

FACET RETREAT WORKSHOP

TITLE: Create Your Own Learning Communities: A Brainstorming Session
(Advancing Your Teaching and Research through Learning Communities)

Presenter Contact Information:

Dr. Elizabeth A. Bennion, Department of Political Science, IU South Bend
2181 Wiekamp Hall, 474-520-4128, ebennion@iusb.edu

Learning Objectives:

Attendees in this workshop will be able to:

1. define a learning community
2. identify key advantages of learning communities
3. identify key obstacles to sustaining learning communities
4. describe at least four different models of student learning communities
5. create customized learning communities to fit their own teaching and learning goals

The major goal of this workshop is to send each participant away with at least two ideas for learning communities he or she could begin to build at the conclusion of the FACET retreat.

Workshop Description:

Learning communities reflect John Dewey's arguments about active learning for an informed citizenry. They are part of a general paradigm shift in higher education, away from an "instruction paradigm" to a "learning paradigm" which abandons traditional passive modes of information delivery in favor of active approaches (Barr and Tagg 1995).

This workshop will consist of five parts:

1. an introduction to learning communities, including potential benefits
2. some general models used for creating learning communities
3. practical matters that need to be addressed in order to sustain learning communities
4. small group/partnered brainstorming about how to create learning communities to enhance our own teaching and research
5. group reports and sharing of ideas

The fragmented and bureaucratized college campus does not always promote the connected vision of learning that most FACET members would like to see for ourselves and our students. Learning communities can rejuvenate faculty members as learners by helping us to rediscover the boundaries and intersections of our discipline with others. Active learning, collaborative learning, and critical thinking are all promoted through student and faculty learning communities.

In this session we will brainstorm together to create individual plans to help each participant advance his or her teaching and research goals through the creation of (and participation in) learning communities.

Meeting the Learning Objectives:

1. define a learning community

“Any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that student 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.”

(Gabelnick et al. 1990, 19)

Alternative definitions?



2. identify key advantages of learning communities

Students learn more when they actively participate in rigorous learning environments, embedded in strong communities, characterized by high levels of interpersonal interaction with their peers and faculty members (Boyer 1987; Astin 1993, Kellogg Commission 1997, Boyer Commission 1998).

Education research demonstrates that “the best academic experiences are small and personal, and promote as much interaction around academic issues as possible between faculty and students” (Matthews and Lynch 1997, 107).

Learning communities provide:

- ❖ rigorous, hands-on learning environment
- ❖ enhanced sense of community
- ❖ frequent interpersonal interaction among peers
- ❖ two-way (learning) interactions between students and faculty

Benefits of learning communities for students include:

- ❖ overcoming the “compartmentalization of knowledge”
 - allow for integration of courses from different disciplines
 - ability to bridge academic divides with a common language
 - realization that skills and material learned in one course applies to others
- ❖ developing and reinforcing skills essential for success in college and beyond
 - writing
 - speaking
 - critical thinking
 - problem solving
 - ability to work collaboratively
 - ability to appreciate multiple perspectives
 - ability to reflect on one’s own learning process

- ❖ promoting retention
 - embed students within a community
 - raise institutional/procedural and psychological stakes for withdrawal
 - promote friendship and sense of belonging
 - form social networks—key to retention, success, and satisfaction (Light, 2001)

Benefits of learning communities for faculty include:

- ❖ promoting faculty collaboration
 - curricular reform and other institutional reforms
 - techniques for enhancing teaching and learning
 - collaborative research—interdisciplinary, SoTL, and/or community-based
- ❖ reengaging faculty in the learning process
 - experience environment as “learner”
 - foster experimentation in teaching and learning
 - better understand experiences of students
 - build sense of community
 - further professional development
- ❖ educating young people for their citizenship responsibilities in a democratic community

3. identify key obstacles to sustaining learning communities

- ❖ workload may be high relative to other classes
 - faculty must be diligent in sustaining active learning communities
 - students may drop out or disengage
- ❖ learning strategies and expectations are different than other classes
 - students may experience anxiety about “public learning”
 - some students (and faculty) may cling to “sage on the stage” learning paradigm

4. describe at least four different models of student learning communities

There are three basic models of learning communities (Love and Tokuno 1999, Shapiro and Levine 1999). In addition, residential learning communities provide opportunities for collaborative learning and community-building. Single-course and free-standing learning communities are also possible to develop.

**There are five common dimensions of learning communities.
Each dimension can range from low to high within a learning community.**

- Student collaboration
- Faculty collaboration
- Curricular coordination
- Shared setting
- Interactive pedagogy

- ❖ Model 1: cohorts in large courses
 - Cohort of students is registered in the same sections of two or more courses
 - Courses are not reserved exclusively for the cohort
 - Instructor may not be involved in learning community
 - Learning community may form around integrative seminar

- ❖ Model 2: paired/linked or clustered classes
 - Courses are linked, often according to a theme
 - Typical structures involves a link between a skills course and a content course*
 - Only learning-community students are allowed to enroll in these courses
 - Faculty plan learning community collaboratively, often using common assignments

* *Variations at IU South Bend include linking two skills courses or two content courses*

- ❖ Model 3: team-taught program
 - Students take all of their courses together in a semester
 - May be combination of large and small enrollment courses
 - Faculty members plan body of courses so that materials and assignments are integrated
 - Most integrated model in terms of intellectual connections and community building

- ❖ Model 4: residence-based learning communities
 - Includes theme floors, theme houses, living-learning programs, and residential colleges
 - Students live and take classes together
 - Faculty teaching the courses are associated with the physical location of the students
 - Faculty might have offices, classroom space, computer labs, or dining facilities available to create living-learning community.

This model builds on findings that out-of-class experiences are important to intellectual development (Terenzini et al. 1996).

- ❖ Model 5: within class learning communities
 - Forms learning communities within a single class
 - Each community focuses on a specific theme or problem
 - Students in the communities work collaboratively throughout the semester
 - Communities meet both inside and outside of the classroom

- ❖ Model 6: free-standing faculty learning community
 - Learning community unites people with shared interests
 - Community focuses on a specific theme, problem, or project
 - Faculty in the community work collaboratively throughout the semester (or longer)
 - Possible applications include the creation of teaching and learning partnerships, teaching circles, and research teams

5. create customized learning communities that fit your own teaching and learning goals

When creating a learning community, consider the following steps (Theis 2006):

- ❖ choose a model for the learning community
 - pick one of the six models (above) – or create your own
 - decide which disciplines and themes will be involved
 - focus on courses that are relatively popular and satisfy requirements
 - consider content neutral courses like composition and communication
 - consider your own research and teaching interests

- ❖ decide which faculty members will be involved
 - use established and respected faculty members
 - avoid “lightning rod” faculty members
 - be cognizant of demands on untenured faculty members
 - seek diversity in status and perspectives, if possible

- ❖ examine how learning communities can fit in with existing campus initiatives
 - take advantage of writing-across-the-curriculum or service-learning programs

- ❖ decide which administrative and professional staff personnel should be involved in implementing and maintaining the learning community
 - work with academic and student affairs
 - maintain a good working relationship with the registrar’s office

- ❖ discover what types of internal and external resources are available
 - consider asking for some compensation (course release, stipend, travel money)
 - consider writing a grant proposal

- ❖ explore strategies to recruit students to the learning community
 - market using posters, campus newspaper, faculty visits to feeder courses, academic advisors, orientations, pamphlets, etc.

- ❖ consider how the learning community will become institutionalized
 - consider developing a steering committee

- ❖ consider how you will evaluate the effectiveness of the learning community
 - design assessment mechanisms when you design the goals of the learning community
 - use both qualitative and quantitative data (focus groups, surveys, institutional data)

Design your own learning communities by answering the following questions:

Q1. What are your teaching and/or research goals for the upcoming year?

Q2. Which of these goals could be advanced through a learning community?

Q3. Would each goal be best advanced through student or faculty learning communities?

Q4. Propose one or two specific learning communities that could support the goals you have identified.
For each learning community, please answer the following questions:

- What faculty will be involved?

Acknowledgements:

This workshop presentation is based on an article by Cameron G. Thies entitled: "A Crash Course in Learning Communities for the Political Scientist" (*Journal of Political Science Education* Volume 1, Number 1, January-April 2005: 129-141).

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