

A LEARNING COMMUNITY'S CHALLENGE FOR THE TEACHER: A CASE STUDY

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to analyze and determine why a class taught multiple times by the same faculty member resulted in diverse evaluations. This paper will describe the overriding variable that successfully predicts success of an introductory "Interpersonal Skills for Leaders" course with a major service learning component. The course is either an elective or a requirement depending upon students' major department's requirements. Six sections are offered each semester to meet the demand for this highly-regarded class.

The course instructor serves as faculty liaison for graduate assistants who teach the remaining sections. Faculty and graduate students meet monthly to assure consistency. Each section uses the same text, syllabus and grading structure. Activities are designed to be similar in all sections.

Because of this dedication to consistency, and the prescriptive nature of the course, the faculty taught the same class material in the fall and again in the spring semester. Methodology changes were made in response to recommendations. Furthermore, a change of classroom better accommodated student learning. Student evaluations indicated a higher level of satisfaction with the course than the first offering.

Two sections of the course were taught by the instructor the third semester. There was a great disparity in students' evaluation scores between the two sections. The instructor, a seasoned educator, looked at the three-semester history of the course to determine factors that contributed to this disparity.

A cursory inspection of each semester's courses showed that possible variables included: Grade levels of students, classrooms, time of day (morning and afternoon classes), number and type of teaching assistants, faculty experience teaching the course, and whether class enrollment was exclusively a learning community or open to all others.

Literature Review

Definition and Explanation of Terms

CIEQ. The Course Instructor Evaluation Questionnaire (CIEQ) is the instrument which students complete at the end of each semester. Data derived from this instrument provide the student evaluation portion of the teacher evaluation process. It is the standard teaching improvement survey provided throughout the college. A perfect score is 4.0. A mean score of 3.4 or above indicates student acceptance of the course is very high. (Questions About the CIEQ, nd.).

Learning Community (LC)/Homogeneous Class. The learning community comprises first semester freshmen majoring in agriculture. Their demographics are similar: 1) this is the first semester of their university experience; 2) they are from small towns or farms from rural Nebraska; 3) they are the same age; 4) the majority share the same religion and political views;

5) they have similar life experiences and belief systems; and 6) they share professional goals and common core values.

Teaching Assistants (TA). Undergraduate students who have been recommended by the faculty after successfully completing the leadership course. TA's enroll in three semester-hours of college credit. Responsibilities include facilitating group discussions; leading small group activities; assisting in the design of tests; and grading tests and class and/or service learning journals.

Learning Community Teaching Assistant (LCTA). Teaching assistants who are mentors for the learning community program. They are learning community members and must already have successfully completed this LC course. To become a mentor the student must complete a questionnaire and undergo interviews. It is considered to be a prestigious position. The mentor automatically becomes a teaching assistant for one of the two sections designated exclusively for the learning community.

Heterogeneous Class (HC). The class is recommended by the University to fulfill three separate undergraduate requirements. It can be an elective or a requirement, depending upon the department. Enrollment comes from the following eight colleges: Agriculture and Natural Resources, Architecture, Arts & Sciences, Business Administration, Education and Human Services, Engineering, Fine and Performing Arts, and Journalism and Mass Communications. Freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors enroll in the class. There are no learning community students in this class.

The Course. An introductory interpersonal skills for leadership class with a major service learning component. It has been recognized by the University for more than twenty-five years as the institution's premier service learning course. As such, it could be either an elective or a requirement depending upon the department. It is a requirement for the agricultural learning community.

Service Learning. One of the reasons this course is so highly regarded by the university is because of its strong emphasis on service learning which accounts for 30% of the grade in the interpersonal skills for leaders course. Students are expected to study interpersonal skills through the text, practice and learn the content while in the classroom, and use the service learning project as a laboratory in which to practice the skills and academic content taught in each class. Two University of Nebraska documents describe the importance of service learning and specifically identify this service learning course as an academic priority.

Academic Program Priorities (2001) is a five-year institutional planning document. It "identifies the **highest** academic program priorities for future investments . . . based on planning decisions . . . and premised on what we foresee about current program needs and goals." Programs identified are "those that the university wishes to advance and strengthen."

A complementary, narrative document for the Chancellor providing more detail specifically sites as an academic priority the Service Learning Program in Agriculture and Natural Resources. "Service Learning . . . could be strengthened by connecting it to similar activity that already

exists in other areas of the campus. . . . We recommend that this priority be one of the examples presented to strengthen the overarching priority, 'Enriching the Undergraduate Experience.' Reference to service learning could also be included in the CEP (Comprehensive Education Program) priority." (Transition to University Task Force, 2003.)

The above two documents specifically referred to this class. Offered for over twenty-five years, it is widely recognized within the University as the premier service learning course. It is identified as an option to meet Comprehensive Education Program (CEP), Essential Studies (ES), and Integrative Studies (IS) requirements. Depending upon the department, it can be either an elective or a requirement.

Methods

Six or more sections of the course are offered each semester to meet the demand for this highly-regarded course. The instructor serves as faculty liaison for each of the graduate assistants who teach the remaining sections. They (faculty and graduate assistants) meet monthly to assure consistency. It is a prescriptive class. Each of the sections uses the same text, basically the same syllabus and grading structure. Activities are structured to be similar. A CIEQ (Aleamoni, 1975) evaluation is administered at the end of each semester.

The faculty incorporated student recommendations into class management and methodology changes for the second semester. The room was changed to better accommodate student learning.

The third semester, additional class management and methodology changes were made. The room was appropriate in both instances.

Findings

Course Composition and Analysis:

First Semester. A morning class comprised entirely of the learning community with three teaching assistants. Unique circumstances created an environment where the teaching assistants were not members of the learning community but did live in the same dorm. All students were first-semester freshmen. The class was conducted in the learning community's dorm in an inappropriate, lecture style classroom. **CIEQ Score = 2.44**

Second Semester. Taught in the afternoon to a heterogeneous class with an enrollment including thirteen second-semester freshmen, six sophomores and two seniors. There was one heterogeneous teaching assistant. It was taught in an ideal classroom. **CIEQ Score = 3.14**

Third Semester. Two classes were taught in the Fall 2004 semester.

The first class was taught in the morning to a heterogeneous student population including four second-semester freshmen, four sophomores, five juniors and three seniors. There was one heterogeneous TA. It was taught in an appropriate classroom. **CIEQ Score = 3.43**

The second class was taught in the afternoon to a learning community comprised entirely of first-semester freshmen. There were two teaching assistants (learning community mentors) who lived in the dorm with the students. It was taught in a different but equally acceptable classroom. **CIEQ Score = 2.61**

Methodology Changes:

After the first semester the instructor incorporated many of the suggestions from the class. The classroom was changed. And several recommended classroom management and methodology enhancements were incorporated. The instructor was encouraged by the .70 CIEQ score improvement from the first to the second semester. After the success of the second semester, the instructor fully expected a very successful third semester—which did occur in one of the two sections.

CIEQ Analysis:

A score of 4.0 is perfect and “3.4 is considered to have very high student acceptance and methods of improvement need to be looked for elsewhere”(Aleamoni, 1975). Variables studied included whether class enrollment was exclusively a learning community or open to all others, grade levels, classrooms, time of day (morning versus afternoon), number and type of teaching assistants, and by semester (first, second and third semester offerings).

By Learning Community By Heterogenous. While the learning community comparison scores did improve from the first to second semester (.17), it is apparent that the second offering of the learning community class is the outlier when comparing each of the above variables. The heterogeneous class CIEQ scores improved by .29. Scores for both of HC classes were significantly higher than those from the Learning Community.

By Semester. Raw scores improved by +.70 from the first to the second semester and by +.29 from the second to the third semester (with the learning community exception). The LC group mean score, while higher than the original semester (.17) was much lower than the HC.

By Grade Level. The two lowest CIEQ scores were from the two classes with first semester freshmen. Conversely, the two highest scores were with those classes integrated with sophomores, juniors and seniors. The learning community CIEQ scores from Fall 03 to Fall 04 represent a +.17 (2.44 to 2.61) improvement; the heterogeneous class represents a +.29 increase (3.14 to 3.43).

By Time of Day. The raw mean score of the morning classes improved by 1.02 when comparing 2.41 (LC) to 3.43 (HC). However, the opposite was true of the afternoon class. The raw mean

score declined by .53 when comparing 3.14 (HC) to 2.61 (LC). It appears that the scores continue to improve with the exception of the second LC class.

By Teaching Assistants. The classes with only one teaching assistant had the highest raw scores (3.14 and 3.43). They were also from the HC. Qualitatively, the class climate was perceived to be more positive by students, teaching assistants and the instructor when the TAs were not from the learning community.

Building Analysis. The original class was taught within the learning community's living environment. While it was convenient for students, the room located in their dorm and within their recreation area proved to be too comfortable and familiar to function well as a classroom. The designated classroom was designed for lecture only and was in a cramped environment, inappropriate for an interactive class. The interpersonal skills class is designed to be highly active with multiple small group discussions and interactions daily which meant the students left the cramped lecture room multiple times to move to larger rooms. The classroom environment was changed after one semester. The subsequent classrooms were deemed to be very acceptable by the faculty and students. It is speculated that the classroom itself contributed to higher CIEQ scores.

Classroom Management and Teaching Methodology Changes. Each semester, the faculty conducted a midterm assessment of class progress from a student's perspective. Where possible, changes were adapted. In addition, there was a stronger emphasis upon classroom leadership which contributed to more involvement.

Qualitative Observations.

The second learning community experience was a real challenge for the faculty. Having had a very successful class the second semester and experiencing an even better result with the HC class in the morning, it was disheartening to see the divergent results on a daily basis between the morning HC and to hear, read and observe the afternoon learning community comments.

From reading journals, papers and classroom observations, it became apparent that diversity within the HC classroom encouraged more thoughtful and varied responses. This ultimately led to greater class credibility, interest and participation. The Heterogeneous class had more life experiences and diverse goals. They appeared to see class in terms of life-altering experiences. Many acknowledged that they either planned to change their career goals based upon these experiences or their career choices were confirmed. They understood the validity of the service learning project and the necessity of interpersonal skills. This understanding stood in strong contrast to an in-class comment by a LC freshman, "I don't need the class; I already have friends."

Interactions. Perhaps the most telling outcome was the difference in the faculty/student interactions between the two classes taught most recently. There were no interactions by the LC students; one LCTA asked for an academic recommendation. However, there have been numerous interactions from the latest HC class: four individuals have asked for a total of seven references for internships, academic scholarships, undergraduate honorary society, and

application to a teacher's college of a private university. In addition two students have applied for a grant to conduct undergraduate research with the instructor for this class to be offered fall of 05. Three requested to be teaching assistants for the instructor's next semester. The HC teaching assistant is currently working in the instructor's office as a student worker. The faculty member received a Certificate of Recognition for Contributions to Students by the UN-L Parents Association. This was an anonymous recommendation completed by a parent. It was later learned that the nomination came from the HC class.

By Grade Levels. The classes with sophomores, juniors and even seniors contained the highest rated CIEQ scores and were the most interactive from a teacher's perspective. Conversely, the two classes with first-semester freshmen were rated the lowest by CIEQ.

Teaching Assistants. At the conclusion of the third semester, the LC teaching assistants met with the instructor for an hour, providing revealing information. Because they were also learning community mentors, they were available to the classroom students throughout the day. They were at times frustrated with the classroom discussions and negotiations which took place spontaneously throughout the day, outside the classroom and away from the teacher.

The instructor felt much more comfortable within the HC environment. There was diversity of opinions and backgrounds resulting in spontaneous but related discussions and challenging ideas. For that day, for that hour the eclectic class then became a true community involving students, the teaching assistant and the teacher.

"Group Think."

It seems apparent that within the learning community culture a certain set of expectations evolved as to what was good or bad about the class, the teacher and what was appropriate or inappropriate behavior in the classroom. Comments such as, "it's a good review of what I learned in high school" were left unchallenged by most of the classmates and encouraged by some. In contrast, a pre-med student wrote, "volunteering without learning interpersonal skills is like seeing everything in black and white. When you add the interpersonal skills into your tool box, everything turns to color and your whole perspective changes." That individual would have challenged the previous rather naive and simplistic comments.

In reflection papers a few LC students suggested that the teacher should stop talking about her experiences; however, the heterogeneous class had numerous students indicate how they appreciated the faculty member's life experiences bringing reality to the subject area. A few members of the learning community felt free to write that the text was horrible, the service learning projects unnecessary and time consuming, the tests too hard and one even suggested the course should be revamped. The heterogeneous class had none of these comments. In fact, they were profuse with their positive comments about the text, the organization of the class and affirmed that the tests were hard, but appropriate.

It appears that there was a "group think" within the LC. While the HC involvement and commitment continued to improve throughout the semester, the learning community appeared to have "peaked" somewhere in the middle of the term.

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

The changing of the classroom location, methodology and classroom management techniques did improve the overall CIEQ evaluation. However, the single overriding variable was whether or not the classroom contained only first-semester, learning community students or whether it was open to the general population with a diversity of grade levels, goals and life experiences. In addition, having the learning community mentor also being the teaching assistant resulted in distancing the teacher from learners.

The faculty presented this case study analysis as a discussion topic to the learning community steering committee. This committee agreed that a class whose subject area is interpersonal skills would definitely improve with diversity. Another class was designated for the learning community.

As a result, the committee unanimously agreed to integrate the learning community students within each of the six sections of the leadership class. In addition, it eliminated the requirement of TA responsibilities from the learning community mentor's responsibilities. However, all mentors will have taken the class and learning community students will be encouraged to apply to become Teaching Assistants throughout the six classes.

The decision was shared with the graduate assistants who also taught the other sections of this class the past two years. Each spontaneously expressed relief and support for the decision. They each expressed their concern about the "group think" mentality. They also commented on a sense of privilege within the learning community culture. They were uniformly pleased with these recommendations and were confident that the learning community's educational experiences would be greatly enhanced with the diversity of ideas and life experiences now available.

Taylor, K, Moore, W., MacGregor, J., and Lindblad J. (Nd.) state in their analysis of research into Learning Communities "From both assessment and research studies, we still have much to learn about the learning community curricula and co-curricula activities, and about the pedagogy and assessment approaches used within these programs." This research further enhances the above assertion. Further research is recommended to determine appropriate courses for community learning.

References

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