

Learning Communities: Benefits and Challenges

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Learning Communities

The phrase “learning community” (LC) has lost true meaning in university jargon. We can likely all agree that concept of a learning community at the simplest suggests that active learning experiences, academic success and the retention of our students correlate to one’s sense of community or belonging. If we believe this, then the objective of a learning community is twofold: first, it allows students to build a strong support network (peers and faculty/staff) as the begin college and secondly, it creates a space where students can share, analyze, examine, debate and engage in academic inquiry collectively!

Let’s be clear, at Southern, our learning communities can best be described as linked courses/clustered courses where the same 20 FIRST YEAR students share at least two of the courses on their schedule. By design our learning communities have several benefits, but we also face some unique challenges in these courses.

Benefits

The benefits of a LC can be measured by examining both the students’ and the instructor’s point of view. Each has a responsibility to foster and participate in the LC. At the minimum, I would argue that the concept of Southern’s LCs are based on four core learning values. If we achieve these in the classroom then we can assume that the students and the instructor have benefited in a number of collective and subjective ways.

DISCLAIMER: Please be aware that I will not address the specific pedagogy used to achieve these core values!

The first core learning value assumes that there must be a sense of shared learning and discovery between and among the students. In other words, individual participants become responsible for learning that takes place in the community (classroom). The second is that meaningful connections must be established between students and between students and faculty. Connections must be reinforced in a variety of ways (through a variety of pedagogies) to ensure that connections occur through the community and not in isolated instances. Third, learning must be connected to the theme of the course, life experiences, the greater community (campus and beyond) whenever possible. Our students are global and seek to understand how what they are learning matters in their lives! Lastly, collective learning can only be achieved when everyone has a voice that is valued, when diverse experiences are shared and respected, and that differences between and among students are used to help inform, influence, and create the community’s learning experience.¹

Let’s look at these core learning values in a couple of different ways. Handouts will be provided.

Challenges

There are three broad categories of challenge within learning communities: who are these people?; student learning & academic success; and, classroom management issues.

Who are these people?

“Labeled millennials, Internet gens, generation Y and baby boomers II, they have been described as ambitious, precocious, stressed, indifferent, wayward, techo-nerd, heterogeneous, politically conservative, and sexually active” by Fred B. Newton, author of *The New Student*. In this article he attempted to codify this new species of student. “These descriptions are only a portion of the many qualities that make up the complex mosaic that is this generation.” Below is a brief synopsis of his findings:

The profile of this NEW college student suggests that there are several under explored transitional issues that affect students of this generation more so than any other. Whether you consistently work with classes filled with or you occasionally have a class of just First Year Students, it is clear that something over the past few years has changed!!!

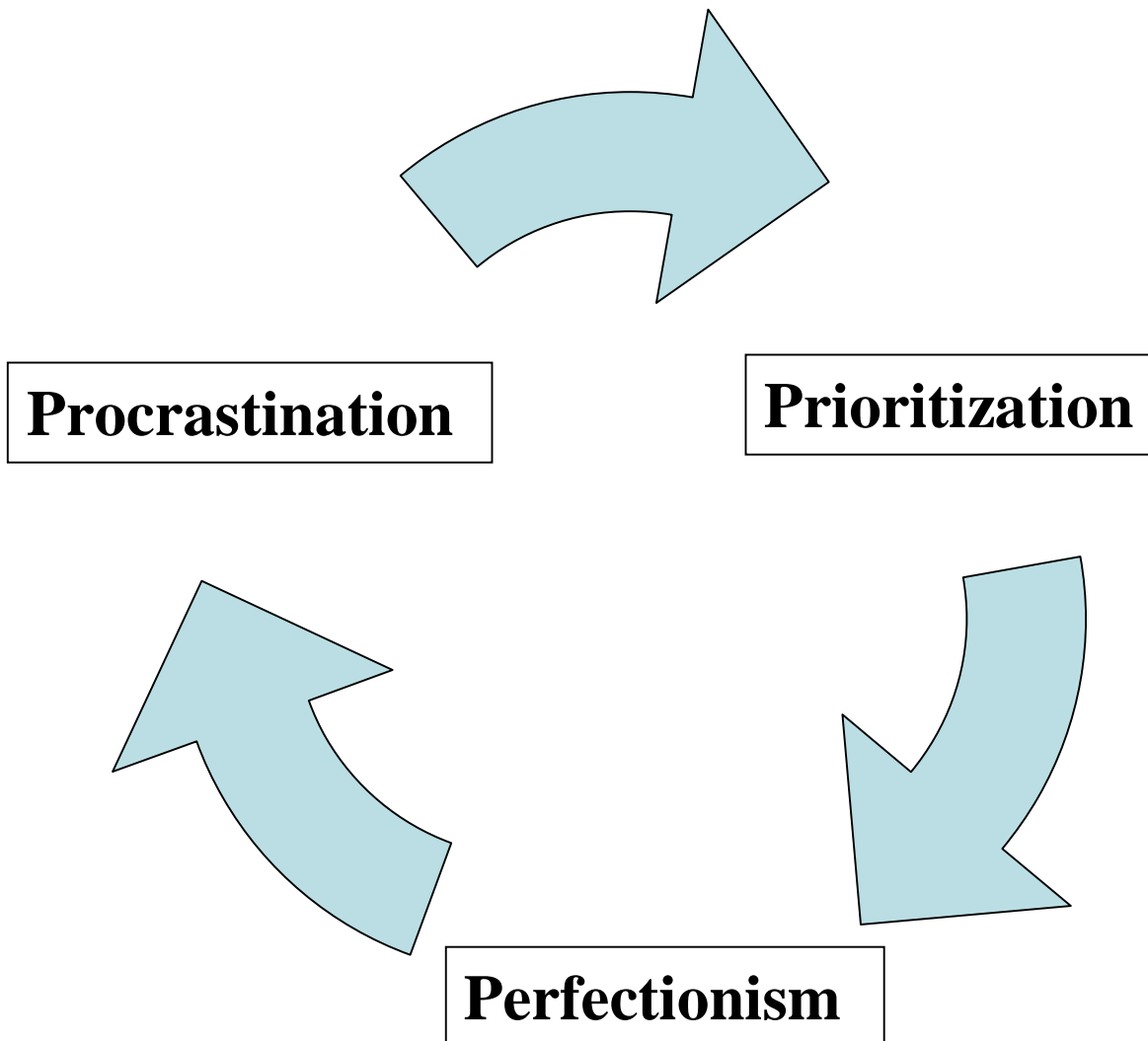
- Students enter college having a greater exposure to and more experimentation with 'grown-up' activity than any previous generation.
- Students receive extensive and rapid exposure to a vast and ever increasing level of informational activity, which makes them the most informed generation to have lived on the planet. However, although students have more general knowledge, they come to our campuses with less experience in exercising the discipline and focus required to explore a subject in depth. In other words, quantity of information is not coincident with depth and quality of experience, qualities that may have greater value in life attainments.
- Students today are on the cutting edge of technological proficiency, and in most cases they are beyond their parents, teachers and potential bosses.
- More students are taking part-time employment during college, while their commitment to school work appears to be diminished.
- Students are ambitious in their career aspirations yet frequently have unrealistic expectation about what it takes to achieve these goals.
- Students are well aware of campus and community rules, regulations, and political correctness. These rules are frequently perceived without personal or moral commitment, so that the challenge for students is to find a way around the rule, create the right appearance by hiding unapproved behavior, and live by a philosophy such as 'cheating is OK if you do not get caught.'
- Many students do get involved in political activity and community service projects, but do so within a circle of influence that is familiar and connected to their local interests.
- Social connection and intimacy are taking on different patterns as students are less likely to be paired off in couples and more likely to participate in group activities, have brief intimate encounters, and experiment with many living options before settling down into an adult pattern.
- Emotionally, students are experiencing increasingly high levels of stress and anxiety.²

Student Learning and Academic Success

Issues of academic preparedness aside, it is challenging for today's first-year students to focus. We live in a fast-paced world with competing demands and distractions—beyond just their cell phones! More students work while getting an education, are involved in campus life, experience

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living on their own for the first time, but perhaps the struggle still lies in the viscous cycle of the 3 P's:



In fact, it is more commonplace to hear students say that they have not turned in assignments because they are 'not ready,' meaning not yet 'perfected.' Students are overwhelmed by all they have to do (not just college assignments) and have a difficult time understanding where to direct their attention. The inability to prioritize forces them to constantly keep putting things off that should be done. A VISCIOS CYCLE!

Classroom Management

Is “community” something we have to buy into? YES IT IS. Thus one of the key issues within a learning community is trying to understand the dynamic of your classroom. Remember, the student who are in your class also share another class together. In any event, you will likely notice that the degree of participation from the individual members of the community in your class will vary. Although we see this in our other classes, it can become something that is more difficult to manage in a learning community section. I call this, The All or None Phenomena.

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Quite simply, learning communities can foster collective ignorance/silence as well as eruptive answering!

Classroom Management Issues Examples

Example from any class	Example in an Inquiry/Linked class
Students come in late and leave early!	One student texts another student in the course to say she will be late. She then calls during class to find out what she is missing as she parks, hits up DD and strolls towards class!!
Students in my 300 level history course have an expectation that the learning (from lectures to readings to assignments) will have a certain difficulty.	Students believe that the coursework is useless and therefore invest little time or effort into the readings and required assignments.
Students tend to form their own groups based on seating arrangements, common interests, residential and commuter status, similar interests, shared major, etc.	Students tend to form their own groups based on seating arrangements, common interests, residential and commuter status, similar interests, etc. The connection between LC students often extends well beyond the classroom. Conversely, with the formation of cliques in LCs, there are often students who become isolated members of the community. It is much more noticeable in a group where the same students share more than one class (insiders and outsiders phenomena)
Students often wonder if they had picked that other professor who teaches this course or waited to take this in another semester if it would be as much work.	Inquiry and LC students talk to each other about what they are doing in the other LC courses and realize that someone (usually not your student) got a better deal/less work/etc. (Insert editorial in Southern News about FYE here)
Students will ask random questions about Majors, jobs, career exploration, letters of recommendation. Many of these are not your advisees and you answer and do what you can for them.	You serve as the student's academic advisor and this opens the flood gate! You are now the all purpose question machine for you student. Emails fly, phone calls, etc...students believe that you are now at their mercy!!!!

¹ Adapted from the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning. Article entitled, Basic Learning Community Principles and Guidelines. (http://www.cirtl.net/pillars_LC.html)

² Newton, Fred B. The New Student. *About Campus*. Nov./Dec. 2000. (<http://www-personal.ksu.edu/~newtonf/interests/research/newstudent/newstudent.pdf>)

The author answers the question, just who is the millennial student? The author contends that the millennial student's attitudes and behaviors differentiate him/her from students from previous generations. He works to pin down a profile for this new student.

Rubric for Learning Community Core Values

<i>Guiding Questions</i>	Conceptualization	Well developed understanding, systematic and ongoing action	Some understanding, moderate or irregular action	Cursory knowledge, minimal action
<i>How do I promote shared discovery and learning among my learners?</i>	Shared discovery and learning promotes all participants to share responsibility for achieving the learning goals.	Practitioner understands the value of collaborative learning, has the skills to implement, implements them, and intentionally evaluates these activities to improve his/her approach to enhance learning.	Practitioner understands the value of collaborative learning and other group-learning techniques, and skillfully implements some of them, but in a non-integrated fashion and without an evaluation plan.	Practitioner uses collaborative learning or some other group-learning technique, but it's just "dropped in" with no understanding of the impact on other course or learning activities.
<i>How do I support meaningful interactions among learners necessary to achieve the learning goals?</i>	Interactions throughout LC and among participants are functional and necessary for the learning goals to be accomplished.	Practitioner understands the value of, and knows how to fully integrate functional interactions between learners necessary to achieve the learning goals, implements them, and has built in a plan to evaluate the effectiveness to improve their teaching and participant learning.	Practitioner understands the value of functional interactions among learners to accomplish learning goals and intentionally builds some into the learning activities, but in a non-integrative fashion and without a plan to evaluate the effectiveness.	Practitioner uses sporadic interactions among learners without an understanding of the value and impact of these interactions on their learning and other activities.
<i>How do I connect my materials and activities to other related topics and experiences?</i>	Implicit and explicit connections are made to other learning and life experiences.	Practitioner helps learners feel fully connected with learning opportunities beyond the course, makes explicit the impact on the learning experience, and evaluates the impact of these connections.	Practitioner helps learners connect to a variety of broader teaching and learning assignments/activities but does not make explicit the impact on the course learning experience; and no plans for evaluation.	Practitioner has "add-on" assignments/activities beyond the primary learning activities that have no other connections to the primary learning goals.
<i>How do I create an inclusive learning environment?</i>	Inclusive learning environment welcomes the learners' diverse	Practitioner creates an environment where all learners from a variety of	Practitioner uses LC techniques to enhance diversity, such as creating a	Practitioner "drops in" LC techniques, such as asking learners to talk about their

	<p>backgrounds /experiences and is used to help accomplish the group’s collective learning.</p>	<p>backgrounds rely on each other to achieve the learning goals by recognizing how the diversity of backgrounds enriched their learning. Practitioner evaluates and makes changes based on how diversity enriches learning goals.</p>	<p>welcoming environment, or intentionally creating small groups based on diverse backgrounds, but connects these techniques in only limited ways to overall learning goals; has no plan to evaluate the impact.</p>	<p>backgrounds, or creating small groups mixing men and women, without using these techniques in any other way, or without any follow-through to connect these techniques to learning objectives.</p>
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Definitions of developmental stages

The descriptions below define each development stage in the framework.

Developed understanding, systematic action

Practitioner increases his/her knowledge and understanding of the impact of concept on participant’s learning. He/she takes action based on this increased understanding, evaluates the actions and improves his/her practice based on these evaluative data.

Developed understanding, moderate or irregular action

Practitioner has some knowledge and understanding of concept based on personal reflection and external sources of information. He/she understands this in the context of his/her own teaching/outreach situation and acts on this knowledge.

Cursory knowledge, minimal action

Practitioner makes elementary changes to teaching/outreach practices based on limited information and with little understanding of why he/she is making the changes.

Illustrative narrative

Shared discovery and learning promotes all participants to share responsibility for achieving the learning goals.

Developed understanding, systematic action

Practitioners at the advanced level understand that shared discovery and learning help promote an individual’s responsibility for achieving the learning goals for themselves and others. Advanced understanding enables practitioners to intentionally build in opportunities with explicit structure and direction for learners to individually and collectively learn, rather than simply putting people together in groups without guidance. They evaluate the impact of incorporating the collaborative learning opportunities, and makes informed changes for future iterations.

Some understanding, moderate or irregular action

Practitioners at the medium level understand that shared discovery and learning are important aspects to promote and individual's responsibility for achieving the learning goals. They implement some collaborative learning techniques to address this understanding, but do so in a non-integrative way that does not greatly interfere with the basic content or structure of the primary learning activities. They have some interest in the impact these changes are making, but have no plan to systematically evaluate the effect.

Cursory knowledge, minimal action

Practitioner at the lowest level understand shared discovery and learning, and collaborative learning techniques as buzzwords, or see them as a transient fad. They have picked up a few "fad-type" ideas and sprinkle them in with no intention of connecting them to what they consider to be the primary content or learning activities. There is no sense of need to evaluate or understand the impact on other course or learning activities.

Adapted from the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning. Article entitled, Basic Learning Community Principles and Guidelines. (http://www.cirtl.net/pillars_LC.html)