

An Introduction to Learning Communities

Anne Mahoney and Judith Flynn

Abstract

The learning community as a distinct way of teaching and learning serves a unique purpose in today's educational environment. This movement reflects the need of our society in 2005 to be part of something larger than us. This need is relevant not only for students, but also for instructors as they work with others to create a course and build community in and beyond the classroom.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the learning community concept and its place in the urban and suburban context, to discuss design, to emphasize the value of an interactive learning team, to suggest guidelines for implementation of a learning community, and to survey learning community practices.

The Learning Community Concept

The transformation to near-universal higher education in the second half of the 20th century created a need for new ways of engaging students and thinking about how we teach and how students learn. The learning community concept developed as a means to orient students to the expectations of higher education while providing them with the support needed to enable them to be successful even as they enter what represents a new culture for many of them (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick 2004, 5–6). Research over the past decade has confirmed that learning communities represent good practice in undergraduate education (Levine Laufgraben and Shapiro 2004, 13).

The learning community as a tool for teaching and learning is not a new idea. The Washington Center at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., established its presence as the national leader in the movement, serving as a powerful resource by way of their website, workshops, and curriculum retreats. We would encourage you to take advantage of these resources, as we have from the beginning of our work with learning communities at the Metropolitan Community Colleges in Kansas City, Mo.

Learning communities at universities and community colleges began with a purposeful restructuring of the curriculum. Students are enrolled in a first-year seminar and at least one other class, which enables them to develop a sense of community among their peers. There is occasionally a theme or a central question that crosses courses and disciplines to tie the experience together for students, enabling them to build explicit connections between ideas and disciplines. Learning communities are usually designed and taught by an instructional team, with an emphasis on student involvement. Teams

consist, depending on the model, of faculty, administrators, counselors, advisors, librarians, registrars, peer mentors, and other support personnel.

The focus on a team-based instructional approach is critical. Examples of proactive team leadership at Metropolitan Community Colleges have included the opportunity for students to have a connection with the college's library through a librarian; to have lunch with academic advisors to discuss their goals and progress; to get computer support with assigned projects; to receive tutoring through the Academic Resource Center; and to have access to a counselor assigned to their learning community (LC).

In order for all of this to work, communication is essential. Registrars must be kept in the loop to help facilitate planning for LC courses and what options learning communities students will have in terms of changing their schedules; facilities must be scheduled in advance; and above all, the dean needs to be aware of the activity.

Metropolitan Context

Learning communities are particularly important for urban and suburban metropolitan universities or community colleges serving commuter students, two places where students frequently do not feel a part of the campus life. These institutions often have a greater diversity of student backgrounds and competitors for student time. Unlike a "traditional" campus with students who live in dorms and who rarely need to leave the campus, urban institutions often struggle to keep students on campus longer than it takes to park and attend class. Unfortunately, these are the students who are more likely to leave if something comes up in their off-campus life, precisely because coming to campus is an interruption of that life instead of the center of it.

Research has shown that developing connections with faculty and peers makes student success more likely — it is imperative that students who have complicated lives off-campus are able to connect with an individual or a group on campus. This has been reflected by such remarks by LC students in interviews as: "This was a family." "You could always ask another student for help." "The resource i.e. tutors, librarians, and advisors visited the class and were part of discussions." "I made friends." "I learned more than in a stand-alone class because I was more at ease." "Having an advisor sit and participate in discussions made him more accessible."

These students learned to create their own positive learning environment. It must be said that the tough part of this work is that they thrive on the building of a social community. The members of the learning community team must work hard to build an academic community. Students are overjoyed to find relationships and groups and friends. They also, however, need high academic bars set early and consistently that enable them to talk about the course content and their lives. They will lean toward a discussion of their lives and skip the critical thinking part if the team is not aware of the need to build both a social and academic community.

Variation in Structures

The Washington Center defines a learning community as “a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to foster more explicit intellectual connections between students, between students and their faculty, and between disciplines” (Washington Center, 2004).

As an example of a **linked** learning community model, two or more instructors agree on an overarching theme to connect their courses and the courses are scheduled back-to-back. Students are enrolled in all of them, and if they drop one, they drop them all. This is why it is imperative that the registrar and student services staff need to be kept in the loop, to enroll students in a way that will prevent problems later. Instructors might offer two stand-alone humanities classes, such as Introduction to Film and African-American Literature. These classes at Blue River Community College, one of the MCC in Kansas City, are taught at different times, but are linked with an overarching theme, such as one entitled “Beyond the Mask.” Students read selections on topics such as invisibility or the American dream, and then see films that connect to the themes discussed to the literature. The instructors work together constantly to assure that the curriculum, assignments, and group discussions build community in the classroom and at the same time lead the students toward mastering the course outcomes.

Linked learning communities are more than team teaching because of the team and theme elements. Many instructors at MCC persuade the deans to schedule their other classes in such a way that instructors are free to attend and contribute to the linked class. Instructors also may choose specific dates for the linked sessions; including them on the syllabi from the onset so students look forward to the large block of time designed by the instructors and the team around the overarching theme.

For example, in an African-American Literature/Introduction to Film class, the themes of “invisibility” and “the mask” were used to connect readings and film viewing. A specific assignment is to locate passages in slave narratives where characters wore masks for protection and then to cite parts of the film *On the Waterfront* in which characters also wore masks for protection. The readings and the viewing of specific scenes, along with guided questions, help students use the theme to connect the linked assignments. Discussions include: “What are characteristics of the mob mentality?” “How does a person survive as an individual in what appears to be a hopeless situation?” and “How do the class themes resonate in everyday modern life?” It might seem that the character of Marlon Brando navigating his way among struggling dockworkers has little in common with a nameless slave living in America’s southern culture. The theme drives the discussions to help students discover the commonalities. This is only one example of assignment design with theme in mind.

Students are given a schedule for the linked session in specific time increments so they know exactly what to expect.

For example:

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 9:00 – 9:30 | Finish actively viewing <i>On the Waterfront</i> ; hand out three reviews. |
| 9:30 – 11:00 | Groups respond to assigned questions, writing answers and reporting the answers to the class including citing scenes and passages as part of the report. |
| 11:00 – 11:15 | Break with food and drinks |
| 11:15 | Students write alone for 15 minutes in reaction to the discussion using the questions on the board: Have you ever felt invisible? Have you ever made someone else feel invisible? Describe. No names, please. |
| 11:30 | Students volunteer to share reactions and instructors guide the class in the end of the linked session. Music from the film era and the literature era is played at the beginning and the end of the session. |

While they eat and wrap up, students get their next reading assignment and have an academic check-in with the counselor assigned to the class. Instructors stick to this time commitment and the students expect these types of blocks of time to write, think, discuss, eat, and compare thematically written language and film language. Every linked session has a different title: “Invisibility,” “Beyond the Mask,” “Power,” and “Overcoming Rage.” They appear on the syllabi so through the syllabi, students and team members are clear about the specific themes that will be woven into the learning community courses.

When discussing a play in one linked session, for instance, the film version will introduce two scenes, then students read those scenes and another group acts those scenes and everyone responds to the theme and the characters’ struggle: How is it different when you view than when you read? How is the conflict different when you read than when you act? How does the role of audience change how you perceive the scene? What elements of film tell the story? What elements of literature tell the story? What on-stage, nonverbal communication and live action tells the story? Compare the three.

Without the block of two classes in a row, these kinds of activities could not happen. The structuring of time becomes a very important part of preparing for a linked session. Some colleges cannot free instructors for the time to be in both classes, so they plan together and use the theme to connect the classes. Every college uses the model in different ways, depending on the circumstances.

One can see the advantage of the time block. The **integrated** model is one way to ensure it every class period. An integrated or “cluster” model might use the same theme but the instructors would be in the classroom together for combined class

sessions. In this case, the enrollment must be that of two classes if they combine two, three classes if they combine three, and so on. An example of a four-course integrated learning community at MCC is the “Road Less Traveled,” with speech, history, English, and math. Projects were integrated, and all instructors were there every day for five days for 12 weeks. Orientation, advising, and assessment were integrated into the curriculum as part of the course. Students would write and speak about topics and themes that fit history or a population study that fit the rubric for the math class. Off-campus meetings included the Kansas City History Museum, where students followed instructions to collect data for writing a report and then a speech. The planning and designing of the time was a great challenge to the instructors. The students thrived on the social atmosphere and struggled to meet the academic-communities bar. The assessment tools only worked when they were connected to curriculum. Students felt a sense of ownership and spirit for the college not seen before. We called this yearlong project PLAN, Placing Learning at the Nucleus. The second 12 weeks covered biology, English, and history. It was a first-year experience and although we could not afford to try it again, the best practices of the PLAN, our experimental college, are still used today.

The integration of two or more courses builds a collaborative community and a chance to use large blocks of time to connect the students and team with the content through the fleshing out of thematic issues.

In both models, students must be enrolled in both classes. Whether a linked learning community or a cluster, students receive credit exactly as they would if these were taken as stand-alone classes.

Regardless of the structure, having students enrolled in more than one common course allows for the development of a theme. At MCC, some learning communities that have been made consistently over the last decade:

- *Turning Points in Human History: Who We Are; Why We Are* (Biology 101/History 133).
- *Vision Quest II: Searching for the American Soul* (History 121/English 102).
- *An Issue of Humanity: Morality, Just Wars, and Fair Peace* (History 199A/Humanities 205).
- *The Story of a Culture* (English 155/Speech 128).

Themes are used to bridge discipline gaps and enable instructional teams to employ guided group work and seminar formats. Students make connections with content through new classroom techniques, such as using open discussions to explore themes:

- *Hamlet*: Identify the advantages and disadvantages of being an only child.
- *On the Waterfront*: Have you ever been snitched on?
- *The Color Purple*: Have you ever felt invisible?
- *Life is Beautiful*: How does war affect your worldview?

These open questions tend to open the classroom as well. Students are encouraged to think beyond the traditional classroom and take the questions out into coffee shops, bookstores, museums, wellness trails, cinemas or live theatres, public lectures or panels, and cultural events such as Irish Fest, Greek Fest, or the local Jazz Festival. These off-campus trips are part of curriculum restructuring and are viewed as a part of the class, not a day to play. If students are coming right from high school this new approach to campus learning must be taught and never assumed.

Blue River Community College, one of the five MCC community colleges, has set a goal to become a learning college. So, as part of this philosophy, we determined a common theme committee with a diverse makeup that decides on a common theme and book for the college every year. The first year the theme was exploration; last year, the campus theme was transition. Next year, the theme will be enlightenment. The idea is that when these off-campus trips are not feasible, we will bring groups, panels, speakers, and artists here who fit the theme of the year.

The learning community classes adopt the common book and the campus theme overarches the chosen themes of the learning communities offered each semester. The theatre and film seasons fit the theme. Using the learning community model, we are trying to reach out to the community beyond the classroom to help people think thematically about many issues.

The learning community is absolutely the source of this college-wide culture. Instructors and staff are all invited to use the campus theme in assignments, projects, and events. Even in stand-alone classes, students get the chance to connect with the larger campus life and see how themes cross roles and disciplines. The learning community classrooms are the heart of this philosophy of the learning college.

Building a Team

College instructors have begun to see the advantage of creating and working with what is often called a “learning team.” This team isn’t just two instructors from two different disciplines teaching together. It isn’t just these two instructors designing a class with the idea of community in mind. It isn’t just building thematic connections to content as part of the curriculum. What, then, is a learning team, and how is it reflected in a learning community?

The team is made up of administrators, counselors, advisors, librarians, tutors, and technical support staff. All of these individuals contribute to the success of a dynamic learning community. Each person on the team needs a copy of the course syllabus and assignments. Many participate in class activities. Some consult with students one-on-one. Some are resources for discussing content of the course or content of students’ lives.

The learning community instructors seek out these other members of the campus. Counselors/advisors are active members of the team from designing the syllabi to the

day of final exams. They advise faculty on scheduling, general education requirements, and potential enrollment; inform students of the LC option as they enroll; serve as resource persons for the class during the semester; and assist students in transferring the experience and knowledge gained from the learning community to future course offerings.

Librarians can create research assignments linked with content and theme. They also generate bibliographies of Web sites and appropriate materials students might use during the class. Keeping the personnel of the library and academic support center up to date on what is happening with your class adds to the outreach necessary in building the extended team.

On the first day of class, the instructor lists the assigned advisor, the four librarians, the tutors, the registrar, the counselors, the computer support personnel, and the two deans on the board. The instructor announces, "All of these folks have a copy of the syllabus. All of them know the expectations of the class. One counselor will join the class as an active member. The library has already worked with the instructors to generate how-to-find handouts, how-to-get-your-grade handouts, how-to-evaluate-sources-on-the-Internet handouts, and a special bibliography for this learning community course. The academic advisors can help you enroll for next term or prepare for graduation. The support staff know project due dates and will help you with technology issues if you ask ahead of time. They even can be here the day of the presentation if you ask early." The message is, "There is a team of people dedicated to student success, and only two of us are giving you a grade. Treat these people with respect and they will help you get more from the semester experience. The learning community includes them."

As an active member of this learning team, the marketing department informs everyone about the concept of the learning community, the scheduled classes, and enrollment procedures. MCC has produced a video, flyers, pamphlets, posters, and a special page in our college catalogue to support the movement. As part of the design process, the instructors must share their course plans with marketing personnel in a timely manner in order to get the desired results.

Contacting the marketing department and the print shop about the course early is also part of the planning that is not common practice for instructors as they prepare for a stand-alone class. As one can see, this is very collaborative work, both before the class and during the semester. Students learn as they see instructors modeling civil communication with others and appropriate use of humor in human interactions. They learn holistically by doing, by observing, and by reflecting on readings.

Assessment is another important component of an effective learning community. At MCC, the Research Office provides all learning communities with pre- and post-surveys that evaluate how students learn differently in this environment. In addition to structured in-class observations, they also conduct focused interviews with students

and faculty. It has been shown that instructors revitalize their teaching style, acquire a new view of content, and discover new strategies for reaching students when teaching in a learning community.

A learning community designed to include many members of the campus community needs flexibility, as student input changes teacher leadership. Students begin to see the whole campus community as part of their team and use all their resources as needed. They become more independent in their learning and make powerful connections between disciplines. The learning community instructors, likewise, use the team as a creative and continual source for ideas to make the themes alive. We consider the learning community team to be professional development at its best.

As we approach our 10th year as practitioners, MCC encourages learning communities, by having campus coordinators, campus workshops, mentoring, in-service workshops, and sending folks to conferences. Most dramatically, MCC has said that all students must take a diversity course or a learning community to meet the general education requirements. These learning enhancements are part of the AA degree program, and so the learning community is a legitimate menu option for a student or instructor who would like to try a new way of learning.

We are lucky to be backed by our administrations. It is critical that on every level, in every office, in every role in the higher education setting, people are informed about what happens in a learning community classroom. It is not a *better* way but rather a *different* way of learning. It reaches some students who might otherwise never stay in college. It has been proven that retention is affected and students' self-confidence improved.

Design

As an instructor, one might wonder where to begin. Unfortunately — and fortunately — there is no set formula for designing and implementing learning community. The art and science of connecting people with people, students with students, everyone with content, and everyone connecting the content to life experience, is not a simple step-by-step process.

The good news is that there are tested guidelines to follow and questions to ask as you create your learning team and begin to build community in your classroom. Most importantly, suggested ideas about ways to develop connections so integral to the learning community model have been tested on campuses across the country.

Probably the most crucial initial decision is to partner up with an instructor with whom you will be compatible. The semester *before* you teach your learning community, discuss student needs and instructional styles. Be honest about how you work, how you interact, and how you evaluate in your stand-alone course. Be honest about what styles would be complementary, where conflicts might arise, where you agree completely on teaching strategies, and where you can agree to disagree. Consider carefully

the level of risk *you're* willing to take as you confront the “unknowns” that are sure to surface as the combined courses thematically take on a life of their own.

Once that decision is made, it is time to forget about your syllabi and focus on outcomes. This is hard for teachers who have traditionally prized autonomy in their classrooms, but there is no better way to begin breaking down the barriers between disciplines and to focus instead on ways to achieve common goals. In the meetings that you have the semester before you teach the course, start with a list of outcomes you need for your course to transfer. Then, make a list of combined outcomes that you cannot compromise and build thematic connections around those outcomes. Discuss how you will design activities, assignments, projects, and assessments that engage the students while at the same time responding to your stated student learning outcomes.

Before the class meets, the instructional team should:

- Discuss outcomes
- Create new outcomes
- Craft linked assignments
- Connect syllabi among courses
- Remember the *team/students*

When implementing the design, the instructional team should remember to:

- Follow the syllabi
- Let the structure free you
- Evaluate the learning space
- Introduce the learning team early to students
- Be open to change based on *student need*

Learning communities force us to confront tough questions, such as resources: how to find time, where to get funding, what support is available, and what facility and scheduling challenges there are. We must ask ourselves if the challenge presented by our new course content is appropriate, and if the course will interface with the general education needs of our students. Questions of scheduling what, where, when, and who will be responsible need to be worked out, as well.

Compatibility among colleagues is critical. At the outset, when identifying members for an instructional team, ensure that enough respect exists to carry the team through the situations that will inevitably arise. This can be accomplished by being honest about teaching styles, what you cannot give up, and which outcomes you must satisfy, and by being open to new strategies, new ways of teaching, and the shifting roles of student and instructor.

Once the team connects and the courses are designed, the possibilities for learning communities are endless: You are now open to developing cross-disciplinary themes and new assignment ideas; changing roles played in the group; exploring new connections you find using the theme/team approach; exploring connections you find

in the classroom, on campus, and in the content; using service learning; and exploring off-campus trips that can be integrated into the theme or content of the learning community.

Implementation

As the semester begins, introduce the learning team to the students and explain their roles in building the community. The students need to see that although two instructors will grade them, many individuals will be part of their learning community experience. Make sure the students are immersed early in the community experience, using themes agreed upon in the design process.

Continuous emphasis on the theme strengthens the connections between the disciplines. As instructors work together to build complementary assignments, students eventually begin to make these connections themselves. Group work enhances the building of community, both socially and academically.

Varied activities, including reflective writings, paired discussions, and group oral presentations, allow for different learning styles and are critical to an active learning community. More importantly, students begin to take responsibility for learning the content of the courses as they make academic and human connections.

It is beneficial to make note of what works and what doesn't. For example, evaluate the room you are using for its strengths and weaknesses. Don't be afraid to regroup as students' needs change. Monitor everyone as often as possible based on the original outcomes.

Invite administrators to visit classes, as it is vital that they are informed about this new model of teaching/learning. Schedule discussions with them periodically about issues such as scheduling challenges, funding resources, and room allocation.

Collaboration is the critical factor in arranging an instructional team and designing the curriculum. Frequent communication enables collaborative planning, development of syllabi or assignments, assessment of what works and what doesn't, and identification of student needs.

Collaboration is also important for assessment. For learning communities to remain viable, administrators must see how the learning community program fits into the institution's mission statement, fits with the general education requirements, and changes the college culture. What instruments are available to collect necessary data?

Some ideas for assessment include faculty and student pre- and post-tests; in-class observations by the institution's research office; faculty and student pre- and post-interviews and focus groups; or an agreed-upon standardized test.

Learning Communities Practices

The Community Colleges often offer two classes back-to-back using shared syllabi and shared assignments with a common theme and common book to build community in the classroom. Students who usually run from campus to work or home find that these types of classes give them the motivation to study with others on campus, use the campus library, speak with advisors as they face roadblocks in learning, and operate as part of the college by getting involved in campus life. The environment of the learning community nurtures human interaction as part of the curriculum.

For instance, in one common public speaking and English combination, the students use papers and revise them into the spoken word. The librarians, knowing the discussion the class had been having over the difference between the written and the spoken language, helped students as they practiced citing sources aloud or writing them for an MLA bibliography. The point is that in a learning community, the library is perceived not as a place to go but rather as part of the classroom, and the librarians, knowing the context of the courses, can know the students as well as their instructors. Students responded that they felt as if they could explore the comparison between the written and the spoken by visiting with the librarians as well as when working on class projects.

Another learning community exploring writing and public speaking took students off campus to the local museum where they had to study a particular artist and had guided questions to answer as they experienced, many for the first time, the works of their chosen artist. Before leaving campus, students spent a session in the library researching the artists they would study. They reported in a public speaking format what they had learned and the reflections they had written about the museum visit. These off-campus classroom sessions are not field trips; they are classes, and the expectation of the group is that they meet on time, form groups, know the responsibility of the group, and have quiet time to write alone based on the carefully crafted questions of the instructors. Upon returning to the classroom, students bring the experiences with them, and the dynamic of the class changes. The group also met at a Barnes and Noble bookstore with the same type of structured exercise groups, discussions, and reflections.

It must be noted that these types of off-campus trips need to be integrated into the course syllabi so the student can use the new place (whether it is a museum, a book store, concert, or play) as another place to interact and build a stronger community. How well the trips are planned, the response to group work and to reflections, and the clear purpose of the event is key to these events being co-curricular.

One MCC campus has a Friday film series, and many instructors offer that as an option for students if they need another outside event for their requirement. The film and speaker must be integrated to the topic at the time and connected to the content of the course.

We are asking students to do more than master the material of two courses; we are asking them to practice and learn to connect the content of the two courses so they do not see every course as isolated. The final connection, and the toughest and most crucial, is that they connect this content with their own lives. The skill of making meaningful connections requires the desired outcome of every course: critical thinking.

In a university, the challenge is to make the larger classes user-friendly and manageable. On a community college campus in the suburbs or in an urban setting, it is to make the small classes part of a larger community. In all cases the learning community demands that the students see themselves as a valuable part of a community where contributions make a difference. The obvious point here is that students then apply this to better citizenship and relationships with family members and friends.

We use the model to teach honoring human interaction, celebrating uniqueness in community, embracing differences, and being able to see connections in life between what appears to at first be disconnected ideas. For instance, in a cross-discipline learning community between science and social science, students were asked, “What do biology and psychology have in common?” They immediately answered, “Too many terms to learn.” But when two instructors teach the human brain from two different perspectives, students begin to see the layers of learning that they can apply to many settings.

In discussing the concept of persuasion in writing and speaking, students used an exercise designed by John Mumma, an English professor. In his learning community experiences, students were asked to write a dialogue convincing people to loan them \$50. They were asked to write the dialogue, including many of the logical fallacies studied plus as much slang as they could in a 20-line skit they presented to the class. The class counted and named the fallacies. Then the pair of students rewrote the argument, translating the slang into formal English and correcting the errors in reasoning. This is one of many examples of exercises to build community that teaches the class to be aware of how they write, think, and speak.

Another successful combination of activities that build classroom community is the “Read, Write, and Reflect” exercise. Many students have trouble reading texts outside of class. This exercise helps the instructor identify this early in the course. The writing piece gives the instructor a chance to intervene with those who need help in the area of reading, no matter what course is being taught, and the reflection gives the students a chance to think quietly, alone in the community. Sometimes this is the first time they have had this experience. Robyn McGee, an English professor, uses this exercise in all of her learning community courses. The next step is to ask volunteers to read their written reflection to the class. She has found that the deeper thinking occurs in the writing; students make more connections in the writing, and then in the subsequent discussion.

Students love to give their opinion. In a strong learning community session, they feel safe to do so, safe to question, and in writing reflections they think before they share too much. No one has to share; there is no pressure to read too-personal thoughts. The focus in this work is the process of learning. Before opening the floor to what I call “blurting” answers, this exercise gives students a chance to think beyond stereotypes and see from more than their own worldview. A learning community really creates the opportunity for students to identify their worldviews and accept the views of others. This is an obvious life lesson that can be practiced in a classroom setting.

We sometimes use this in the English/Theatre History or Film/Psychology learning community model to flesh out tough issues, such as the open questions mentioned previously. When met with resistance in the study of Hamlet, under the overarching theme of family issues, we ask students a series of questions about stepparents, being an only child, power in families, money and status, and belief in ghosts. After they write and share responses, they are at once interested in the character of this young Dane, an only child who has lost his father and is being asked to accept a stepparent and who visits with the ghost of his beloved father.

Another example of a learning community assignment that worked and reaches beyond the classroom was an assignment for the same course, public speaking and English composition. It could be used in any learning community crafted to match the disciplines and outcomes. Students, for a final presentation and paper, were asked to research using interviews, articles, and statistics to convince us to give to a charity. Theresa Hannon, creative writing instructor, provided a rubric for the students to use and offered a prize to the most persuasive paper. But what happened could never have been predicted: These students, who had such a need to help others and had never been asked (since they usually are the ones in need), exploded with ideas and actions.

Our campus came alive with these projects. Not a mere poster, but the Bloodmobile appeared, as did baskets set out to collect clothes for families in need, organized by a student who had received secondhand clothing. We had a young man who did research and signed up students and faculty for the breast cancer run to benefit individuals who, like his mother, had survived the disease. He also informed the class, and many participated in the citywide run. Some of these students had never been to Downtown Kansas City. Without exception every student became passionate about a charity, brought in speakers, and created a community beyond the classroom, even inviting other classes to be part of this assignment. These are just a few samples of how an entire campus was affected by the activity of the learning community in a positive way.

The existence of four or five learning communities on your campus can leave a lasting mark on those who are a part of it. Whether a large university or a small community college, the need is there for students to embrace the occasions of human discourse, to look beyond stereotypes, and to respect values other than their own in the safety net of this time-tested model in higher education, the learning community.

Conclusion

“We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” – T.S. Eliot

Our experience with learning communities has been both challenging and rejuvenating. Instructors report that they have a new view of the teaching/learning process. Students tell us that they are more connected to the campus, to their learning, and to each other. Designing and implementing an effective learning community is hard work; however, the presence of these communities has a positive, measurable, and long-lasting impact on the culture of a college campus.

In working with people in any setting, consider the saying, “When things get difficult, turn to wonder.”

Wonder at each individual student.

Wonder at the opportunity to try a new way.

Wonder at how much there is to know.

Wonder at the many ways of knowing.

References

Blue River Community College, (n.d.). Blue River theme calendar:
<http://kcmetro.edu/blueriver/theme/calendar.html>.

Levine Laufgraben, J., and N. Shapiro, N., *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities* (The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series) (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Metropolitan Community College, (n.d.). Metropolitan Community College Web site:
<http://kcmetro.edu/learncomm>.

Smith, B. L., J. MacGregor, R.S. Matthews, and F. Gabelnick, *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Washington Center’s Evaluation Committee, *Assessment In and Of Collaborative Learning: A Handbook of Strategies* (electronic journal): <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/acl/Intro.html>.

Washington Center, (n.d.). Washington Center Web site: <http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu>.

Author Information

Anne Mahoney graduated with a bachelor's degree in speech and theater from the University of Arkansas and a master's in theater arts from the University of Kansas. She is in her 15th year as an instructor of theatre and communication courses. She created and implemented learning communities for nine years at MCC, is MCC's district coordinator, and presents annually at the national learning community conference. She does regional workshops called "LC101." She grew up in Kansas City, Kansas, a close-knit community. She says that the diversity in ethnic neighborhoods there, her theater experience, plus a strong family life were ingredients that made her receptive to the concept of building and sustaining connections in communities. Her husband Joe Monachino, Sr. and daughter Mary inspire her in her work.

Judith Flynn is a reading instructor at Penn Valley Community College, one of the Metropolitan Community Colleges in Kansas City, Mo. She has taught learning communities for six years, was PVCC's Learning Community Fellow for five years, and served as her college's representative on the MCC Learning Communities Steering Committee.

Anne Mahoney
Communications Studies/Theatre Arts
Blue River Community College
20301 E. 78 Highway
Independence, MO 64057
E-mail: Anne.Mahoney@kcmetro.edu
Telephone: 816-220-6550
Fax: 816-220-6709

Judith Flynn
Penn Valley Community College
3201 Southwest Trafficway
Kansas City, MO 64111
E-mail: judith.flynn@kcmetro.edu
Telephone: 816-759-4331
Fax: 816-759-4606