

Confessions of a Learning Community Coordinator

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FOR FOUR YEARS I was the English department learning community coordinator in one of the larger learning community (LC) programs in the country. During my tenure, the number of composition sections linked with courses in other departments grew from a handful to sixty-four. Over this same period, the retention rates for students involved in LCs proved significantly higher than those for their peers. Our president was sufficiently impressed to invest \$1.5 million in the initiative; and this largess engendered increased engagement, continued innovation, and exceptional levels of student satisfaction, all of which earned us a place among the nation's top five LC programs.

The rising tide of institutional prestige did much to buoy up the fortunes of the composition program. At Iowa State, half of all LCs link courses across the curriculum with a section of first-year composition. English teachers consequently have found themselves in the role of gracious colleagues willing to

accommodate the interests of students in horticulture and business, agronomy and design, engineering and biology. Indeed, English teachers consistently took the lead in generating continuity between linked courses and, in the process, garnered an impressive number of awards for their contributions to the LC initiative.

In the midst of such success, my own tenure as LC coordinator was the administrative equivalent of a Caribbean cruise: a sunny excursion beyond business as usual, where most passengers anticipated blue skies, where unexpected financial support was the equivalent of hors d'oeuvres on deck, and where interdisciplinary collaborations offered new ports of call for teachers and new horizons for students. Professionally, I count myself lucky to have been involved. And yet, privately, as I reflect on my experience, I find myself troubled by a gap between the official success of the initiative and my own lingering disappointment.

Could my disappointment signify a general challenge to the LC movement that merits more than my own remorse? Perhaps by confessing my misgivings about LCs I can call attention to a set of problems that, admittedly, I could not solve myself.

Learning communities in theory and practice

First, let me say that the administrators in charge of the LC initiative at Iowa State were fully capable of keeping our cruise and crew on course. My problems began elsewhere, with the pedagogical promise of LC theory. As I read it, this theory proposes an elegant combination of strategies in which the stable orientation conferred on individual students as members of a supportive community is enlisted as an enabling context for collaborative learning. In turn, the collaborative experience of a purposefully designed program of interdisciplinary study creates unprecedented opportunities for student cohorts to consider distinctions among academic disciplines, contemplate connections across typically dissociated parts of the curriculum, and, with some encouragement, reflect on the contextual nature of knowledge itself. Or so it is argued.

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At first acquaintance, this argument seemed both pragmatic and inspiring: the collaborative experience of an integrated, multidisciplinary curriculum would not only provide the intellectual coherence the undergraduate experience too often lacks, it also would offer a concrete approach to core values of liberal education. That is, linked courses present a practical means for freeing students from the monocular vision of a single discipline by providing them with a vantage point from which they can survey the big picture and identify for



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themselves a critical framework that puts learning in context. Consequently, as I took up my duties as English LC coordinator, I thought it my responsibility to trumpet the epistemic potential of learning communities as widely as I could. Which I did, without noticeable effect, to any audience willing to listen.

Granted, some teachers were willing to contemplate the convergence of LCs and critical thinking. But, in fact, course objectives and learning outcomes for even the best-planned sections remained stubbornly conventional, intent on content and competencies rather than the connections among disciplines—connections that could transcend the additive approach to undergraduate study and actually integrate the academic experience. As a result, I could not validate in practice the potential that seemed so appealing in theory. The problem, of course, may have been my own inability to translate a credible body of education scholarship into goals that inspired commitment. But it was not for want of effort.

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Along with routine exhortations on the pedagogical value of purposeful links, I adopted administrative strategies for enhancing interest in the learning potential of LCs. For example, I asked teachers involved in

links with English to attend an on-campus institute where English teachers and their collaborative partners could plan the practicalities of course linkage and consider new opportunities for reflective learning. Having insinuated these ambitions into the planning process, I next scheduled “linked lunches” at which teaching partners could continue course planning and contemplate prospects for deep learning.

And yet, as the LC initiative grew, the learning part of the LC experience remained more or less the same as what went on in traditional courses. Good teachers continued to do good work, sometimes collaboration with other teachers spawned interesting assignments, but mostly, linked courses ran parallel to each other and the prospect of integrated courses as a context for reflective thinking remained unrealized. My own inadequacies aside, the question remains: what inhibits committed teachers in a well-funded, effectively organized program from taking up the promise of LCs and developing learning environments that enable the higher-order thinking I tried to promote? In analyzing the problem, I acknowledge that curricular issues exist in local context; however, there are now more than five hundred LC initiatives in this country, and I suspect that in more than a few the learning component is lagging behind efforts to create supportive communities. Why?

Risks and rewards for faculty

Let me begin with the obvious. The collaborative effort required to coordinate LCs takes time; to coordinate syllabi as well as organize extracurricular activities takes lots of time; to create the conditions for student reflection on interdisciplinary connections takes perhaps too much time. In a survey of 655 teachers at Iowa State, 59 percent endorsed the learning strategies associated with LCs, but only 14 percent of respondents had actually participated in a LC. When asked about the limitations of LCs, “too much time on task” was at the top of

the list. “They require involvement after hours,” said one respondent. “How do I manage an LC and have a life?” complained another.

This concern is real, but not necessarily disabling. We all know teachers who are willing to go above and beyond if they think an investment in time will enhance their professional lives. Time spent in LCs is an investment I suspect many teachers would be willing to make if they thought potential benefits outweighed perceived risks. At present, the benefits of participation are measured in terms of personal satisfaction, while the risks often involve issues of professional status.

To place the topic of professional risk in context, let me say that the promotion and tenure policy at my school is fully Boyeristic and thoroughly intent on accommodating what goes on in classrooms. Two years after its inception, I conducted a survey of department chairs regarding LC participation and its effect on promotion and tenure. When asked if they would support LC participation by full and associate professors, 84 percent agreed. When asked the same question about untenured assistant professors, 42 percent agreed; as many disagreed, with comments to the effect that “this takes too much time away from research” and “such efforts are not recognized by upper administration.” Given this discrepancy between explicit policy and latent assumptions, junior faculty who might find LC commitments personally rewarding can hardly consider them professionally prudent.

Let me add one more scruple related to faculty preoccupation with risks and rewards. That is, while learning community collaborations offer opportunities to think broadly and discover new ideas, most faculty members have no notion how they would pursue and publish ideas outside their own disciplines. So, if your chair tells you that vita lines are what have value, it would make sense for you to stay home and do the work you know rather than explore terrain you do not.

In sum, good teachers have not pursued the epistemic potential made possible by interdisciplinary links because, despite its promise, an LC commitment requires more time than a traditional class and the rewards for time spent remain uncertain, as do the means for converting such work into scholarship. These inhibitors are essentially institutional, related primarily to how the academy construes professional performance rather than what individuals perceive as valuable. My own experience tells me that given a change in the reward structure, LC coordinators could more easily enlist committed teachers not just to teach in LCs but also to promote the kind of critical reflection envisioned in LC theory.

By way of response, let me suggest several options for enhancing the attractions of LC participation. First, if we make LC commitments a part of official job descriptions, then related scholarship would be central rather than tangential to job performance. Second, if we do a better job of providing peer review for classroom scholarship, we can document the distribution of knowledge to student audiences. And finally, if we connect interdisciplinary teaching with interdisciplinary trends in research and program development, we could partner with colleagues across the curriculum in pedagogy-related grant proposals that transcend disciplinary boundaries.

These tenuous prospects aside, I confess to an unfounded faith in the long-range benefits to all students—whether or not they are part of a LC cohort—who learn that knowledge comes in different forms and always requires critical reflection. My faith is unfounded because, in my experience as a LC coordinator, such outcomes were primarily a matter of aspiration. □

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