

Report for Title III Grant Learning in a Learning Community

Summary of Project Four faculty teaching four different classes were involved in a University Express Learning Community for Fall 2007: Mike DeUnamuno, PD 113; Alison Kuehner, English 163; Carmen Madden, English 151B; and Teresa Massimo, Speech 101. As part of our learning community, we had students reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of being in a learning community.

Specifically, we had students engage in the following activities:

1. In the beginning of the semester in their reading class, students were surveyed in the learning community to find out why they enrolled in a learning community and what advantages or disadvantages they anticipated being a part of this group. (see attached LC Survey)

In this survey, students expressed a wide range of motivations for being in a learning community. A handful had carefully researched learning communities online and wanted to be a part of one; other students had picked the class on the recommendation of other instructors or counselors; some students had signed up for this learning community because it consisted of the only available classes and they needed the classes.

2. Later in the semester in their PD class, students were again asked about their attitudes toward their learning community. The results of this class discussion are summarized (see attached Fall 2007 ENGL 151B Learning Survey).

In general, students had a positive attitude about their learning community and the other students in it because of the supportive and social atmosphere. But some also felt they may be taking classes they didn't need or that the group dynamic encouraged them to "slack off" because they were working with their friends.

3. Students reflected on their experience of being in a learning community by keeping a weekly journal in English 151B.

4. Students used study strategies learned in their PD class to study for a test in their reading class.

This was probably the one time when the learning communities (at least between two of the classes) was most in synch. One student, in her end of the semester letter, commented on how the English 163 class was "tied in" with the PD class because both classes reviewed PQ3R at the same time and both classes presented various study strategies and learning methods. However, students did not necessarily do well on the textbook test in the reading class, even though they had been presented with study strategies in both their reading and PD class to help them prepare. It seems that many students were overly confident, thinking the test would be easy and did not really need to expend much effort outside of class studying on their own.

5. At the end of the semester, students were asked to write a letter about their progress in their speech class and in their learning community.

Many felt that getting to know other students in the class helped alleviate their fear and nervousness when speaking in front of the class. Also, having the support of their classmates (who became friends) outside of class helped them prepare their speeches. For instance, one student wrote “This learning community in particular was very supportive of each other and always had good things to say, which helped boost extra confidence . . . for everyone.” However, one student pointed out the drawbacks of being in this particular learning community when she wrote the following: “I have a few things I want to say about University Express as a whole. The first is that it was not at all what I expected. I registered for the program in May and everyone else seemed to be in it because they were the only courses left. I wanted to be with people who were serious about their education, and like me, who had researched the program and understood how beneficial it could have been. Instead, I found that people were immature, disrespectful, and unappreciative. I have to say that I think that a learning community is a good idea for people who want to be there and who know why they are there. I will not be enrolling in any other learning community because the course I enjoyed the most is the one class I had out of UE.”

6. Students were encouraged to see the connections among the various skills and strategies they are learning in their different courses (in all courses).

In particular, in their end of the semester letters in speech, students pointed out connections between their classes. One student noted that she had learned in her English class “to state your weakest points first and end strong,” a technique she carried over to speech. Another student stated she had learned from her reading class “to use a credible source when I’m supporting my point,” a guideline she applied when preparing her speeches. A student said she used the PQ3R method she had learned in reading to pull out reliable information when reading to prepare for her speeches. Yet another student commented that “both my English teachers taught us about writing a good thesis in papers and supporting those thesis with main points like it is required in the speeches I did.” Finally one student pointed out how he used the “relaxation methods and stress relief methods from Mike’s Personal Development class to calm . . . down before a speech.” So even though most students could list only one or two way their classes overlapped, a majority could cite at least one specific connection and could apply strategies learned in one class to tasks required in another class.

Project Outcomes:

- Students became more aware of the advantages and disadvantages of being in a learning community. For instance, they could see how being with a group of the same students all semester could provide a safe, supportive atmosphere. However, other students could also see how being with the same group of students had its disadvantages, especially after spending so much time together in classes, some students didn’t want to study together outside of class.
- To some degree, students were able to make connections and apply skills they learned in one class to another. For instance, students understood the concept of a thesis and applied this in their reading, writing, and speech classes.

- However, it's not clear that all students developed individual strategies for improving their success in their learning community. In fact, it seemed to many of the instructors that students with poor behaviors, such as arriving to class late, talking during lectures, or not turning in work on time, reinforced each others' negative behaviors. On the other hand, students with good behaviors, such as focusing on learning, contributing to class discussion and group work, also reinforced their good behaviors.

Recommendations:

- learning communities might function better with only two classes linked together. With four classes linked, students had limited contact with other students in the college. In this learning community, that was detrimental to students who reinforced each others' negative behaviors. Also, the faculty involved had a difficult time meeting in person and truly coordinating lessons. We mostly communicated via email and kept each other informed about the assignments in our classes.
- learning communities are not a panacea for improving students' educational experiences. In this case, being in a learning community might have been detrimental to some students, who did not have good role models among their fellow students, and who did not experience a greater range of students (most students in this group were straight out of high school). Again, a smaller learning community, allowing students an opportunity to take classes outside their group might have had a more positive effect.

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