Faculty collaboration: creating multidisciplinary learning communities

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Learning communities are a growing tool in use at colleges and universities around the country. In large part, these communities have been created in the hope that they will increase interaction among students and teach them to apply knowledge in meaningful ways. In addition to generating student interaction, learning communities should strive to bring faculty together in collaborative settings. We should ask ourselves: how do faculty fit into the learning community? In a case study the author reflects upon his experience as a faculty member in a large multidisciplinary learning community. Recommendations provide guidance to those who are looking to develop teaching/classroom linkages with other departments on their campuses.

Introduction

Discussions of learning communities often revolve around the design and implementation of classroom management techniques created to ensure that students absorb and apply knowledge in meaningful ways. Student focused, these learning communities are generally limited in their vision to interactive engagements that students have with each other or with the faculty member teaching their course. However, such a restricted approach to learning communities largely ignores the possibilities that exist for collaboration between faculty members from multiple disciplines. Parker Palmer (1987) argues that faculty members and administrators must,

> "think about community in settings of higher learning…different(ly) from the way we think about community in other settings, like the civil society, the neighborhood, the church, or the workplace. Within the academy, we need to think about community in ways that deepen the *educational* agenda" (p. 20).

Widening the focus of our learning communities beyond the students who sit in the classrooms towards the colleagues with whom we share institutional goals and values is one way to accomplish these ends. Employing a case-study examination of the author's experience as a post-doctoral teaching fellow in Wayne State University's Honors Program, this paper is a distillation of the successes and challenges experienced in creating a learning community populated by faculty from a diverse pool of disciplines. The faculty were assembled to produce an expansive and vibrant learning community that spanned multiple sections of a common course. Although the setting for the research is a 4-year research university, community college faculty and administrators will find the information instructive as they work to implement curriculum and practices that support the creation of broad-based learning communities.

Wayne State University Honors Program

As an urban research university in Detroit, Wayne State is committed "to discover, examine, transmit and apply knowledge that contributes to the positive development and well-being of individuals, organizations and society" (Wayne State University Mission Statement 2001). Each university department and program plays a part in fulfilling the mission, but the Honors Program has organized its approach to undergraduate education by identifying four "pillars" that support the university's broad mission and fosters a community of learning in the department, classroom, and beyond. The four pillars are community, service, research, and career. Freshman who complete four years of study in the Honors Program direct their focus to one of these pillars during each successive year of their program of study.

While the primary focus of the present paper is the first year college experience and the creation of "community," it is worth noting how the Honors Program works to develop the remaining three pillars. During their sophomore year, students are actively involved in service learning projects. The exact form of the service learning is varied, but in all settings, students are linked with

faculty and community based organizations. For example, a popular service learning choice is the Detroit Fellows Project. This tutoring project allows students to earn college credit while helping elementary school students develop their reading skills. It should be made clear that these projects are not merely volunteer programs. Rather, these service-learning opportunities allow students to develop their freshman year classroom skills in real-world settings.

As juniors, students work to develop solid research skills. Working with a full-time faculty mentor, students are encouraged to develop research projects and submit them for funding consideration. The competitive process provides a stipend to winning applications and also affords the opportunity for students to present their research findings in university, state, and national forums.

During their senior year, students complete their thesis and concentrate on the transition to a post-undergraduate career. The thesis project, directed by a faculty member from the student's major department, is a culmination of the student's undergraduate experience and serves as a critical tool in the transition to a career field or graduate school setting.

The four "pillars" curriculum succeeds in creating a broad learning community for students because at each stage in their academic program individual students are encouraged to combine their knowledge and experiences. Therefore, instructors need to provide enough individual freedom to students in the classroom so that they engage the course material and their classmates. The creation of *space* is the critical pedagogical instrument. The classroom does not act as a barrier between what students learn at the college and what they experience during the course of living. Rather, the arrangement permits students to create the community after the instructor provides them with the opportunity for it to occur. Such an approach allows for the greatest amount of flexibility and creativity. It also maximizes the number of learning opportunities for students. Indeed, the connection between experience, thought and theory transcends individual bounds and arises out of group interaction. The implication here is that students think and know in connection with their collective existence and with the social implications of human life. Thus, issues and ideas are experienced, thought about, and theorized under different conceptual schemes particular to individual students.

Creating community: City I and City II

Developing a community of scholars and introducing students to the urban experience is the critical part of the freshman year in the Honors Program. One of the essential pieces of the process is the enrollment of students in two 3-credit courses: City I and City II. The courses are offered sequentially in successive semesters. They provide an examination of urban issues, history, and American political institutions and processes from different disciplinary perspectives. These two courses best exemplify the expanded notion of faculty-inclusive learning communities alluded to in the introduction.

City I and City II are alternatives to the popular "great books" approach that has been applied in many higher education curriculums. Rather than present students with a course that looks at "classic texts" for the core materials, these courses identify a number of different disciplinary/critical approaches to urban matters, and recognize the city as a "classic text." For instance, a classic text might examine fundamental questions like: Who are we? Where are going? What should we do? City I and City II propose that the City of Detroit can be held up, like a text, to study these same questions.

City I

Specifically, City I promotes a culture of research-based learning, with a special emphasis on the City of Detroit. The parameters for the class are established in the wide-ranging assigned reading. Students read books by Witold Rybczynski (*City Life)*, John Berger *(Ways of Seeing)*, E.L. Doctorow *(Ragtime)*, and supplemental selections from a variety of other sources. To encourage the building of a classroom community and to place students squarely in the urban experience, they are required to participate in class wide "cultural passport events." For example, attending a viewing/lecture of the Diego Rivera murals (*Detroit Industry*) at the Detroit Institute of Arts or watching George Gershwin's opera, *Porgy and Bess*, at the Detroit Opera House are "passport events." In both cases students are encouraged to collectively explore the artistic work in question and the context of its presentation.

Honors students also examine American urbanism, which allows each scholar the opportunity to use personal skills and knowledge necessary to perform basic research. They engage in group projects and activities that orient them to research methodologies and multi-disciplinary approaches critical to understanding urban settings.

City II

As a course, the focus of City II shifts slightly, but is a practical extension of the theoretical underpinnings explored in City I. City II addresses American political institutions, processes, history, and ideas in an urban context. Using a variety of methods of inquiry, observation, and communication, students—working in groups—develop service learning or problem-focused group projects. A core objective of the course is to ensure that students possess the necessary tools to become citizens who are "active agents." Do they have the tools and skill sets to function within the context of a pluralistic American society? To achieve the objective, City II is centered on three broad themes; civic literacy, citizenship, and participation. The themes help increase civic awareness among the students and encourage them to be active members of the community. John Berger and Witlod Rybczynski's texts are used as references in City II, but there is also the addition of a course pack and a text by political scientist John Kingdon (*America the Unusual)*. The course pack readings examine topics ranging from urban public policy to research methods. As in the first semester, "passport events" are a part of the curriculum in the second semester course.

Staff

Structurally, City I and City II are once-a-week large lecture courses with accompanying seminar meetings. Seminar sections are capped at 25 students. The courses are staffed by the Director of the Wayne State University Honors Program and by five post-doctoral teaching fellows. The Director has the primary responsibility for organizing and guiding the lecture portion of the class, and the post-doctoral fellows are more prominent at the seminar level. Guest lecturers are routinely invited into the large lecture to share their perspectives. The guests represent a varied group of disciplines. Speakers from anthropology, civil engineering, history, urban planning, biology, and political science have all made appearances in the courses. The range of diversity is also reflected in the post-doctoral fellows assigned to the course. Over the past few years, individuals on staff have represented the following departments: American studies, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, music, English, and political science.

The teaching fellows are the instructors of record for their individual classes, and they are responsible for the content in their seminars and the grades assigned to student work. Most importantly, the structure, content, and organi-

zation of the courses are a collaborative product generated by the Director and teaching fellows.

An extended multidisciplinary community

It would be incorrect to characterize the teaching fellows as teaching assistants. Given their responsibility for course development and implementation, a more comparable description can be found in schools that have team teaching arrangements. However, even that comparison is strained. The cohort teaching City I and City II is larger than most team teaching arrangements, and with few exceptions faculty are only directly engaged with the students in their individual seminars (Shapiro and Levine 1999). In other words, they do not lecture or make appearances in other seminars or have a role in evaluating all the students in the course. Students have shared experiences in the large group lecture and at the passport events, but their seminars are largely independent exercises.

Bringing varied faculty members together under the banner of a single course creates conditions that benefit students and faculty alike. Not surprisingly, students, presented with greater opportunities to observe and interact with faculty became more comfortable approaching faculty with questions, concerns, or comments. One of the great successes created when a learning community of faculty and students comes together is the increased opportunity for advising and mentoring students.

Students are encouraged to develop a relationship with the teaching fellows and to think about their college classes and programs as a progression of interlinked concepts and ideas. Students are discouraged from viewing their undergraduate education as a series of courses or boxes that need to be marked off so that they can move along. The mentoring structure is designed to help students identify strengths and weaknesses in their academic preparation. It is also designed to help them think long term about their goals and aspirations.

Much like the creation of space for students is critical in shaping and constructing a learning community, the same is true for affording faculty the opportunity to participate in such an arrangement. Most higher education arrangements are not designed to maximize faculty interaction, but rather they are individually compartmentalized. The structure of the Honors Program at Wayne State begins to break down some of the artificial barriers and creates a forum for the exchange of ideas and insights across disciplines.

Learning community successes

Individuals considering the creation, or redevelopment, of college level programs and their associated curriculums in the hopes of creating a learning community will be faced with considerable challenges, but also the potential for remarkable success. The benefits for faculty, and—by proxy—students include:

- Providing different disciplinary perspectives on course content.
- Creating a mechanism for employing innovative pedagogical approaches and experiencing rapid feedback regarding the relative success or failure of the effort.
- Encouraging faculty collegiality and collaboration.
- Formally bringing guest lecturers together with other faculty that might not normally interact.

Fresh perspectives

Faculty typically prepare their course materials in relative isolation. Aside from an occasional classroom visit by a colleague or possible discussion at a department meeting there are few opportunities for faculty to openly discuss a learning topic with other faculty. The occasions are even scarcer when one considers how often such a conversation might occur with a colleague outside the faculty member's own discipline. Creating a learning community of faculty means considerable planning and discussion around the central themes and objectives that become the focus of a course. The collaboration arrangement allows faculty to look at a topic with fresh ideas. Consider the various disciplinary approaches that could be brought to bear on a topic such as the distribution of government grants to faith-based organizations for the purposes of addressing domestic abuse. A political scientist, sociologist, economist, psychologist, historian, and anthropologist (and others) could legitimately analyze and explore the topic; but they would do so from their disparate disciplinary perspectives. By seeing and discussing alternative approaches, each faculty member's classroom presentation is enriched by incorporating some of the alternative perspectives identified during the course planning process.

Feedback loops

As faculty consider the content of a course, they also must decide how the material is to be presented. Faculty are encouraged not only to share their disciplinary perspectives on topics, but also to discuss openly their teaching techniques and styles. Suggestions for alternative pedagogical approaches that faculty find intriguing and promising can be

implemented in coming class sessions. Unlike most teaching strategies exchanged at a conference or seminar, or implemented independently by faculty, the techniques incorporated in learning communities benefit from a feedback loop that keeps the class fresh and innovative. New classroom management techniques can be introduced, discussed, and debriefed in the matter of a week or two and not in terms of semesters or years. There is a constant flow of feedback, ideas, and strategies for reaching the students and improving the class.

Collegiality and collaboration

Many faculty, like students, desire college and university environments that are more conducive to collaboration. The richness of the exchanges in the Honors Program is due in large measure to the quality of the faculty staffing the City I and II courses. The teaching fellows position is a highly competitive post granted to recent Ph.D. graduates who have a demonstrated record of academic and teaching excellence. Unlike a research fellowship where the emphasis is placed upon exploring and expanding an area of content expertise, the teaching fellowship is designed to strengthen the teaching, class management, and course design skills of young faculty members. Creating post-doctoral fellowships is not a viable staffing option for most colleges, but the selection of faculty to participate in a learning community can be exclusive and selective. Having several gifted faculty members assigned to work closely together provides an excellent opportunity to observe what it is that great teachers do. Indeed, the teaching fellows are housed in offices within the Honors department, not in their "home" departments. Proximity facilitates continuous and informal exchanges. Problems or ideas can be readily vetted with one's colleagues; there is no need to wait for a formal meeting or e-mail exchange.

Guest lecturers

Informal collaboration and interaction are appealing, but it is easy to become careless in such a model. To supplement these informal exchanges, the Honors Program instituted a standing staff meeting each week for the entire faculty assigned to the course. The meeting allows for questions or concerns, highlighted by anyone involved with the course, to be uniformly addressed in a timely manner. It is also the place to meet with the guest faculty presenters a week before their presentation. The guest lecturers are given time to discuss

their upcoming appearance in the course and receive feedback from the Honors faculty about current coursework in the class and the future focus of study. Discussing the outline of upcoming lectures allows the teaching fellows to properly prime their students for the material ahead of time. Priming the students means that they are better prepared to absorb, process, and respond to the concepts presented by a guest lecturer. Additionally, the guest lecturer's visit to the faculty meeting is important because a fresh perspective on the class can generate questions regarding items that initially appeared clear to the individuals teaching the course. Ultimately, there is a considerable interest in knowing what types of questions, concerns, and ideas invited faculty have regarding City I and II.

Learning community challenges

While there is little doubt that a collaborative approach to teaching an undergraduate course holds tremendous possibilities, it is equally clear that there are substantial challenges to creating successful learning communities. Faculty and administrators looking to replicate the aforementioned successes should take note of the following concerns:

- The need to balance a level of consistency and standardization throughout the learning community against giving faculty the latitude to be creative and flexible when dealing with their students.
- Learning communities require more time and energy to create and sustain than normal course offerings.
- Collaboration is an excellent principle to be the driving force for creating a learning community, but ultimately someone needs to be the person who leads the group.
- Vigorous and successful learning communities demand institutional-wide support.

Standardization?

Balancing the need to have all sections of the course pursuing the same objectives while permitting faculty the freedom to teach their sections as they see fit, is arguably the biggest challenge in structuring a course. Creating too much standardization can result in a reduction of the faculty member's role to that of a mere grading assistant. The innovation and flexibility that makes the course appealing can be lost. Recruiting faculty and students for the course would then be quite difficult. On the other hand, there is a need to ensure that the same basic objectives and goals are being taught in all sections of the course. Otherwise, the integrity of the course

can be destroyed. Additionally, creating a strong student learning community means that students regularly communicate with each other. Such communication invariably turns to discussions and comparisons of their experiences in their seminars. If the rules and policies regarding assignments and grading vary widely across the sections, there is the perception that students are being treated unfairly.

More work, please

Collaborating to create a set of agreed upon objectives and assignments is quite time-consuming. Working to monitor the course, and adjust as needed throughout a term, requires regular meetings and diligent deliberation. In a more traditional class arrangement, a faculty member can draft a syllabus, assignment, or grade papers at her own pace. That is not an option in a meaningful learning community. Each of the faculty teaching the course need to be kept informed regarding the work of their colleagues and the time frame in which items will be distributed and implemented. Regularly scheduled meetings, with an agenda, will help make sure that happens. It can be inconvenient and frustrating to do so much work by committee; however, the time spent meeting is significantly well spent when it comes to the overall health and success of the course.

Who's in charge?

Establishing a chair, or at least a lead faculty member, for meetings and for the course in general is a difficult, but necessary step. All courses need an identity. What is the course about? What should students expect to accomplish? Why should they take the course? Typically, the individual instructor teaching the course provides the answers to these questions, but with a team of faculty it is easy for the identity to become muddled. Having a person in charge of the overall process helps to make sure that there is a consistent set of objectives and a clear vision for the program. In the Honors Program at Wayne State, the Director of the Program provides the necessary direction. The Director most visibly imprints an identity on the course by being the "face" of the class in the large lecture setting. That person provides many of the lectures that weave together the guest lecture presentations and is the one faculty member who regularly presents to the entire student body. The message the Director conveys to the students is discussed in the weekly staff meeting and suggestions are made regarding focus and presentation, but ultimately the Director must unify the dis-

parate threads of the class into a coherent and meaningful lecture presentation. Filling the post is difficult and requires that the duties and responsibilities of the lead faculty be carefully articulated. Is this person to be considered "one among equals" or perhaps the one who has the final say on some matters? In many ways the post has the makings of a quasi-administrative role and the ambiguity can potentially dampen the collaborative environment.

Resource allocation

Finally, there are the problems of resource allocation and institutional resistance. Creating a course that is taught by full-time faculty, but not housed inside a traditional department does create territorial disputes. Competing departments are concerned that the course is "poaching" their students and, by extension, diminishing their budgets. That argument becomes more pointed when the courses in question are marketed as general education equivalents used towards fulfilling graduation requirements. When confronted with this resistance, we should bear in mind the words of Alexander Astin (1987), the director of the Higher Education Institute,

> The most important thing is for each of us to recognize that there is much that we as individuals can do on our campuses, in spite of our tendency to believe that trying to change an institution is much like trying to move Mount Everest. We can, for example, examine the way we teach our classes, treat out students, and treat our colleagues. And when we have an opportunity to participate in curriculum decisions, long-range planning, and similar kinds of group activities, we can take the initiative to introduce value questions such as "cooperation versus competition" into the deliberations. (p.18)

Additionally, having a director or lead faculty member positioned to represent the course or department in response to attacks is absolutely necessary. Responding in an ad hoc or committee fashion will surely lead to the slow dismantling of the course.

Conclusion

Community is something that cannot be mandated or forced into creation, and the best communities are ones that are the creation of the participants or inhabitants of the community. While there is no shortage of creative proposals for developing community in the classroom, most of the suggestions call for the creation of community through the individual efforts and abilities of the teacher. A better approach is to bring communities of faculty to-

gether. Pooling the talents of faculty creates a meaningful learning environment for students and encourages greater dialogue and professional development among faculty. Adopting a collective approach to teaching is difficult. However, the benefits for the students and faculty outweigh the extra effort that is needed to bring such a course into being. The intent is not to suggest that the City I and City II courses described here need to be recreated on other campuses, but their innovative approach to engaging faculty in collaborative teaching efforts merit consideration as a model.

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