

## **An Ohlone Story**

### **Learning Communities**

**Submitted by Vicki Curtis**

#### **Overview**

Ohlone has had naturally occurring learning communities for many years. Student athletes and each cohort of nursing students are a learning community; however, in 2002 a small group of faculty attended a Berkeley Convocation on the “under-prepared student”. The focus of that convocation was the use of learning communities to facilitate the academic success of developmental students in particular. A spark was ignited that has since grown into a blazing fire.

Learning communities are usually defined as a common cohort of students taking two or more of the same courses where interdisciplinary connections are highlighted and explored, and an intentional building of community among students and faculty is actively pursued. The literature and research has shown over and over again that students who study as part of a learning community receive better grades, have higher rates of retention and persistence, and establish strong student to student, and student to faculty bonds. The form these learning communities take varies according to the specific goal of the learning community, and Ohlone has learning communities that represent almost all of the different models.

In spring of 2003, the first faculty driven learning community was offered between ESL 161, an advanced ESL reading course, and Art 101, Art: An Introduction. This was a team taught learning community where the art instructor and the ESL instructor attended each other’s classes along with the students. The ESL cohort was part of a much larger art class. The top ten grades in the Art 101 class were earned by members of the ESL cohort. After that first learning community was offered, several other learning communities consisting of two classes were offered such as English 101A, Composition and History 117A, American History. During the time of these initial learning community offerings, the administration was very supportive and even assigned, Vicki Curtis, the ESL instructor involved in the first learning community, as the Learning Community Coordinator with 20% reassigned time. This was short lived as the college soon faced tremendous financial challenges which did not allow for the learning community coordinator position to continue.

Learning communities became a bit stagnant until 2004 when the excitement began to build again at a fixed flex presentation which included the showing of a video of students at work in and talking about their learning community between T/D 118, Survey of Acting and ESL 151, Speech Communication. The energy and excitement of the students infected the faculty and staff attending the presentation, and the flickering flame once again burned bright. The fuel which kept the fire going was provided by the new president, Dr. Doug Treadway and Dr. Jim Wright, Vice President of Instruction. Soon a Title III grant was written and received which had learning communities as one of its core goals. The Learning Community Coordinator position was revived and redesigned with 50% reassigned time. Vicki Curtis, the original learning community coordinator, was once again asked to take on that role. Mikelyn Stacey, Dean of Language Arts and Social Sciences, took on the project of creating a first-year experience that would involve a cohort of freshmen students taking a group of transferable classes together that would facilitate them moving efficiently and quickly toward their transfer goals. This became Ohlone’s University Express program. These cohorts have evolved into highly coordinated learning communities and now also involve basic skills courses as well. Today, Ohlone offers between 6-10 learning communities including University Express each semester and the new Newark campus curriculum is being modeled around learning community and cohort theory.

## **Relationship to College Values**

Open access to higher education and actively reach out to underserved populations

Learning communities are at the heart of the college's values and goals. With the inclusion of basic skills classes in the University Express program and ongoing ESL learning communities each semester, the college has made a great effort to find instructional techniques and programs to better meet the unique needs of these often underserved students. In surveys done of students who have been involved in these types of learning communities, students have reported not only having received better grades, but also having gained a much deeper understanding of the involved disciplines as they relate to each other and to the students themselves. They also reported having developed bonds with other students and faculty that supported them staying in the course and completing when they may not have otherwise been motivated to do so.

These learning communities were not only given permission, but encouraged to explore a variety of innovative teaching methodologies as they worked with their community of learners. Multiple staff development opportunities were provided to assist the faculty to that end. In surveys of faculty who taught within these learning communities many expressed how much they had learned from one another, and how they felt a bit more comfortable venturing from the known teaching techniques with a faculty partner by their side.

The success of the learning communities dedicated to the underserved student is evident in the steady increase in the number of basic skills and ESL learning communities which fill each semester.

Team work and open communication

Clearly the very nature of having a community of faculty and learners working on common assignments and projects necessitates team work and communication. Faculty learning community teams have spent hours in planning retreats, team meetings, and weekly planning sessions to design learning activities that make the connections among disciplines visible and to find better ways to assist the students in attaining the learning outcomes of the courses. Faculty have often begun their team work even a semester prior to the learning community being offered as they create the marketing plan they will use to promote their learning community. New ways of working and communicating together have had to be explored. This has not been without conflict; however, these were always resolved for the good of the team. Faculty are getting to know one another better and are calling on one another's expertise even after the learning community class is completed.

## **Strategic College Goals**

Learning College Model; Learning Communities and Cohort Groups

In the learning college model, it is not only encouraged, but expected that everyone is invited to continually learn new things. The learning communities have provided one of the best staff development techniques the college has ever witnessed. It began as a pebble thrown into the Ohlone pond five years ago and has spread out like concentric circles. As each new community is created and taught, more and more faculty are being exposed to and using innovative, active, and collaborative teaching techniques. They are learning from one another and perhaps, due to the freedom allotted to the learning communities, venturing out well beyond their initial comfort zones.

From these beginnings, a curiosity about learning space developed and two new experimental classrooms were faculty designed in 2006 around the idea of community learning. These spaces have flexible seating arrangements with moveable tables and chairs, numerous tools for collaboration such as laptops, huddle boards, and collaborative plasma screen stations, and the ability to digitally capture the learning that takes place within the classroom, so that it may continue beyond the classroom walls. While many of the

learning communities have made use of this space, other non-learning community classes have been taught there as well. This has encouraged more traditional faculty to “rethink” the lecture only mode when they enter a room with such a community feel. Learning community faculty have volunteered their time to coach these more traditional faculty as they attempt collaborative learning methodologies.

In spring 2007, a collaborative teaching coaching group facilitated by Vicki Curtis, the learning community coordinator, held monthly get-togethers to model and discuss collaborative/active teaching techniques to try out in future classes. They then came back together to assess the success of these techniques and further hone them with feedback from their colleagues. This group was composed of both full and part-time faculty and counselors.

## **ACCJC/WASC Accreditation Standards**

### **Student Learning Programs and Services/Instructional Programs/Student Support Services**

Learning communities have made Ohlone rethink the delivery model of student learning programs and services from disconnected solitary experiences to community based ones where each person is viewed as an important member of the team. Most of the full-time learning communities include a counselor. The counselor usually teaches a personal development class within the community and provides emotional and affective support as well as assistance with educational planning. Having instructional and student services faculty work so closely together has proved to be a very effective way to ensure each student has all the instructional and student services support he or she needs.

In addition to inspiring exploration with innovative teaching techniques, learning communities have also sparked an interest in exploring alternative assessment strategies. Faculty have begun questioning how to know when a student really understands something. A small group of faculty was involved in the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education’s research project on assessing the learning that takes place in learning communities from 2006-2007. The research protocol presented faculty with questions about learning and assessment from a new angle. Alternative assessments were looked at, such as student created e-portfolios and student videos. E-portfolios use is continuing to expand and this assessment technique is being used by greater numbers of faculty. The assessment research protocol is being modified by Ohlone’s staff development coordinator, Deb Parziale for future use at Ohlone.

### **Technology Resources**

Learning communities have also spawned an interest in technology tools which can either create a virtual community or facilitate collaboration within a learning community. Software for E-portfolios previously discussed, wikis and blogs, collaborative writing tools, will be a part of the new Web CT learning management system.

In fall of 2006, Ohlone became an iTunes University allowing Ohlone to have Apple host a repository for faculty and student podcasts. Many of the learning community faculty are among the pioneers in podcasting. There are faculty and student podcasts within Ohlone iTunes in a variety of disciplines with more in development.

## **ACCJC/WASC Accreditation Themes**

### **Institutional Commitments**

The college has demonstrated commitment to the learning community strategy in a number of important ways. Reassigned time for faculty has been made available for development and coordination. Learning community development is an important goal in the institution’s strategic plan. Learning communities are being developed and support in other efforts including athletic cohorts and basic skills reform.

## Student Learning Outcomes

Upon a close inspection of all of the above mentioned activities, features and teaching methodologies utilized and inspired by learning communities, it is clear how vital the learning community movement at Ohlone has been to the design, implementation, and measurement of student learning outcomes which warrant relevant and appropriate learning experiences to prepare our students to take their places in society.

The learning community passion and fire continues to burn brightly to guide our current and future learning journeys.

## **Learning Communities 2003 -2007**

### **Spring 2003. Fall 2003**

- Vicki Curtis and Kenny Mencher offered ESL 151 and Art Appreciation, Filled

### **Fall 2004**

- Transfer Express: The First Year Experience, Filled
  - English 101A (Gallagher)
  - History (Bardell)
  - Psychology (Helms)
  - Personal Development (Takakuwa)
- Looking in the Mirror: Finding an American Identity, Filled
  - English 101A - Reading and Written Composition (Mitchell)
  - History 117A - History of the United States (Hanna)
- On With the Show: In English? Filled
  - TD-118 Survey of Acting Techniques (Blank)
  - ESL-151 Introduction to Speech Communication Skills (Curtis)
- Linked classes, Filled
  - English 151A Fundamental of Composition (Rakesh Swamy)
  - English 162 Developmental Reading (Rakesh Swamy)

### **2005-06 and 2006-07**

- a. Six Learning Communities for Fall 2005
  - i. University Express (Group 1)
    1. ENGL-101A, PSY-101, HIST-117A, PD-113
    2. 30 common students, plus 1 that enrolled in a different ENGL-101A
  - ii. University Express (Group 2)
    1. ENGL-101A, PSY-101, HIST-117A, PD-113
    2. 17 common students, although 3 of these were not in PD-113
  - iii. University Express
    1. For developmental students
    2. ENGL-151B, ENGL-163, SOC-101, PD-113
    3. 29 common students
  - iv. University Express
    1. For developmental students
    2. ENGL-151A, ENGL-162, PD-212C
    3. 23 common students; Note: This cohort originally included the cross-listed class ART/IS/MUS/TD-100, but only 10 of the cohort's students were enrolled in this course at census
  - v. "On with the Show in English"
    1. For ESL Students
    2. ESL-151/SPCH-151, TD-118
    3. 25 common students
  - vi. Puente (NEW)
    1. Devoted developmental English students with Hispanic heritage
    2. ENGL 151B, PD 113, ENGL 163
  - vii. Note: Two other Learning Communities were listed in the class schedule, but enrollments did not demonstrate a common cohort of students.
    1. "Looking Out/Looking In": ENGL-127& SPCH-103 (the ENGL class was cancelled, and the SPCH students did not share a common ENGL).

2. "Looking in the Mirror": ENGL-101A & HIST-117A (only 6 students in common, out of around 30 in each class)
- b. Two Learning Communities for Spring 2006
- i. "On the Road to Research & College Success" (NEW)
    1. Online Learning Community
    2. ENGL-101A, PD-113, LS-101 X
    3. 15 students in common, out of 16, 19, & 20, respectively
  - ii. "On with the Show in English"
    1. For ESL Students
    2. ESL-151/SPCH-151, TD-118
    3. 23 students in common, out of 23 & 24 respectively)
  - iii. Note: Other Learning Communities were listed in the class schedule, but enrollments did not demonstrate a common cohort of students.
    1. "English in Psychology": PSY-101 & ENGL-101A (the ENGL class was cancelled, and the PSY students do not share a common ENGL class at all).
    2. "Golden Four": MATH-156, ENGL-101A, & SPCH-101 (the MATH class was cancelled, and there were very few students common to the other two classes).
    3. "Business of Biotechnology": BIOT-100, BA-123, & BA-125 (none of the BIOT students were in either of the other classes, and the two BA classes had a very small number of common students).
    4. There were three University Express cohorts planned for Spring 2006, but the common number of students did not seem to demonstrate a true cohort:
      - a. ENGL-151B, ENGL-163, PD-113, and SOC-101 or PSY-101
      - b. ENGL-101A and HIST-117A
      - c. HIST-117B and ENGL-101B or ENGL-101C
- c. Seven Learning Communities Fall 2006
- i. Ohlone College Investigative Analyst (NEW)
    1. ENGL 101A, HIST 117B, PHIL 106
  - ii. Who Am I in America? (NEW)
    1. Devoted to ESL students
    2. ESL 184R, ESL 184W, PSY 101, CAOT 120, PD 150
  - iii. On the Road to Research & College Success
    1. Online Learning Community
    2. ENGL 101A, LS 101, PD 113
  - iv. Puente
    1. Devoted developmental English students with Hispanic heritage
    2. ENGL 151B, PD 113, ENGL 163
  - v. Three University Express
    1. Two for developmental English students
      - a. ENGL-151A, ENGL-162, HIST-117B, PD-113
      - b. ENGL-151B, ENGL-163, SOC-101, PD-113
    2. One with all college level courses
      - a. ENGL-101A, BIOL-105, HIST-117A, PD-111
- d. Six Learning Communities Spring 2007
- i. High Tech Hijinks: Reading and Writing in a High Tech World (New)
    1. Devoted to developmental English students

2. ENGL-151B, ENGL-163, CNET-101
- ii. Overcoming Algebra (New)
  1. Devoted to developmental Math students
  2. MATH-199, MATH-151A, PD-111
- iii. Debate Today's Issues with Tomorrow's Leaders (New)
  1. SPCH-106, PS-102
- iv. On With the Show: In English?
  1. Devoted to ESL students
  2. ESL-151, TD-118
- v. Two University Express
  1. One for developmental English students
  2. One with all college level courses