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A Question of Support: Assessing a Composition Learning Community for Student Learning and Academic Success

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Abstract: Learning communities (LCs) represent a high impact practice in higher education with marked benefits for all stakeholders. In general education composition courses, learning communities can provide key support for students. This paper provides an example of a mixed-methods assessment design, and its consequent revision due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, investigating whether and how a composition learning community supports student learning and academic success. Comparing LC and non-LC courses, as well as online and in-person courses, the results of this study find significant increases in academic success for students in face-to-face (or in-person) LC courses, and no significant increases for students in online LC courses. Engaging in a robust assessment cycle provided the key evidence both for areas where our composition learning community is succeeding in its goals, as well as important areas for improvement, particularly in the current era of increasingly turning to online educational modes.

Keywords: *learning communities, composition assessment, mixed-methods assessment, high impact practices, student success, online teaching, in-person teaching*

Learning Communities and Peer Mentors

For college educators interested in supporting students' academic success, the implementation of learning communities is a high-impact practice that has demonstrative benefits (Baier, Gonzalez & Sawilowsky, 2019; Mangan, 2019; Otto et al., 2015; Smith, 2001). Many studies point to the favorable effects of learning communities for all participants, including instructors and peer mentors (Budge, 2006; Collier, 2015; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Mayhew et al. 2016), but especially for first year students, and particularly those who are low-income, first-generation, or otherwise at-risk (Otto et al. 2015).

Learning communities can take many forms, from linked courses to living-learning communities where participants are housed together, to classroom learning communities that may or may not be linked to other sections (Baier, Gonzalez & Sawilowsky, 2019; Lederman, 2020; Otto et al., 2015). Overall, learning communities are typically constructed to bring students together collaboratively through common academic and/or social experiences around a common purpose or question (Baier, Gonzalez and Sawilowsky, 2019; Otto et al., 2015). Learning communities do not always integrate peer mentors, but when they do, the peer-to-peer interactions involved can greatly improve the

undergraduate student experience. Such a construct also affords professionalization to peer mentors as well (Benjamin 2020). Regardless of the model, Otto et al. (2015) point out that it is thoughtful planning and facilitating of learning communities that "can have a dramatic positive effect on students" (pp.16), while at the same time allowing learning community facilitators both flexibility and scalability. The positive effects of learning communities for students include, but are not limited to, increased connection of students to learning through metacognition, increased connection of students to each other and peer mentors through collaboration, higher rates of academic success (in the form of GPA) and, at times, higher retention rates (Baier, Gonzolez and Sawilowsky, 2019; Frey & Almarode, 2020).

Learning Communities in Composition

As composition scholars writing about students' transfer of writing-related knowledge have noted, the transition into college and through general education courses is complex at best (Rounsaville, Goldberg & Bawarshi, 2008). Scholarship suggests that well-structured peer mentoring programs also provide support by increasing students' development, achievement and persistence (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). In order for these programs to be meaningful and sustainable, expectations of mentorship must be clearly delineated (Reid, 2008) and mentors must themselves receive training and support (Benjamin, 2020; Budge, 2006; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). First year writing classrooms have been identified as concentrated sites where undergraduate students experiencing these transitions can benefit from a learning community model with peer mentor support (Camp & Bolstead, 2011). In our urban research institution, prior to this assessment project we had ample anecdotal evidence that seemed to demonstrate the advantages of a learning community built to support undergraduate students in our composition courses, but no quantitative data pertaining to the results of this support on student academic success.

Learning Communities Online vs. In Person

The current moment in higher education is one that finds colleges and universities, overall, supremely comfortable with online learning. In fact, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning environments were viewed, at many institutions, as the "brave new world" of certificate and degree-granting (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020; Lederman & Lieberman, 2019). Nevertheless, scholarship has persistently compared the affordances and constraints of online learning to in person learning, to better understand how stakeholders have reaped benefits and faced challenges in each respective mode. In their study of student respondents to the National Survey of Student Engagement, Paulsen and McCormick (2020) outlined that the benefits of online learning for students lie mainly in perceived academic challenge, learning gains, satisfaction, and better study habits, while in-person learning carries advantages in higher levels of environment support, collaborative learning and faculty interaction. These results seemed to point to student affect as the crucial variable influencing academic success, rather than learning mode. However, when accounting for demographic variance (i.e., age, work status, dependents, and enrollment status) the study found that while student dispositions generally matter far more than learning mode, online learning is still far behind other modes (i.e., hybrid and face-to-face modes) when it comes to collaboration and interactions with faculty (p. 27). Paulsin and McCormick argued that, as online learning becomes more ubiquitous, the importance of meaningful interactions in online learning environments will only increase.

Since student dispositions are such an important piece of the online learning puzzle, the investigation of internal motivation factors helps to clarify the behavior patterns of students in online learning environments, with or without a learning community. Sun and Rueda (2012) compared motivational and learning variables (interest, self-efficacy and self-regulation) with three kinds of student engagement: behavioral, emotional and cognitive. Students' self-described interest in a course significantly correlated with only emotional engagement (p. 197). Overall, the results showed correlations between interest and self-regulation for all three types of engagement, while computer self-efficacy did not correlate to any, and the significant shifts came in terms of emotional engagement. And though the study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a finding relevant to many students' pandemic educational experiences showed that as a students' anxiety increased, emotional engagement with online learning decreased (p. 202).

It is important to acknowledge, as Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) maintain, that non-pandemic online instruction, situated in robust literature and facilitated with careful design in alignment with widely recognized best practices, should be understood as distinct from the "emergency remote teaching" achieved under crisis-conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 2). The consequent online instruction resulted in declines in confidence and increases in anxiety for undergraduate students (Prokes & Housel 2021). Additionally, students experienced changes to their work-life balance, experienced mental and physical health shifts, and faced the challenge of all courses being held online, while academic and/or technology support resources, and perhaps most significantly *social* support resources, were lost (p. 9). Responding to the toll of the pandemic has led scholars like Mabry (2020) to argue for virtual learning communities as the replacement for lost social infrastructure (p. 3). Fisher, Frey and Almarode (2020) have advocated for the use of Student Learning Communities (SLCs) to help students transition traditionally in-person work, like group work, to virtual learning environments. They argue that student learning communities can meet learning outcomes and engage students in meaningful collaboration in online courses, providing a solution for the pandemic-induced lack of social and academic support. At the time of this study, however, this proposed solution for enacting SLCs entirely online has yet to be meaningfully assessed.

Background/Institutional Context

The Rhetoric and Composition Studies Program at our urban R1 university provides students at the undergraduate and graduate levels with theoretical and practical knowledge of written language. Faculty and students study the teaching of writing, professional and technical writing, writing assessment, computers and writing, research methodologies, and the history of rhetoric and composition. Within the general education requirements of our institution, for courses that all students must take in order to graduate, the Composition Program is responsible for at least four courses. In order to increase the support available to students in our program, over the past six years we have developed the composition learning community (CLC). The CLC is structured as a coalition of classroom learning communities (Baier, Gonzalez and Sawilowsky, 2019) that functions through common academic and social goals that are shared by instructors in the CLC, as well as peer mentors. The CLC was developed to support students in emotional, social and behavioral areas by making transparent the shared experiences of working in composition classrooms through peer

mentor support and participation in the semi-annual CLC Writing Showcase. The CLC's learning outcomes include 1) the development of written communication skills, 2) growth in collaboration experience and practice, and 3) participation in integrative learning practices in the writing classroom.

Currently, the Composition Program conducts regular, robust assessment on its curriculum and learning outcomes across the course sequence, an important step in ongoing curricular development and revision. However, our current assessment practices do not encompass the impact of many pedagogical and service-based supports we have put in place for general education students over the past years, specifically, the CLC. The CLC conducts regular assessments (via surveys) under the direction of our institution's learning communities office. While the current assessments have allowed us to monitor our functions as a learning community, they so far have not been able to tell us specific things about the impact of CLC participation on student academic success and retention within the Composition Program. For example, while we regularly assess the general education learning outcomes across all sections and collect survey data on the function of the CLC, assessment of whether or not participation in the CLC leads to higher levels of success in these courses has not been possible with current assessment protocols. Therefore, while we have had some qualitative and quantitative data on student interactions with peer mentors and CLC instructors, as well as some qualitative data on student participation in the CLC's Writing Showcase, these data have not related the impact of CLC participation on students' success in the Composition Program. This becomes increasingly problematic when coupled with our growing need for budget increases for peer mentors, as well as our desire to revise training materials and community framework based on direct assessment of that success (or lack thereof). Additionally, recent learning community research has suggested that meaningful learning community work should be designed to support knowledge transfer (Camp & Bolstad, 2011). Creating assessment protocols to frame such work became the starting point for this project.

Assessing the Composition Learning Community

Within this institutional context, the assessment project presented here responds to Eubanks' (2021) call for locally situated approaches to assessment. It also takes up Lichtenstein's (2005) call for studies on variations of learning community contexts within a single program. Liechtenstein argues that within a learning community that spans several sections of a course, the internal classroom environment is crucial to the attainment of learning outcomes. Since learning communities are used more and more in higher education to promote retention, the paucity of comparative research within learning communities highlights this gap. The study looked at learning community and non-learning community classroom environments, and divided between positive, mixed and negative classroom environments (p. 351). Following this, we aimed to design an assessment project that would similarly compare learning community and non-learning community courses across the Composition Program, following student participation (and non-participation) in the CLC in connection with student academic success in the Composition Program. Our assessment project was designed to help us answer the following research questions:

1. Does the composition learning community (CLC) significantly support student learning and academic success?
2. Do online CLC sections of composition differ significantly from in-person sections?

Methods

We proposed pilot assessment methods that specifically looked to correlate data across program and student service (namely, the CLC) goals. We aimed to do this by cross-referencing data that we already had (via student records and institutional reporting) and data gathered through instruments specifically designed for our program's learning community. Following Creswell and Creswell (2018), we designed a convergent mixed methods study that drew on both quantitative and qualitative data to give us insight into our research questions.

The Planned Assessment vs. COVID-19 Adjustments

First, we generated surveys for students enrolled in CLC sections of general education composition, to understand the impact of interventions such as conferences with peer mentors and participation in CLC composition courses on student success in these courses. A pilot survey was designed by the CLC Assessment Team and disseminated in Fall 2019. Based on partial results of the pilot survey, the survey questions were revised, and the survey fully disseminated pre- and post-semester in Winter 2020 (See Appendix A).The pre- and post-semester surveys were disseminated as links within course announcements via our course management system, Canvas, to all students enrolled in CLC courses during the Winter 2020 semester. Participation in the pre- and post-semester surveys was voluntary.

Second, following Holt and Fifer's (2018) call for learning community studies that examine more objective mentee outcomes such as course grades, we proposed triangulating the survey data with student records, for all composition students, both CLC and non-CLC (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We planned on working with a COGNOS report writer, who would be able to customize assessment reports where students' demographics, mid-term and final grade reports, enrollment data and use of services could be analyzed for important possible trends and correlation, along a 3-phase trajectory. These actions, we proposed, would help us to ascertain where the learning community framework and events may need revision to support the Composition Program goals, as well as where the learning community is successfully doing so.

Many studies conducted in this "era of flux" (Androzzi & Schramm-Possinger, 2020) have faced radical revisions in response to the increasing demands and pressures of an international pandemic. This study was no different. The post-semester pilot survey data was lost due to technical difficulties and user-error with regard to the software platform used. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the winter semester shifted to emergency online protocol right after Spring break. This was a challenge for disseminating and garnering significant responses to the post-semester survey of CLC students. The shutdown of campus due to the pandemic in March 2020, also limited the COGNOS report to only Phase 1 of a planned 3-phase data collection. The data was thus limited to some demographic information and student records for all composition students in the form of mid-term and final grades. The chi-square statistical test was used to determine the significance of difference between mid-term and final grades for CLC versus non-CLC courses. Thus, we were

able to snatch victory out of the jaws of defeat, as it were, and push through with the data we did have in order to answer our research questions, if not fully, to the extent that we can plan for next steps and continue our assessment cycle (Huerta & Hansen, 2013).

Results

Web-Based Survey

Despite the challenges of working through this assessment, the results present an interesting picture of student experience within the CLC, one more complex than might have been expected. Students enrolled in CLC sections of general education composition courses reported an overwhelmingly positive perception of their peer mentors, and their sense of knowledge transfer. They also report experiencing high levels of comfort with collaboration in post-semester survey responses (see Figure 1).

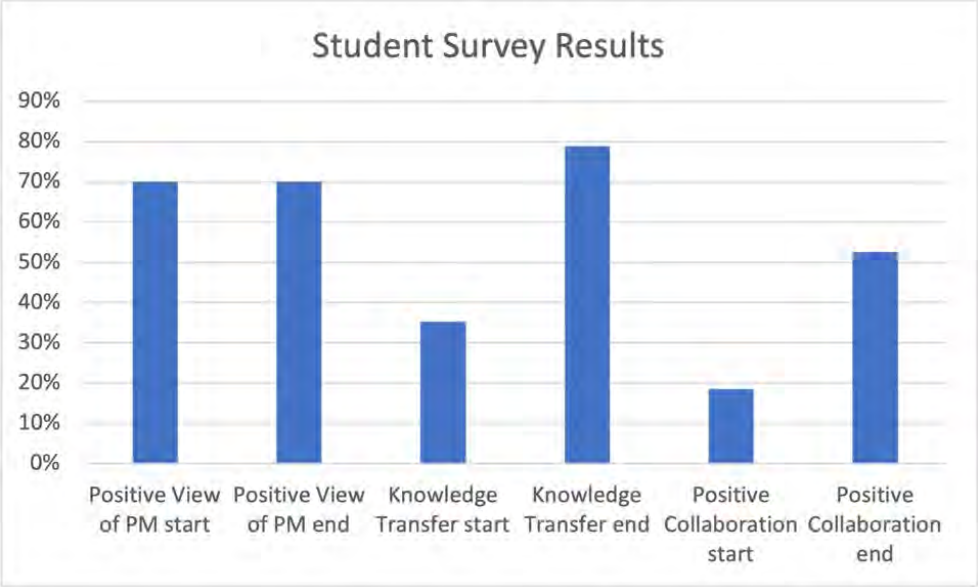

Figure 1 *Student Survey Results*

The rate of response for the pre-semester survey was more than double the rate of response for the post-semester survey, likely due to the intense adaptations students faced during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey responses demonstrate that students enrolled in CLC sections of composition courses maintain positive perceptions of peer mentors from the beginning of the semester to the end (70% in both pre-semester [n = 54] and post-semester [n = 20] surveys). CLC students also increase in their positive responses regarding knowledge transfer, as we might expect would occur in a comparison of the beginning of a class to the end. The positive responses regarding knowledge of writing and writing knowledge transfer increase from the pre-semester survey to the post-semester survey (from 35.2% pre-semester [n=54] to 78.9% post-semester [n=20]). Additionally, CLC students' positive responses regarding collaboration increase from the beginning of the semester to the end

(from 18.5% pre-semester [n = 54] to 52.6% post-semester [n = 20]).

Student Records

When comparing mid-term grades to final grades, students in face-to-face CLC courses also demonstrate a statistically significant higher percentage of stable or higher grades, and a statistically significant lower percentage of grades that are lower at the end of the semester, as compared to students enrolled in non-CLC sections of composition. However, there is no statistically significant difference between online CLC courses and non-CLC courses. This shows us that within face-to-face or in-person CLC courses, the learning community is functioning as we would expect and desire it to (Baier, Gonzoles & Sawilowsky, 2019; Camp & Bolstad, 2011). Specifically, in a comparison of grade increases and lack of decreases from mid-term to end-of-term, students in CLC sections of composition are performing better than students not enrolled in CLC sections. However, our study also shows us that this is not the case with the *online* version of the CLC (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of student grade changes over semester from mid-term to final grades for CLC and non-CLC classes, both in-person and online

Comparison of student grade change from mid-term to final grades for CLC and non-CLC composition courses		
	Grade stays the same or increases (from mid-term to final)	Grade decreases (from mid-term to final)
In person CLC	83%	16%
In person non-CLC	79%	20%
Online CLC	76%	23%
Online non-CLC	83%	16%

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was an assessment of the CLC's effect (if any) on student academic performance and of the differences (if any) between online and in learning community sections. It provides a key piece to ongoing discussions around assessment, by demonstrating mixed methods assessment on a learning community, while also answering our research questions for our local context (Eubanks, 2021). We see that while students have an overall positive perception of the learning community, their peer mentors, and their own learning, only students in face-to-face sections of the learning community see significant positive difference in their academic performance.

Limitations for this study included, but of course are not limited to, the onset of the

COVID-19 pandemic and the changes it brought to both course delivery and instrument dissemination. The lower number of respondents to the student survey can perhaps be attributed to the massive upheaval caused the pandemic protocols.

Despite the limitations, the benefits of engaging in an assessment cycle (Huerta & Hansen, 2013) can still be seen here. While our learning community is functioning as we hoped it would in face-to-face environments, this study found no significant benefit in online environments. In recent semesters, online learning has been the only learning environment available. While face-to-face learning will return to its preeminent status as we enter the "new normal," online learning will almost certainly be more common than ever before. Curricular revisions and training for peer mentors to particularly address unique aspects of facilitating a learning community online should be implemented, and of course, assessed again. Training, in particular, holds promise as an immediate intervention. Benjamin (2020) found that when peer mentors participated in a range of training practices, from orientations, to training videos, to practice sessions, not only did the peer mentors see their awareness around problematic student behaviors increase, but they reported feeling significantly aided in their interactions with students (pp. 6 - 9). While we must develop training materials for peer mentors to draw on specifically in online mentoring scenarios, we might confidently expect similar results. Continuing our assessment cycle, seeing precisely where our learning program is working, and where it is not, will help drive program improvement and in the end, provide the best possible support to our students.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. I contacted my peer mentor through the following means during this semester by…(choose all that apply)
    a. Email and/or Canvas message
    b. Text message
    c. Third-party communication apps (e.g., WhatsApp)
    d. I did not work with my peer mentor
    e. No peer mentor available
    f. In class (when available)
2. What added value do you think a peer mentor brought to your writing class? (short answer)
3. Apart from your CLC peer mentor, did you have other support systems available to you this semester (for example, do you receive support as a student athlete)?
    a. Yes
    b. No
4. Was your writing class originally scheduled to be held online this semester (i.e., the class was entirely online and not face-to-face, prior to the move to remote learning)?
5. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree,” please respond to the following statement: “I feel that the lessons I learned about writing this semester will apply to other writing classes and classes in my major.”
6. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is “Not at all comfortable” and 5 is “Very comfortable,” please rank the degree to which you feel comfortable collaborating (for example, Peer Review, Group Projects, etc.)
7. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is “Doesn’t Improve at All” and 5 is “Improves a Great Deal,” please rank the degree to which you believe collaboration improves your writing (for example, Peer Review, Group Projects, etc.).
8. Which elements of writing and written communication do you feel comfortable doing? (Check all that apply)
    a. Conveying your original ideas in writing
    b. Discussing writing on important topics
    c. Making use of rhetorical principles
    d. Adapting writing from one genre to another
    e. Analyzing and extracting information from texts
    f. Finding/researching relevant scholarship
9. Which elements of writing and written communication do you NOT feel comfortable doing? (Check all that apply)
    a. Conveying your original ideas in writing
    b. Discussing writing on important topics
    c. Making use of rhetorical principles
    d. Adapting writing from one genre to another
    e. Analyzing and extracting information from texts
    f. Finding/researching relevant scholarship

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