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Building Community During a Pandemic Through Course Support Groups

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Abstract

Maintaining a learning community's status as a high-impact practice involves understanding the factors that contribute to their effectiveness in increasing retention, engagement, and overall academic success. By creating diverse small groups in which students are encouraged to support one another academically, both during and outside of class, the learning community's impact can extend to sociocultural development and learning. During the onset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, the ability to socially connect and engage was threatened by the shift to remote learning. However, in my Learning Community course, brief introductions and contact information exchanges served as a catalyst for interpersonal support and cultural understanding during a challenging time.

Keywords

support groups, team-based learning, learning communities, cultural humility

Maintaining a learning community's status as a high-impact practice involves an understanding of the factors that contribute to their effectiveness in increasing retention, engagement, and overall academic success (Kuh, 2008). One critical element of high-impact learning communities are intentionally formed small group cohorts that enable students to get to know one another and develop a sense of group belonging through the integration of linked courses (Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 2000). These elements of connectedness and interpersonal relationships that a learning community provide serve to deeply engage students in the learning process, specifically for underserved student populations (Kuh et al., 2013).

While "effective online learning aims to be a learning community and supports learners not just instructionally but with co-curricular engagement and other social supports" (Hodges et al., 2020), the sudden shift to remote learning as experienced at the onset of the global pandemic in the Spring of 2020 had the potential to weaken the bonds so strongly created through a successful learning community. This article describes a method of integrating course support groups that can serve to engage students academically, emotionally, and socially. The benefits of these groups can extend beyond the pandemic to improve learning outcomes in an otherwise isolated online learning environment.

At my urban community college, many students did not immediately have access to electronic devices with which to access learning management systems. Access to a steady stream of broadband connectivity in their homes, where most were expected to socially isolate, was not necessarily a given. Still, the broad expectation was to continue learning, only two weeks into the semester, remotely. While dedicated faculty members grappled with emergency remote teaching (ERT), or quickly learning how to transfer a semester's worth of in-person learning experiences to a digital platform (Hodges et al., 2020), those involved in learning communities struggled to find ways to build rapport *with* and *between* students among linked courses remotely.

One seemingly simple practice that I typically implement in my learning community courses is the creation of support groups. These organically selected groups are formed on the first day of classes by simply asking students to sit within talking distance of one another, rather than skipping seats. After a close reading of a course-related article, I typically ask students to gather in small groups to discuss their impressions of the author's ideas, after which they introduce themselves to one another and share contact information. The idea is that once these groups are formed, students can more deeply connect with one another for academic support outside of class (Marrs, 2011), as well as scaffold one another through high-quality discourse during class (Sweet & Michaelsen, 2007). The construct of scaffolding denotes the guidance needed to fill the space between what a student can do independently and what they can achieve with support from a more experienced partner (Wood & Wood, 1996). While

scaffolding was originally used to illustrate the support provided to young children by parents or tutors (Bruner, 1975; Wood et al., 1996), peer-led interactions structured by a teacher can serve as another useful form of scaffolding (Daniel, Martin-Beltrán, Peercy, & Silverman, 2015).

After initiating these support group introductions during the first week of Spring 2020 classes, students were able to collaborate in their groups on several close reading discussions before the pandemic-related emergency campus closing. I was dismayed to think that the transition to remote learning would not afford students the opportunity to continue to build relationships in the same way that in-person learning so strongly nurtured. We were directed by the university administration to lead our online classes asynchronously in order to accommodate our students' upended work and childcare schedules. This meant that we could not hold regularly scheduled class meetings, as it would create an inequitable experience for those students who could not attend the meetings.

As we neared the end of the semester, although the majority of students were completing assignments and faring well in the course, I felt that my ERT failed to scaffold the connection-building so critical to a learning community. I thought that in-person interactions were necessary to build community and that this new online environment would prohibit real connections from forming. I didn't realize that the connections had already been forged during that first week and the students would come through for each other, even in a virtual world. At the end of the semester, one student shared with me reflections on her overall experience in the course. Her narrative portrayed the development of cultural humility and self-awareness that had not existed prior to participating in our learning community. Before enrolling in the course, she had limited interactions with people from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds and was apprehensive about what this new experience would bring. She shared:

> Deciding to go to [this college] was a particularly big deal for me. I grew up Orthodox-Jewish and have never really had any close experiences with people outside of the orthodox community (i.e. aside from at the grocery store, parks etc.). On my way to class on the first day of school, I told myself that I would just keep to myself and quietly observe the other students over the semester. I walked into the classroom and looked around. The students were very diverse with people of all colors and religions. "Wow, I can't believe I'm doing this," I thought, and sat at an empty table at the end of the room. I looked at the table next to me. There were two Muslim girls sitting there. One girl was wearing a hijab on her head, but otherwise looked pretty modern. But it was the other girl that really stood out; she was dressed in a full black burqa from head to toe, with only the teeniest sliver of her eyes peeking out. She looked very scary to me, like the jihadists that you see on the news. But I wasn't too thrown

> off because I figured I would never have anything to do with her and would just keep to myself.

She began her college experience with a tremendous level of discomfort in anything beyond being present in a classroom with students that looked and acted different than her. However, an effective learning community encourages students to actively engage with the course content as well as with other learners. Therefore, sitting in an isolated corner was not an option. She continued:

> [The professor] entered the class and immediately looked at me and said, "Can you please move to the middle of the class and sit with the other students?" "Pfft," I thought to myself, annoyed. I was not comfortable being a clearly Jewish girl sitting with two Muslim girls; I had it ingrained in me from a young age that Muslims hate all Jews with a passion. But I knew this was part of the deal of entering a public college, so I listened and moved to their table.

I introduced the course by offering a shared reading of Christakis & Christakis' (2010) article on the importance of interactive play in early childhood, and its impact on social-emotional development needed for future academic success. My student was clearly in agreement with these ideas, in theory:

> We began class by introducing ourselves and then read an article written by Harvard staff members who felt that although the student body at Harvard was filled with hardworking overachievers, they were not properly prepared for college. They argued that the most important life skills students need to build to succeed in the real world are working together and getting along with each other. "That is so true," I thought.

However, when asked to participate in a social interaction in practice, her tone changed:

> Then [the professor] turned to us and said, "Ok, now everyone give your contact information to two classmates sitting next to you." What! Is she crazy? How can she ask us to give out our numbers to complete strangers?! I glanced at the two girls sitting at my table. "No way, I'm not giving them my number, who knows what could happen?!" I thought. I looked down at my papers and tried to play dumb, hoping she wouldn't notice that I didn't listen. The problem was, no one else did either. "Let's go, c'mon," she said. Realizing she wasn't letting up, the girl in the hijab, said, "Ok I'll give you both my number and then you text me and I'll make a group chat." At this point I didn't want to be rude, so I said to myself, "Here goes, I knew I was getting myself into this," and gave her my number. The other girl, we'll call her "Q" gave her number as well.

The student clearly agreed with the importance of working together and getting along as an espoused theory, but when asked to put this theory into practice, she was not as readily willing to engage. This is part of the power of

learning communities. They project students beyond simple classroom coexistence into supportive relationships, where they can not only increase their academic success, but also develop sociocultural competence and humility. Such was the case with my student, who realized that stereotypes and prejudice prevent us from forming human connections:

> On the third day of class, I ended up sitting next to Q and partnered with her to discuss the assigned article. I was surprised to see that she was super sweet and happy to work with me. She asked to look at my homework and asked for some tips and suggestions as she is from Pakistan and English isn't her first language. I was relieved that the interaction went well. After class I ended up waiting in a long college office line right behind Q. We both had similar troubles with the offices and talked a little about it. "You are such a nice girl, and really smart," she said to me as I was leaving. "Thank you, you too," I responded. I walked away and thought, "Wow, I can't believe how nice she is even though she knows I'm Jewish. Who would've ever thought I would be talking with a woman who wears a burqa!" I was always terrified of these women and wouldn't even go near them in the street. This was a big culture shock, getting to see what was behind the mask.

Stereotypes and prejudices are attitudinal beliefs pertaining to entire social groups that stem from lack of knowledge and are often triggered by gut reactions with limited conscious consideration (Cuddy et al., 2007; Kite & Whitley, 2016). As my student had limited experience in interacting with those outside of her own cultural group, she felt fearful and, thus resorted to stereotypes to build explicit prejudgments about those around her. Fortunately, in the short time that we spent together in-person, the learning community's power to engage and connect was effective. My student was both supportive and supported during the difficult transition to online learning, and she developed an unexpected friendship:

> The next day CUNY announced the campus was closing and all schooling would be done online due to Covid-19. This was a big adjustment, so Q, who had my number from the first day of class, began texting me to make sure she was doing everything right. I was happy to help, but I was also laughing to myself that I was now texting back and forth with a Muslim woman in a burqa. This was almost as surreal as the new state of the world. The conversations began becoming friendly, to a point where I would say Q is a friend. She even said she would pray for me to get married and said she wished she could help me find a husband, but she didn't know any Jewish people.

Although we did not share the usual interpersonal experiences during class, my student was able to develop bonds with her group members outside of class due to our initial introductions and contact information exchange. Her support

group became a team, guiding one another through the difficult shift to online learning, scaffolding each other's understanding of the course assignments, learning about each other's cultures, and even sharing marriage advice!

This anecdotal account of one student support group was not an isolated occurrence. Other groups demonstrated connectedness in various ways throughout the semester. One group shared in passing that they had created a group text chat to share questions and discuss assignments with each other. Another group decided to focus on the same topic for their mid-semester Educational Theorists project so that they could share research and ideas before their individual presentations. As we were in the throes of a global pandemic, the project guidelines did not require students to work in groups. This was an autonomous decision made by the students to support their learning. The support groups seemed to be more important than ever, and I believe that the students would not have achieved their level of success without them.

Transformative experiences such as these are not uncommon on college campuses with culturally and ethnically diverse student bodies, whose faculty intentionally aim to create communities of learners within their courses (Gebauer, 2019; Swanson et al., 2021). However, enrolling a diverse student population is not enough to bring about social change. It is crucial that students from diverse experiences and backgrounds do more than simply sit next to one another in a classroom. By engaging in learning community support groups, students can create for themselves a caring network of learners who scaffold one another academically, emotionally and socially. As antiracist education takes a front-seat as a vehicle for promoting equity and inclusivity during our current times of civil unrest, learning communities have the potential to elicit a sense of cultural humility within dominant groups while amplifying the voices of those from marginalized groups.

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