

Practice Presentation Proposal
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- 2) Helping Students Apply Their College Experience: A New Learning Community Approach
- 3) Practice
- 4) Learning communities were implemented in a personal leadership course to foster greater participation and deeper discussion of course topics, because it is difficult to elicit discussion from students in large classes. Students reflected positively on this experience and also gave suggestions for making the learning communities more effective.
- 5) Barry Boyd is Associate Professor and Associate Department Head in the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University. He teaches courses in personal and professional leadership, leadership of volunteers, as well as coordinating three undergraduate majors. He believes that the greatest reward for what we do is hearing students say that what we taught them impacted their lives.

Summer Felton wears two hats in the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University. Teaching multiple leadership courses and advising over 350 undergraduate students keeps her busy, but she enjoys it thoroughly! One of her favorite quotes is, "Life is more accurately measured by the lives you touch than the things you acquire."

6) Paper

Introduction

The concept of learning communities is not new. In fact, Alexander Meiklejohn would probably be considered the “father” of the learning community movement and his efforts were concentrated in the 1920’s. Though techniques have changed, the principles and reasons why the learning community was started have not. The learning community was originally about students developing their own point of views and connecting classroom knowledge to the “real world” (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). In the Personal Leadership Development course taught at a major land grant university, the instructors have used learning communities to help groups of students in one class to make sense of the material and apply it to “real world” contexts. In this session, participants will:

- Examine a new model of a learning community which can be applied to a personal leadership course
- Discuss best practices for assembling learning communities in your courses
- Explore the benefits of being in a learning community
- Discuss student’s perspectives from being in a learning community for one semester

Background

A National Panel Report recommended that college institutions place more of an emphasis on students becoming “intentional learners” (AACU, 2002). In order for a student to be an intentional learner, they must connect their study to personal life, their formal education to their career, and the knowledge gained to their social responsibility. Learning communities are one method for students to become intentional learners.

Learning community models vary across institutions and across disciplines within institutions. Though the names vary, there are basically five major types of learning community curricular models: linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies. The linked courses model is simply pairing two courses in the course schedule so that the same students are in each course. The two faculty members coordinate syllabi and the two courses build on each other. The learning clusters model is an expanded model of the linked courses model that involves three or four courses scheduled and listed together so that students are actually a cohort in the cluster. The freshman interest groups model links courses around pre-major topics and also contains a peer advising component. This model is most appropriate in large college or university settings. In federated learning communities, courses are centered around a theme such as Social and Ethical Issues in the Life Sciences. Students enroll in the three courses chosen that fit this theme and also enroll in a three-credit program seminar that is a discussion about the courses and is lead by a “Master Learner.” The coordinated studies model involves courses that are highly sequenced and skills-

specific. In this model, larger blocks of time are allotted for courses to allow for discussion and extended learning experiences.

In the personal leadership course at this land grant university, we designed a new learning community model. This model is fairly simplistic, but still entertains the notion of a learning community establishing a “common ground of learning as development, the value of building connections, and the power of shared inquiry” (Gabelnick, et al., 1990, p. 17).

How it Works

In classrooms of more than 100 students, it is difficult to elicit discussion from more than a few students. Many students feel self-conscious expressing their opinions in front of large groups of their peers. However, Gebelnick, et al. (1990) notes that if students are in smaller groups of peers with whom that feel safe, they are more likely to share opinions and discuss topics being covered in class.

Learning communities (LC) were implemented in this personal leadership course in order to foster greater participation and deeper discussion of the course topics. Students were randomly assigned to a five to six-member learning community within their class section. Icebreaker activities were used to help community members get acquainted. The primary interaction among members of each learning community occurred during the “lab” days where students applied the lecture concepts to “real world” situations. Students were asked to reflect on the lectures and share their thoughts with the other members of their learning community. While students were not required to sit in their learning communities during lectures, they quickly began doing so on their own.

Results to Date

During the last class period, students were asked to do a reflective writing about their experience in their learning community. The purpose of this reflection exercise was course improvement. The class instructors wanted to know what were the advantages and disadvantages to the learning communities and how could the experience be improved. Fifty students completed this voluntary assignment.

Content analysis of the students’ reflection papers was conducted using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Content analysis is a “qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). This study used an open coding technique whereby each paper was carefully read to identify concepts and categories. Each reflective paper was read by two independent reviewers and advantages and disadvantages concerning learning communities identified. Each advantage/disadvantage was coded and identical codes tallied at the end of the process. Every assertion made in the analysis was documented with no fewer than three examples.

Advantages

Table 1 ranks the 15 advantages as perceived by students to being in their learning community during the fall semester. These advantages will be further discussed during the presentation and in the final paper.

Table 1. Advantages of learning communities as perceived by students. N = 50

Advantage	Frequency
Created friendships/force me to meet people I would have never met.	38
Created greater depth of understanding of class materials/concepts	31
LCs were a positive experience	31
I was comfortable enough with members to share openly (Easier to participate in small groups)	24
Provided me with study buddies/help with the class	19
Made me want to go to class/class more interesting	14
Provided different viewpoints/opinions to class discussion	13
LCs overall helpful and beneficial	12
Created opportunity for self-reflection and feedback (I learned a great deal about myself)	12
Learned to appreciate/understand other's strengths and opinions	10
Created team relationship	6
LCs were set up in a good way (random assignment)	5
Evoked interesting/in-depth conversations	5
Discovered new ways to solve problems	2

Disadvantages

Table 2. Disadvantages of learning communities as perceived by students. N = 50

Disadvantage	Frequency
Didn't get to meet/interact with rest of the class	17
It hurt group interaction when members were absent (consistently)	7
Some projects were not challenging	6
Lack of Diversity in some groups (all males/all females)	2

Suggestions for Improving the Learning Communities

- Rotate group membership to be able to meet the entire class
- Have LCs do a group project to make them work together outside of class
- Use round tables, not long ones to improve conversation
- Group LCs either by Strengths or by personality type
- Grade members on group participation

Conclusions & Recommendations

The goal of instituting learning communities within this large classroom setting was to increase student engagement and dialog. Based on the students' self-reports, this goal was accomplished. Of the 50 respondents, 31 cited that they achieved a greater understanding of the course materials through discussions with their learning community. These close-knit communities not only expanded the students' social circles, but became a place where they felt comfortable sharing opinions and ideas regarding their personal values, strengths, and vision for the future. In-depth conversations happened that probably would have never happened in the larger classroom setting. Participants felt safe.

Areas that need improving included expanding the communities to include other groups so that students can benefit from the opinions and ideas of a broader set of students. Instructors should also examine some of the lab activities that were identified to be "less challenging." The instructors will also look at ways to make students more accountable for their absences since absences affect the value of the learning community.

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