hakeem also describes radical transformation in his self-efficacy as a writer and communicator. In fact, rather than identifying himself as a "high school dropout . . . just roaming the streets (and) not doing anything productive," he now thinks about earning a doctorate. He says:

> Ahm, I feel as though my writing has greatly improved. And my communication skills has greatly improved too. And, I can see myself, I think I can see myself if I really, if life permits it, if I really put my all into it, overall, I think I can achieve my goal of becoming a professor and obtaining a PhD.

Finally, Abdul's increased self-efficacy as a writer and thinker leads him to feel what he describes as a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment. In fact, Abdul takes great satisfaction in just *doing the work,* regardless of the grade he ultimately earns. Abdul says:

> I feel that one of the most significant things (that) happened . . . I feel a sense of accomplishment, you know, like, like, like, like, proud of myself, for example. I just put in my drafts, my first and second draft to my English class and when I'm walking out, I feel like, you know, proud of myself. That's, I feel proud doing something that you know, is, is gonna be beneficial to you in the future . . . So, feeling a sense of, you know, positive feeling, you know, of doing something good.

Overall, this section revealed the degree to which developmental students in an LC program learned to identify themselves as academically and linguistically competent. As discussed, most students initially conceived of this developmental LC program as an unnecessary impediment, as well as a potential threat to their self-esteem. Yet, with time, they recognized the LC as a vehicle for cultivating a newfound intellectual curiosity and, at least in the case of Hakeem, one's sense of self as an emerging scholar.

Better Pedagogy, Even Separate from the Intentional Interdisciplinary Connections

Every participant (15/15) in the current study reported that the pedagogy within their LC classes was more stimulating and engaging than that which they have found outside of the LC. Remarkably, the enhanced pedagogy that students find in their LCs appears to go beyond those lessons and activities aimed at integrative learning. In the following excerpt, Jessica describes her second level of developmental English as far less exciting, organized, and intellectually stimulating than the first level, which she took within the LC.

> There is no connection . . . (the professor) sits there, and we're literally, reading 40, like, for 40 minutes, 4 pages. I feel like I'm not learning . . . everyone talks over everyone . . . I've learned more in my (first level developmental English) class than I'm learning now.

Similarly, Anastasia describes opportunities for collaboration and intersubjectivity[4] in her LC developmental English class not yet encountered in her next-level English class, outside of the LC. Describing the benefits of studying English in the context of the LC, Anastasia asserts, "It was great that even (if) I didn't understand, for example, one chapter, we (had) discussions and I would listen to each person's opinion and like, compare with mine . . . It (made it) easy to get the idea of the book." However, the lack of scaffolding and collaborative learning opportunities outside of the LC, leads her to feel alone and without supports. Thus, she "goes to google" for help in understanding.

> I go to google . . . I'll read the chapter and if I don't get it, I
> immediately check it in google, (I) go to summaries. It's not good, but
> I don't have any choices. I have to understand the reading.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of students also reported struggling with the pedagogy of their non-English classes outside of the LC. For example, Boris laments the pedagogical dynamics in his non-LC history class. He says:

> When I'm sitting in my history class . . . and the professor keeps
> talking, talking, talking, talking, and just, I'm not . . . it's just not
> interesting for me, you know. There's, there's certain classes that I
> have to take them, I have no choice, but I'm sitting there, and I'm like,
> you know, I'm just falling asleep.

Similarly, Maria proclaims, "Now I'm taking a (non-LC) health class . . . (the professor) just stands in the corner with like, a laser pointer . . . It, it is awful." A common theme in non-LC classes was the lack of relational connectedness with both instructors and fellow students. Some describe "not knowing anyone in the lecture classes," and others affirm that their non-LC instructors appear significantly less interested in providing needed supports. For example, Hakeem tells us:

> This class, when I walked into this class it was completely different. It
> was like, everybody was strangers and the professor was like, all stern
> and I mean, it didn't feel so comfortable to just jump out of your seat
> and participate, or anything, you know. I don't know . . . It was weird,
> but, anyway, there is definitely a different, like, atmosphere.

In sum, students described having significantly fewer opportunities for both collaboration and "active learning" outside of their LC classes. They consistently asserted that without the freedom to express themselves, ask questions, and generate knowledge, they were no longer achieving the mastery that they had experienced in their first-semester LC program. It is worth reiterating that this theme emerged across all interviews, including among those students even those

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[4] Intersubjectivity is a sociocultural notion that rejects the idea of teacher as "expert" and rather, focuses on collaboration between teachers and students, and among students, in the construction of new *shared understandings* (Matusov, 2001).

students who felt challenged by the interpersonal dynamics and integrative requirements of their LC.

Perceived Drawbacks of the LC Program

Lack of Opportunities to Connect With the Larger College Community

Although students' reflections about their LC experiences were overwhelmingly positive, they also reported on what they considered the drawbacks of their first-semester LC experience. The first centered on what students perceived of as a lack of opportunity to connect with the larger college community. In short, slightly fewer than 50% (7/15) of students reported that they became so close with their LC classmates that they found themselves not interacting with others. From students' perspectives, this was particularly problematic because it interfered with opportunities to connect with students in their desired majors, as well as to connect with more advanced students— particularly those who have already completed their developmental sequences— who might provide guidance and serve as role models. Maria affirms, "You have to go to every class with every single person, and you're not actually meeting other new people." We also hear from Ramon, "I came to school to meet new people, you know, kind of network . . . so when I realized that I'm gonna be with these same students for almost all my classes, I was like 'ugh,' you know." Abdul concurs, declaring that "I wanted to see other people too, hang around other kinds, you know, trying to, you know, experience the college life." In short, although developmental students described many benefits of beginning their college careers in the LC, some also felt that their participation in the LC precluded opportunities to "network" and connect with others at the college.

Hyperbonding

One of the most prevalent complaints among students centered around hyperbonding, which Watts (2013) describes as "a disruptive force in the learning community classroom characterized by non-productive student behaviors" (p. 1). In fact, more than 50% (8/15) of participants affirmed that the relational dynamics of their LC unwittingly enabled students to disrespect their instructors and peers in ways that were not typical in other classes (Darabi, 2006; Schnee & VanOra, 2012). Ramon describes the disruptiveness of this phenomenon:

> I mean, I, I have a good relationship with most of the students, I just felt like in the class it should be different . . . I'm a cool person, you know, but once we're in a class, I feel like you should act a certain way. And when students kind of didn't do that, that's what kind of got me upset, you know, and it was kind of embarrassing. 'Cause like, one day we was in class . . . and they were just screaming, and just, yelling out, I was like "what's going on?" Like, you know, it's kind of

embarrassing . . . People wanna come here to you know, actually learn, you know, be somewhere with themselves. Not everyone wants to be like them.

Additionally, Hakeem, in discussing what he perceived of as immaturity and a lack of seriousness fostered by LC relationships affirms:

It seemed like they're high school students in a sense. You know, they're very, I don't know, immature, or just not serious about school, and I found it somewhat, I would say, you know, that the average person would find it somewhat difficult to, you know, learn in a classroom, when there are people that are very distracting, you know.

Shanice concurred, complaining about the rowdy atmosphere in the LC, declaring unequivocally that it took away from her learning. She says, "It was always a bunch of BS (students) would say, you know, curse, and you know, just be rude and on their phones . . . things that like, offended me." Boris expressed similar struggles, telling us:

Like, I'm not sure how to explain it, but I guess, it's just like, there are certain people, I see certain kids (in the Learning Community), they're being like, rude and destructive . . . I do tend to call out or whatever the case is, talk to other people, but I, I would say that I'm a little bit more focused than the others . . . I think (attending college) is really serious, you know, it's not, it's not fun and games, it not somewhere you go, day camp or summer camp.

Overall, in spite of students' positive experiences, a significant proportion complained about inappropriate classroom behaviors, which prohibited them from learning as much as they might have otherwise. Ironically, while students describe the relationships in their LC as contributing positively to their persistence-based efforts, they also believe that the closeness of the LC created barriers to learning. It is important to acknowledge that faculty reflections on LCs appear to confirm students' perceptions that immature and distracting classroom behaviors are significantly more salient in the context of LC courses, when compared with non-LC or stand-alone coursework (Schnee & VanOra, 2012; Watts, 2013; Wiedenhaupt, 2014).

Discussion

As discussed, there are a number of positive academic outcomes associated with participation in a developmental LC program, which include retention, completion of developmental courses, and higher grade point averages (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Raftery, 2005; Tinto, 1998, 2003). In this study, I sought to add to the literature by learning more about how developmental readers and writers in community college personally experience a first-semester LC program. Consistent with the literature, students affirmed that

the LC promoted their learning by facilitating meaningful connections among peers and providing opportunities for interdisciplinary thinking and learning. Additionally, students conceived of the LC as an opportunity to revise their perspectives on placement within a developmental English course and to develop a markedly improved degree of academic self-efficacy. Finally, students asserted unequivocally that the active learning strategies employed in their LC courses facilitated both course mastery *and* higher-level reading and writing abilities. Yet, by listening closely to students' narratives, I was also compelled to contend with some challenges that the LC model might pose for this particular population of students. As discussed, a small percentage of students felt excluded from the community, based primarily on religious, sexual identity, and (dis)ability status. In addition, some students felt overwhelmed and (perhaps) unreasonably challenged by having to write essays that meaningfully integrated the ideas, principles, and goals of multiple disciplines. Finally, some complained about what they viewed as a lack of opportunity to connect with the larger college community, as well as hyperbonding among peers.

Despite the challenges, I believe that data within this study support the notion that beginning one's college career in a highly integrated LC program is the best option for developmental students in community college. This may be the most significant take-home point of the current study. These data also point to the importance of *listening to students* as a critical method for understanding the impact of first-semester LC programs on the experiences of developmental students in community college. However, as a next step, I argue that we need to develop more creative ways of listening that are consistent with the collaborative and "dynamic" principles of highly integrated LC programs (Kahn, Calienes, & Thompson, 2016). Before elaborating upon this, I would like to propose suggestions for how we might address three of the challenges that the LC model posed for participants, challenges that I suspect are not specific to developmental students within this particular institution.

The first suggestion is to consider how we can help LC students embrace those classmates who more obviously differ from the larger cohort. As Namir, the only student from an Orthodox Jewish community relays, "I feel left out . . . not part of something." As an initial step, I propose diversity-focused readings and discussions in *all* LC classes, alongside empathy-building activities that ask students to reflect upon their own, as well as others' experiences of exclusion based on race, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, immigration status, and other categories. We cannot assume that this has "already happened" or that students intuitively realize how to honor the diverse experiences and backgrounds of their classmates. Nor can we assume that by encouraging students to form bonds and collaborate, we automatically safeguard them from prejudice and discrimination in the classroom. As LC professionals, we need to confront this

directly, perhaps sharing how we have personally been stigmatized and/or marginalized by our memberships within various categories. We might struggle as a community to identify our implicit biases and when necessary, to actively fight against them (Boysen & Vogel, 2009). Ideally, faculty and students will recognize the promotion of inclusivity as an integral feature of the mission of LCs, right alongside supporting students' persistence and promoting integrative thinking and writing.

LC practitioners also need to develop ways to allay developmental students' concerns about the difficulties of integrating ideas from distinctive courses and disciplines. As Shanice affirmed, "I was like, it has to be an English paper, but it has to be a psychology paper, and I didn't know how to do it." On the one hand, perhaps these struggles are actually a *good thing,* as they illustrate the degree to which the LC's integrative requirements compelled students to push themselves beyond what they might have previously conceived of as their cognitive capacities. As such, students' complaints may reflect the pains that we necessarily feel when building a new intellectual muscle and developing higher order reading, writing, and thinking abilities. Nonetheless, while we want to stretch our students' muscles, we do not want them to break. Therefore, we need to find ways to continue to challenge developmental readers and writers with integrative thinking and writing requirements, while providing adequate supports along the way. I have found that providing rubrics helps because they assist LC students in identifying the dimensions along which each instructor will evaluate their writing. Additionally, as LC faculty, we might collaborate more purposefully in our delivery of feedback, perhaps co-authoring all suggestions for revision, in order to ensure that students do not feel like they are receiving contradictory feedback. And as always, opportunities for drafting and revision remain critical. Despite Shanice's complaints, she acknowledged that "there are three drafts of this, so I'll take a stab at it the first time and see what they said."

The third area of concern is hyperbonding, which has already been identified as a classroom issue by LC practitioners (Darabi, 2006; Schnee & VanOra, 2012; Watts, 2013). As Ramon recalled, "Cause like, one day we was in class . . . and they were just screaming, and just, yelling out, I was like 'what's going on?'" To address this, we might begin the semester by *collaborating with students* in the creation of a "cohort charter," which would "provide defined rules for students and faculty to follow specific to participation, responsibilities, and behavior" (Watts, 2013, p. 9). Once this charter has been established and agreed upon, we might revisit and refer back to it throughout the semester, especially when student behaviors begin to detract from students' learning. Additionally, we might minimize unproductive student behaviors by more explicitly encouraging productive ones. This might be accomplished via the sorts of group projects that compel students to "practice interacting, assigning tasks, and discussing concepts

and decision-making in a group setting, with guided advice and structure provided by the instructor" (Watts, 2013, p. 10). In other words, by compelling students to engage intellectually toward a common (intellectual) goal, we create fewer opportunities for distraction. Finally, we are likely to reduce hyperbonding when we behave like role models, holding ourselves as responsible as we hold our students. We might learn each student's name early on, demonstrate respect for all opinions shared, and communicate in ways that highlight the worthiness of our shared endeavor.

Finally, this study underscored the importance of listening to our students as a critical method for understanding the impact of first-semester LC programs on the experiences of developmental students in community college. I argue that as a next step, and to learn more, we need find ways of listening that adhere more authentically to—and reflect—the kinds of active, collaborative, and dynamic learning experiences that we promote in our LC classes. I find a model for this in a study conducted by Kahn, Calienes, and Thompson (2016), who listened closely to students' narratives in order to learn how they experienced the sociocultural principles underlying their particular LC program. In contrast to the current study, which is based on individual interviews with students, these researchers collected their qualitative data by putting students more explicitly into conversation with both the researchers *and with one another.* This attempt at "dynamic assessment" models a way of listening that honors the notion that students' voices are both collective and individual, their experiences personal and shared, reflecting the critical LC notion that all learning (including research) happens collaboratively and in dialogue. As the researchers note, "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" (Kahn, Calienes, & Thompson, 2016, p. 9). In other words, we might learn a great deal more about students' experiences of collaboration when we *ask them to collaborate in reflecting upon their experience.* This study prompts me to reimagine what some of my findings might have been had students constructed their discourse collectively. While it is likely that they would have continued to extol the social benefits of LCs, I wonder whether students in dialogue might have illuminated more about *how and why* they benefited from the critical relationships they formed. Perhaps what each student said in her/his individual interview was just the beginning (or surface) of a much deeper discourse. But what they needed to go further was not necessarily revised interview questions from the researcher, but students' expanded opportunities to reflect upon, debate, and (re)conceptualize the ideas narrated by their cohort of colleagues. Thus, I hope that those of us conducting qualitative research on students' experiences consider a more collective and dynamic approach, which would not only reinforce the LC principle that collaboration is

key to learning, but also provide a potentially more effective vehicle for learning about the personal and collective experiences (and wisdoms) of our LC students.

In conclusion, this study revealed how developmental students experienced a highly integrated first-semester LC program. Students' narratives clearly illuminate the benefits of engaging with peers, drawing interdisciplinary connections, and participating in an active and collaborative construction of knowledge. They also illuminate some of the challenges that LCs might pose for this particular population of students. Above all, this study underscores that the intellectual and social opportunities afforded by LCs remain critically important for developmental students in community college.

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