Learning Communities

What used to be an innovative trend is now a "credible and proven curricular model" (Laufgraben, J. L., & Shapiro, N. S., 2004, p. xiii). The term "learning communities" (LC) is an instructional strategy where people work together toward a common goal—students working with students, faculty working with faculty within the same discipline or from different disciplines, or students working with faculty. Although each learning community may take on a slightly different focus, here is one way they can be defined:

Learning communities can be defined as a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in a learning endeavor toward a common goal during a prescribed period of time. The typical time period for a successful learning community in an academic setting is one semester.

A number of characteristics, components, and features have been identified which make up a learning community (Burden, 2003; Cox, M. D., 2007; Iowa State University, 2006; Wilson & Ryder, n.d.; Wojcicki, E. 2002). A compilation of these sources is presented in the following list.

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1. **Voluntary Membership**
   a. Members join a learning community voluntarily. However, in a classroom situation, students could be assigned to take part in a learning community.

2. **Shared Goals, Objectives, Values, Vision**
   a. Members are encouraged to help develop goals, objectives, and activities together with the instructor.
   b. Once the learning community is developed, members work toward a common goal, objective or vision.
   c. Community members learn from one another including the instructor.

Learning communities impart trust and mutual respect.

3. **Connectedness and Trust**
   a. Learning communities impart trust and mutual respect.
   b. Members of the community understand that in addition to working on problems, they also are part of the solution—they must provide equal time in solving problems.
   c. Learning communities should provide a safe and secure learning environment where members feel free to discuss issues without the worry of reprisal.

Everyone has a voice and that voice should be heard, respected, encouraged and supported.

4. **Supportive Environment**
   a. Everyone has a voice and that voice should be heard, respected, encouraged and supported.
   b. The community of learners is meant to cooperate and work through challenges and problems.

    c.   Members are accountable for their actions and are expected to complete their share of the work load. Members feel free to rely on other members for support.

5. **Open Communication**
   a. Learning communities should provide a variety of ways for students to communicate with peers and the instructor; members are encouraged and expected to foster open and autonomous communication. Anonymity is not a function of a learning community.
   b. Members are encouraged to be open with their thoughts, be an attentive listener, be able to communicate feelings (even if they are difficult to say), challenge other's ideas, think out-of-the-box, know when to say nothing, use humor appropriately, be organized, be curious, leave biases out of the community, be enthused, be flexible, be tolerant, encourage others, keep each other on track, do sound research, be respectful, be resolute and believe in oneself and others.
   c. Learning communities help to create a social network of peers.

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6. **Instructor Role**
   a. Act primarily as a facilitator and then as an instructor (with the notion that you will learn from students and learn from yourself).
   b. With the input of the students, establish ground rules, etiquette, expectations, and overall goal of the community.
   c. Believe in students' abilities to achieve.
   d. Model best practice and encourage students to assume leadership roles.
   e. Encourage mutual respect and caring, tolerate and encourage challenges of opinions, discussions, disagreement, learn from successes and failures, praise and recognize one another's triumphs, support each others' troubles.
   f. Be fair, knowledgeable, unbiased, willing to help, and easy to approach.

Getting Started with Learning Communities

Leigh Smith, MacGregor, Matthews and Gabelnick (2004) suggest the following steps to initiate and sustain learning communities.

1. **Seeing the Opportunity in the Idea**—through existing models taking place in academic departments, at other institutions or learning about them from attending conferences.

2. **Establishing a Collaborative Leadership Team**—"is probably the single most important step in initiating and sustaining" learning communities (Leigh Smith, et al., 2004, p. 303). Successful learning communities emerge from strong bonds between academic and administrative units as well as collaboration between "academic and

student life" (Leigh Smith, et al., 2004, p. 304). Having a willing and able person or persons to lead and be responsible for the learning community is vital to its success. A faculty member, an administrator, or another individual can serve in this role who can work with the broader leadership team made up of stakeholders in the learning community. Leigh Smith, et al. (2004) note that some institutions form steering committees to "provide coherence and good communication" (p. 305).

Learning community constituents have different goals and should have students' learning in mind.

3. **Defining Learning Community Goals**—as with any learning environment, learning communities need to focus on well-established and meaningful goals. Well-defined goals assist learning communities in the formation of appropriate activities for successful outcomes, help students learn and promote creativity, vitality and collaborative cultures. Learning community constituents have different goals and should have students' learning in mind. However, everyone and every element involved in the learning community should benefit from the experience and these include students, faculty, curriculum, institution and community (Leigh Smith, et al., 2004). Goals will evolve over time and the learning community and everyone connected to it should be open to and learn from changes that can take place.

4. **Choosing a Curricular Structure**—Leigh Smith et al. (2004) have identified three structural frameworks to follow when creating learning communities (see their work for a full explanation of these structures).

    a. **Learning Communities within Courses that are Unmodified**
    Students in a learning community cohort enroll in courses together which are not modified on behalf of the community. Students will, however, enroll in another course or courses which integrate and perpetuate the learning community.
    Example: Themed Learning Communities such as *Business Ethics; How GREEN is your paw print? Reducing Your Carbon Footprint; Black and Latino Leaders in U.S. Social Movements; and Military Arts and Artists Militant* – offered at Northern Illinois University.

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    b. **Learning Communities of Linked or Clustered Classes**
    This LC structure has instructors who teach different courses collaborate to link content to each other's courses. This structure could link an introductory skill building course to a more content-intense course; link "foundation courses for a major," link related courses toward a minor, or link general education courses "around an interdisciplinary theme" (Leigh Smith, et al., 2004, p. 77).
    Example: An introductory Public Speaking course linked with an American Public Opinion course in which the student cohort learns basic public-speaking skills which can be practiced and refined in the public opinion course discussions.

5. **Team-Taught Learning Communities**
   As the title implies, this LC structure is taught by a number of faculty

members who can be from the same general discipline (English Composition and American Literature) or from unique disciplines (Humanities, Composition, Art). This structure can be created around a central theme related to a particular content, an academic college, or a problem/issue. Students receive one syllabus which integrates each of the courses around the central theme.

Example: UBUS 310, Business Core: Lecture, a 9-credit hour course for undergraduate business students, offered at NIU. This course is team-taught between three business disciplines (finance, marketing, and operations management) and introduces "students to the three primary functional areas in business" (Northern Illinois University, 2007c, para. 1).

Knowing your students and their academic needs is at the heart of all instruction. Therefore, doing some research about your students will help you through the LC planning stages (which can be gleaned from academic advisors and colleagues).

6. **Recruiting Students**—student**s** want classes that are relevant to their interests, fit in their busy academic and personal schedules (fit into a semester rather than longer commitment), "count" toward their academic majors and can be transferred to other schools. Leigh Smith et al. (2004) suggest that learning community developers consider these points rather than creating a LC that is interesting to them rather than the students.

7. **Marketing and Promoting Learning Communities**—knowing your students and their academic needs is at the heart of all instruction. Therefore, doing some research about your students will help you through the LC planning stages (which can be gleaned from academic advisors and colleagues). Marketing plans should include information about the value of the learning community for the students—how it fits their needs and when and where the learning community will take place. Promoting the learning community can be done through academic advisors, university recruitment media, bulletin boards, course announcements, former students, student organizations, and online using the department, college, school, or university's Web site.

8. **Advising**—Advisors can help students transition to and function within a learning community and can act as spokespersons in recruitment efforts. Leigh Smith et al. (2004) suggest that advisors be included when planning learning communities for their perspective on students' personal, academic and scheduling needs.

Assessment strategies should be well thought out and start at the beginning of the LC experience and include both formative (throughout the learning) and summative (at the end of learning) formats.

9. **Registration and Scheduling**—getting student buy-in to actually commit to a learning community begins with its purpose—what is the overall goal and how will students benefit from it? Leigh Smith et al. (2004) state that learning communities can help students adjust to college life, can assist students in registering for bundled courses, and provide a means to make new friends and study partners. As mentioned in the previous step, advisors can play a crucial role in helping students through all phases of a learning community.

10. **Assessment**—assessment strategies should be well thought out and start at the beginning of the LC experience and include both formative

(throughout the learning) and summative (at the end of learning) formats. As with any teaching strategy, assessment methods should evaluate the goals and instructional objectives (the purpose of the learning community) and meet the needs of all the stakeholders – the students, the instructors, the administrators, the institution, the curriculum, and any other people who are involved in the learning community.

In *Sustaining & Improving Learning Communities,* Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004) list four learning community forms or models all of which are offered at NIU:

1. ***Paired or Clustered Courses.*** NIU's Department of Special and Early Education requires students to enroll in courses which are sequenced in blocks for students enrolled in the teacher education programs.
2. ***Cohorts in Large Courses or TLCs (Themed Learning Communities).*** NIU offers Themed Learning Communities which enroll "a common cohort of students in a small, personal 'learning community' by linking general education or other undergraduate courses around a common theme or area of interest" (Northern Illinois University, 2011, para. 1).
3. ***Team-taught Programs.*** The College of Business at NIU offers UBUS 310, Business Core: Lecture, a 9-credit hour course for undergraduate business students. This course is team-taught between three business disciplines (finance, marketing, and operations) and introduces "students to the three primary functional areas in business" (Northern Illinois University, 2007c, para. 1). Visit the College of Business Web site to see their other team-taught courses at (http://www.cob.niu.edu/).
4. ***Residence-based learning communities, models that intentionally link the classroom-based learning community with a residential life component.*** NIU has several Academic Residential Program communities, including Business Careers House; Fine Arts House; Health House; Hearing Impaired Interest House; Honors House; International House; Science Engineering & Technology House; and Teacher Education and Certification House. The "Academic Residential Programs . . . [strengthen] connections between students and faculty within a chosen course of study." (Northern Illinois University, 2007a, para. 1).

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Summary

Learning communities create interdisciplinary learning environments which assist students in becoming partners in their own learning. Learning communities encourage students to take an active role in their learning through open communication, creative thinking, negotiation, and mutual respect of each member of the community.

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Selected Resource
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