

INNOVATIONS IN EDUCATION LEARNING COMMUNITIES

by Sandra McCleaster RRT



Higher education is continuously under pressure to show that it's preparing students for the changing world of work and good citizenship. The way academia responds to this pressure is by exploring different ways to provide instruction. As a result, new educational models have emerged, i.e. Service Learning, Writing Across the Curriculum, Multi-Cultural Education, to name just a few. One more paradigm of particular interest is the development of "Learning Communities."

Learning Communities came about in response to a 1984 federal Department of Education study which concluded that "every institution of higher education should strive to create learning communities organized around specific intellectual themes or tasks."

Even though the concept isn't really new, learning communities have over the past two decades become a growing movement, attracting the attention of faculty across a wide range of academic disciplines. This is a unique type of learning package – one that is quite different for both students and their teachers.

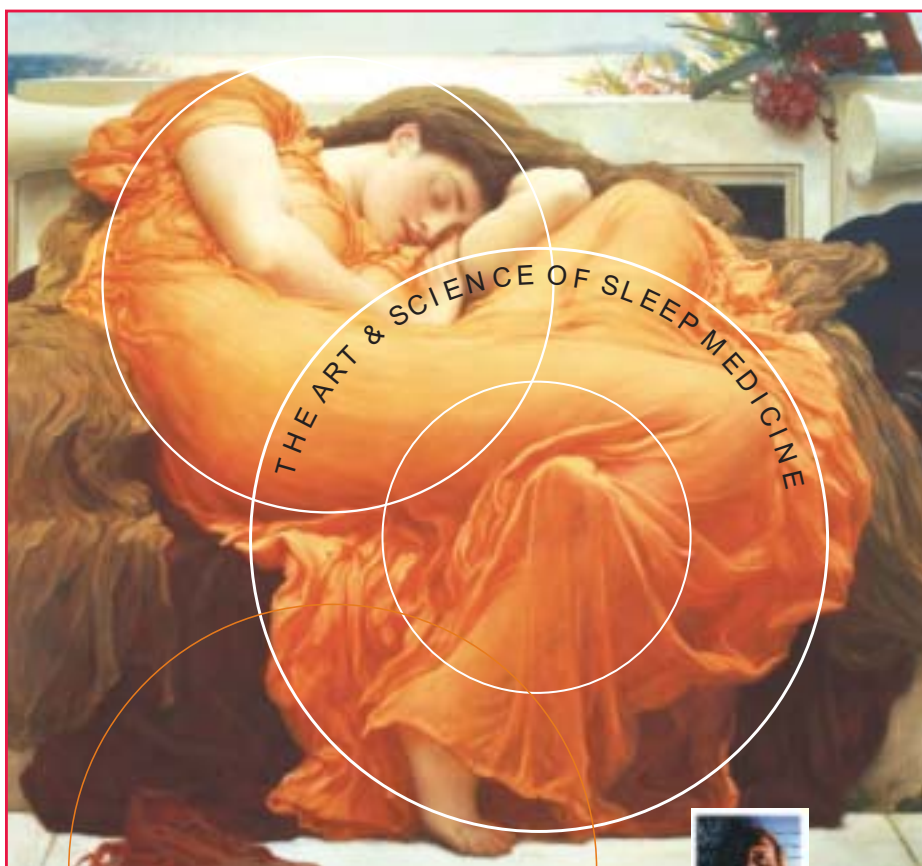
An accepted definition of a learning community is "an approach to curricular design which enrolls a specific cohort of students and links or clusters courses." It involves a

deliberate configuration of students' time and learning experiences, the purpose of which is to build and foster relationships while at the same time, providing an appropriate context for learning. The rationale is to create a rich, challenging and nurturing academic community that might not otherwise exist.

The concept is based on the premise that learning never occurs in a vacuum. Learning can only happen through discourse among people who have a common interest in a topic. The discourse fosters a sense of connection which develops not just between students but between students and faculty as well. Important and unique to the experience is the relationship that also develops between academic disciplines. Thus, the learning community.

There are lots of models and variations of models on record, too many to individually describe within the body of this article. In summary however, Learning Communities can range from clusters of loosely paired courses to whole programs which consume students' entire semester's curriculum. Obviously some models are more doable than others. An important commonality among models, however, is that the cohort of students remains intact.

One popular and simple approach is to have two courses linked by a learning community or integrated seminar. All of the students must co-enroll and instructors must co-teach in the courses in the link. In this clustering or pairing, courses are linked by theme. One course is identified as being the primary content course. This primary content course is then linked to some general education, English composition, or public speaking course, where the specific content becomes the fodder for learning assignments. Learning activities and assignments should be specific to the primary content. It's in the integrated seminar where student-to-student and student-to-faculty dialogue and communication happen. This is where the sense of "community" is developed. What happens is a transfer of information across the courses, giving the subject content a context for application. Students get a broad framework for their education.



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One popular model and probably the most appropriate for allied health education combines a communications course with a component of experiential learning within the primary content course. The "other" course would provide the place where content topics are talked or written about, providing an opportunity to integrate course materials as well as providing a platform on which to develop a personal "point of view." Here's a hypothetical example: combine an English composition or ethics course with an appropriate respiratory therapy content course, for instance "Mechanical Ventilation." Topics for the composition or ethics course can only be based on the Respiratory Therapy course content, in this case some aspect of mechanical ventilation. The integrated seminar could use as its basis case studies brought from students' clinical experiences. Here, rather than "correct answers," students develop ability to recognize and discuss problems, identify possible solutions and form opinions.

There is anecdotal evidence that learning communities improve learning. Proponents say that an environment which fosters active student participation the way learning communities do can be the difference between success and failure. It's felt to be more in line with the way people learn naturally and more relevant to how problems are solved and decisions are made in the real world of relationships and work. Indications are too that learning communities have led to significant improvements in student retention.

It seems as if the learning communities approach would be well-suited for the community college environment where commuter students come from diverse backgrounds and have limited interaction with one another outside of the classroom. Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be much on record about the implementation of learning communities in allied health education. That may be in part because allied health programs are so self-contained and tend to be a bit territorial, so as to insulate themselves from the liberal arts disciplines.

Some educators though, have noted that allied health programs are actually learning communities in and of themselves. (i.e. a cohort of students moving through a program). To that extent this may be true. Certainly, students do naturally form a community of sorts as they progress through a program. But for a true learning community to exist, it needs that paired course and integrated seminar.

Possibly the biggest benefits for allied health education, Learning Communities address the needs for:

- active and collaborative learning
- inter-disciplinary work, (a "must" in health care)
- understanding issues from various perspectives
- social and academic support
- student retention (all educators could use some help with this)

I know that, like any education innovation, integrating the paired or clustered courses would involve a commitment to planning and re-design. For instance, the professional phase of many allied health programs takes place after a student has completed a core of pre-requisite or liberal arts courses – too late for implementation of the learning community. In this case, a serious commitment to change would be essential. I could also foresee some administrative hurdles, not the least of which is that the "other" faculty would have to buy into the concept. And there would need to be a creative approach to grading the integrated seminar.

Nevertheless, it sounds like learning communities could be a recipe for student solidarity and success, as well as a way to revitalize the teaching experience for tired faculty members who've grown weary of the same old lecture format. I've never tried anything like this; but it does seem like it could be novel and fun.



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