Investigating a Plan to Institute Learning Communities at Monroe Community College
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Committee History

In November 1998 an in-house, Student Affairs staff development program was held entitled “Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs.” The program featured Dr. Susan Salvador as the speaker and focused on new initiatives that may be developed and implemented at MCC to enhance our efforts toward becoming a “learning institution.” As a result of that activity, a small sub-committee was formed whose charge it was to investigate “Learning Communities” as a potential process to be used at the college and to develop a set of recommendations for the Associate Vice President of Student Affairs, Dr. Susan Salvador.

In response to our charge, the sub-committee began to investigate the concept of Learning Communities (LC) and has since engaged in significant staff development toward that end. As the committee members began to research this new paradigm of learning, we became very excited about what we learned and the exciting possibilities of employing LC at MCC. Some of the activities undertaken by the committee include:

- All members participated in a live LC teleconference entitled: 
  *Learning about Learning Communities: Taking Student Learning Seriously*

- All members have done extensive research regarding LC. An attached bibliography, which is not comprehensive, indicates the breadth and depth of investigation undertaken.

- All members participated in discussions and interviews with members of other successful program initiatives at MCC such as the Nursing Department and the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Option.

- Two members attended the national LC conference in Seattle, Washington entitled: 
  *Transforming Campuses through Learning Communities.*

- Two members participated in a regional conference at Syracuse University entitled: 
  *The Promise and Practice of Learning Communities.*

- One member attended a national conference on LC in Florida entitled:
Learning Communities Proposal 2

Transforming Campuses into Learning Communities: Building Bridges and Overcoming Barriers.

Based upon the significant research that has been accomplished, the sub-committee is confident that the discussion and recommendations that follow are well grounded in theory as well as in practice (at other institutions) and represent a solid comprehension of the philosophy and practice of LC.

Learning Communities Definition and Models

According to O’Bannion (1997) the first learning community was offered in the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. Other early experiments occurred at Santa Fe Community College in 1966. For the past twenty-five years there has been periodic growth, and Washington State ranks as the leader in developing new and expanded forms of LC. According to Tinto (1996) in their most basic form LC are a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together. Gablenick, MacGragor, Matthews and Smith (1990) offer a more comprehensive description, “A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses or actually restructure the curricular material entirely - so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise” (p. 19).

Although significant variations exist at different institutions, there are basically five major types of LC curricular models: linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies program.
Generally, LC developed through the efforts of individuals and relatively small energetic
groups of faculty, student affairs staff and administrators motivated to improve student
persistence.

**Philosophy of Learning Communities and Group Learning Models**

Recently, there has come about a great interest in the concept of Learning
Communities as a new way to structure the learning experience in higher education.
Numerous articles have examined the research and practice of LC and have discussed the
implications for students and faculty. As the previous section indicates, there are a
variety of models of LC that can be implemented and a range of goals which may be
sought. However, it is essential to look beyond these “practical” questions to gain an
understanding of the underlying philosophy of the learning communities movement and
examine perspectives about learning which lend support to this new paradigm of
education.

As Patricia Cross (1998) states, learning communities are particularly interesting to
those in higher education for reasons that are *pragmatic* (learning communities have been
proven to work), *research based* (they fit what research tell us about learning through
research), and *philosophical* (learning communities reflect and support a changing
conception of knowledge.) This philosophical shift is important to recognize and discuss
briefly. It is clear to anyone who attempts even a superficial understanding of what
learning communities are, that collaborative learning and active learning among
community members is a foundational concept of LC. What may not be immediately
clear is that this represents a shift in understanding what learning is, indeed, what
knowledge is. It represents a movement away from the traditional view of knowledge as something that exists and must be discovered to the idea that knowledge is socially constructed by groups of people. Bruffee (1995) says “we construct and maintain knowledge not by examining the world but by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers” (p.9). This constructivist perspective requires that a community exist so that knowledge may be built by the learners through a collaborative, interactive process. In the same way that the definition used previously indicates a balanced, holistic approach to LC, this philosophical stance indicates that we look anew at the process of learning, at “ways of knowing,” and incorporate processes that are multidimensional and interdisciplinary in nature. This stance advocates that teachers and students work interdependently, that collaboration and cooperation be favored over competition, and that isolation be broken through involvement in an integrated learning experience. This leads to issues surrounding the type of group learning that will take place and what results come from that learning.

Cooperative learning, as the name implies, requires cooperation by learners working to accomplish a task, share information and provide support for each other. This type of learning process emphasizes accomplishing a task, which leads to acquisition of knowledge about a particular subject. When the main learning objective for a group is the acquisition of instrumental knowledge, cooperative strategies are most effective and most appropriate. The instructor maintains a role as authority or expert and the focus of cooperative learning is the subject matter at hand rather than the interpersonal process being used.
Collaborative learning, rather than focusing on instrumental subject knowledge, assumes that knowledge is socially produced through group processes. It is a process of shared inquiry where group members, along with a teacher who is a “co-learner,” shape and test ideas. Collaborative strategies are most appropriate when communicative knowledge, i.e. knowledge through interpersonal exchange, is desired.

Finally, transformative learning occurs when the individuals involved modify their own underlying perspectives, assumptions or expectations. Through transformative learning students come to see themselves or their world in a new and different way. The role of the instructor in such a situation varies however equal participation and discussion is usually encouraged in such a setting.

Cross supports the strengths of social construction for learning communities. “…Social construction conceives of knowledge not as something that is transferred in an authoritarian structure from teacher to students but rather as something that teachers and students work interdependently to develop. Thus it fosters active learning over passive learning, cooperation over competition, and community over isolation.” This is opposed to the passive learning presumably encouraged or at least permitted by lectures, the competition brought about by grades and test scores, and the isolation that exists for large numbers of commuting and part time students.

Benefits of Learning Communities

Research that supports this new paradigm of learning includes benefits for both students and faculty. In 1993, Tinto and associates conducted a study that examined the experiences of new college students in three learning community programs in three
different public institutions of higher education: The Freshman Interest Group program at the University of Washington, the Learning Community Clusters at LaGuardia Community College, and the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College (SCCC). “The program sought to answer two basic questions regarding these programs: first, do learning communities make a difference and if so, how?” Quantitative and qualitative forms of inquiry were undertaken and the study reported the following major findings: LC contributed to building supportive peer groups by enabling students to develop a network of supportive peers that helped them to make the transition to college and integrate them into a community of peers. Personal connections developed within the classes helped students balance the many struggles they faced in attending college, allowing students to bridge the academic-social divide. This was most evident at the community colleges where students spoke of a learning experience that was different and richer than that with which they were typically acquainted. Because faculty and students worked collaboratively in the classroom with faculty modeling learning and students actively participating, students gained a voice in the construction of knowledge. In the LC, students from diverse ethnic backgrounds and ages shared their experiences and expressed diverse viewpoints, which challenged others to rethink their own perspectives. With faculty encouragement, students were able to address issues of their own learning. Another finding was that students reported greater personal involvement in academic and social activities and perceived greater developmental gains over the year than did students in the standard curriculum. LC students saw faculty and peers as more welcoming and supportive, classes as more exciting and were more involved in learning.
Most importantly, students in LC persisted onto the next year at a considerably higher rate than did similar students in the standard courses.

The Seven Principles of Good Practice (March 1987 Issue of the AAHE Bulletin) publicized a conclusion especially relevant to LC. Students who have frequent contact with faculty members in and out of the classroom during their college years are more satisfied with their educational experiences, are less likely to drop out, and perceive themselves to have learned more than students who have less faculty contact. LC can facilitate multi-format teaching and improve interaction among students and faculty. This increased faculty contact seems to have a positive affect on the faculty as well. There is greater flexibility about the use of time within this structural format that allows faculty the liberty to create an excellent curriculum within broad guidelines. Faculty learn from both students and colleagues making connections between disciplines that they describe as revitalizing. One example of this is outlined in the following interview with MCC’s own Barbara Connolly, Chairperson of the Nursing Department.

An interview with Barbara Connolly revealed that over the past ten years the Nursing Program faculty, staff, students and curriculum have evolved into a learning community. The shift to a learner-centered approach to students is the outcome of faculty development activities that lead to the implementation of a variety of instructional methodologies designed to engage the students as active participants in learning. Additionally, the department enhanced the learning center and developed many different learning choices to support different student learning styles. Nursing students bring diverse backgrounds and experiences to the program; most are balancing multiple responsibilities and the average age is 32, significantly higher than MCC’s average age of
27. The nursing program’s curricular structure, faculty to faculty and faculty to student interaction and physical location is similar to a Pyramid Model of learning communities posed by Brower and Dettinger (1998). The distinct components of this model are:

“They have a boundary that defines who is and is not a member... diversity is encouraged not just for ideological reasons but also because different perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds contribute to the collaborative efforts to achieve the community’s goals” (p.16).

Another similarity is the role of professional ethics woven throughout the curriculum. Brower and Dettinger view the development of professional, ethical and civic responsibilities as essential to learning communities. Those three responsibilities coupled with a broad knowledge base and critical thinking skills, embodies their view of “the epitome of a successful college graduate” (p.17).

In summary, Barbara Connolly describes their conceptual approach as “they’re on the edge of discomfort, always looking for innovative ways to increase learning.” The Nursing Department has chosen LC to achieve their departmental goals. Their success is evident by the performance of the 1999 graduates, who achieved a 95% pass rate on the State Board exams, which is among the top in the state.

Recommendations

The months of research and dialog regarding introducing Learning Communities to Monroe Community College has led us to the following recommendations:
Successful LC implementation requires extensive interdisciplinary coordination therefore, the introduction of LC must be a team approach of both academic and student services. This would include working with such offices as Registration and Records, Academic Advisement and Financial Aid to ensure the processes are efficient and effective. A student development professional (i.e. counselor or advisor) should be actively involved in the developmental process. Many MCC counselors and advisors are currently in teaching roles. We believe this dual role provides a perspective that will enhance and support the foundations on which LC are grounded.

Identify a formal “point person,” who will be accountable for the process and progress of instituting LC at our institution. This person would lead a team whose charge it would be to create clear guidelines, thus create a formal screening process before courses carry the LC label. This would be similar to the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) model currently existing at MCC. Although there are a variety of LC models that can be implemented, we believe it is essential that formalized criterion is instituted in order to provide a consistent student experience.

Support is crucial at different levels, therefore, it would be critical to identify and secure resources to support the LC initiative. One example would be collaborating with department chairpersons to ensure that LC offerings support the existing curricula, while gaining departmental support for the LC initiative. Another example would include establishing a fund to support required professional development including conferences, in-service training, etc. for all faculty members of courses carrying the LC label.
Like support, assessment is crucial to the success of initiating LC. The final recommendation is to establish a formal evaluation process. The team should be charged with identifying both qualitative and quantitative methods of assessment that would include but are not limited to program monitoring, program impact, program improvement, and program validation.

Conclusion

As members of the present Learning Communities Team we were involved in creating a piloting program for the spring 2000 semester at the Damon City Campus (DCC). Our experiences have provided important information regarding the successful implementation of LC at MCC. We have identified for you some of the challenges that we must face as we continue to move in this direction. Firstly, timing is crucial to the introductions of LC. Sufficient lead-time is essential to educate the college community and market the LC clusters to advisors and students. Secondly, collaboration with Department chairpersons is essential in order to develop clusters that will serve the academic needs of the various student cohorts. Also challenging is collaborating with student affairs departments such as Registration and Records to create a process for block registering students in LC as it relates to the timing of the master schedule. Lastly, and most time consuming is educating the entire campus community to ensure adequate understanding and awareness of the LC initiative.

For further information regarding the current LC initiative at DCC, you may contact the members of the LC team, including the authors of this paper.
Bibliography

The following is a partial list of the materials used by the sub-committee to research learning communities.


Mac Gregor, J. (Comp.) (1999). *Strengthening learning communities: Case studies from the national Learning Communities Dissemination Project (FIPSE)*. Olympia, WA: The Evergreen State College, Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.


