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American Association of Colleges and Universities, *Peer Review*, Fall 2001

Peer Review, Fall 2001

The Challenge of Learning Communities as a Growing National Movement

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Learning communities have become a growing national movement.¹ Four or five hundred colleges and universities now offer them, and the number continues to increase. They are found in virtually every state, in both public and private colleges and universities, and in a diverse range of institutions. Learning communities are a broad structural innovation that can address a variety of issues from student retention to curriculum coherence, from faculty vitality to building a greater sense of community within our colleges. On some campuses, the learning community effort is very large; on others, it is small. On most, it is fragile, even if it has been in place for several years.

At this juncture it's appropriate to ask why learning communities have become so pervasive and what challenges this growing national movement faces. These questions are timely for learning communities are at a transition point. On the early adopting campuses, they are facing classic second-stage reform effort issues of succession and institutionalization, and the movement itself faces challenges as it becomes larger and more diffuse.

How and Why Learning Communities Became Pervasive

The learning community movement has numerous roots and branches and a long history of start-up, failure, and rebirth at another time and place. The basic ideas underlying learning communities are not new. The roots lie in the 1920s with the establishment of a short-lived program at the University of Wisconsin, the Meiklejohn Experimental College (see Brown 1981; Cronon and Jenkins 1994; Powell 1981). The seeds of many of the current value conflicts that threaten learning communities were sown in this earlier time.

Meiklejohn lived in a time when the elective system became popular and research-focused specialized academic departments were gaining ascendancy. Meiklejohn thought the structure and values of the emergent research university were becoming antithetical to the task of preparing students for democratic citizenship, a goal integral to the very notion of public education. He saw the division of the curriculum into smaller and smaller units of credit and the growth of specialized academic departments as critical structural issues that would ultimately drive both relationships between students and faculty and the content of the curriculum. He predicted that narrow departments would make it difficult to raise important interdisciplinary issues and the fragmented nature of the curriculum would frustrate committed teachers trying to create a sense of deep engagement and community. "General education" (education for citizenship), he rightly surmised, would become nobody's business.

Meiklejohn's solution was to establish the "Experimental College," an interdisciplinary, team-taught, two-year lower division curriculum focusing on democracy. The curriculum was both historical and contemporary, looking at the roots of democracy and the issues facing twentieth-century America. The Experimental College tried to build community and create a seamless interface between the living and learning environment. The pedagogy stressed active learning, seminars, and assignments that asked students to put the theory they studied into practice, a radical notion at the time. Teachers were seen as advisors and facilitators of learning rather than as distant figures on a lectern.

It was not an easy sell. Enrollment was lower than anticipated. The students were often seen as unruly, and Meiklejohn and the faculty spent much time fighting the values and power structure of the university. Despite being a favorite of the new president of the university, the program was abandoned after five years. Although it didn't last very long, the program had an enormous impact on its students. Recent histories describe it as a high point in the university's history, referring to it as "Camelot on the Lake" (Cronon and Jenkins 1994).

The next major chapter in learning community history is in the 1960s when the higher education system nearly doubled in size and the community college system was broadly established. This was a time of innovation with various experiments with structure. Cluster colleges were one attempt to humanize the scale of higher education and promote community. Many traditional institutions established innovative programs and sub-colleges such as the residential college at Michigan, the Centennial Program at the University of Nebraska, and Fairhaven College within Western Washington University. Innovative new colleges were also founded including the Evergreen State College, the University of California-Santa Cruz, and Empire State College.

Interdisciplinary approaches were an important aspect of these innovations, but only a few significantly altered traditional organizational structures. As a result, they often contained internal contradictions and faced substantial compatibility challenges as they developed. Very few survived into the 1990s with their founding values intact. Throughout this period, there was debate about whether these innovations could scale-up and become cost effective. This issue remained unsettled until well into the 1980s when institutions like the Evergreen State College proved that they could. Meanwhile, mainstream institutions picked off their innovations, broadly appropriating ideas such as student-centered learning, writing across the curriculum, active learning, and interdisciplinary programs.

Several of the most important programs in this era were in California. In the mid-1960's the Meiklejohn model was resurrected by a former student, Joseph Tussman, at the University of California-Berkeley and at San Jose State College by Merv Cadwallader, a friend of Tussman's. These programs were also short-lived but they became seedbeds for future endeavors. Cadwallader carried the idea to a number of other institutions, including The Evergreen State College. Tussman wrote an eloquent account of the rationale for curricular restructuring in his book *Experiment at Berkeley* (now reprinted as *The Beleaguered College*, 1997).

Learning communities resurfaced with the establishment of the Evergreen State College, a new institution holistically designed around the structural notions underlying the Meiklejohn-Tussman integrated curriculum (for an account of this see Jones 1981; Jones and Smith 1984; Smith and McCann 2001). About five years later, a number of institutions on the east coast, notably SUNY Stony Brook and La Guardia Community College also developed new curricular restructuring models. These adaptations made the idea of learning communities applicable to a broader range of institutions, especially research universities and community colleges. Patrick Hill, then at SUNY Stony Brook, was passionate about the growing social and intellectual atomism and the mismatched expectations between students and faculty in research universities, but he was also a pragmatist who appreciated incremental change and local adaptations.

There was a joining of the East and West Coast learning community effort when Hill became provost of the Evergreen State College in 1983. The momentum for learning communities dramatically increased in 1985 with the establishment of the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at the Evergreen State College. Led by Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor, the Center helped develop and disseminate a language about learning communities along with a variety of models that could be locally adapted. It became a support system for people interested in learning communities.

A number of other factors contributed to the pervasive reach of the learning community effort. The significant research of Vince Tinto, a major figure in the area of student retention, was critical. In the early 1990's Tinto undertook a major study of the impact of learning communities and collaborative learning (Radcliff and

Associates 1995). He looked at the learning community programs at two very different institutions -the University of Washington and Seattle Central Community College-producing the first in-depth study. The results clearly demonstrated their effectiveness and showed that involving and academically challenging campus environments could be purposefully built on commuter campuses . At the same time, Alexander Astin's important book, *What Matters in College*, appeared. Between Astin and Tinto, both the dimensions of the problem of undergraduate education *and* some solutions were offered. The leadership of people such as Astin, Tinto, Peter Ewell, John Gardner, Carol Schneider, and Pat Cross was also important in spreading the word about learning communities. They spoke to different audiences in academic and student affairs, in research universities and community colleges, and broadened the reach of the learning community effort.

The last fifteen years have been a time of broad discussion about teaching and learning. Many powerful pedagogies have emerged on the national landscape: service learning, assessment, writing across the curriculum, inquiry-based approaches to the sciences, multicultural education, collaborative and cooperative learning, and problem -centered learning, to mention just a few. These reform efforts have a common aim of promoting active learning and what has been referred to as "deep learning." Numerous funding agencies and national organizations and conferences have supported these teaching and learning reform efforts and featured learning community work over the last decade.

Many innovations fail to develop broad reach simply because they become too intramural, operating in isolation of potentially related enterprises. What's notable about the learning community effort is that it has often joined forces with these other efforts, providing a broader structural platform for implementing these other powerful pedagogies. This has both deepened learning community pedagogy and aims, and broadened the audience and base of potential allies. This could go further.

Recently, regional nodes of leadership have started to emerge beyond the early adopters. Delta College in Michigan and William Rainey Harper College in Illinois now jointly sponsor an annual learning community conference, and several convening campuses are now emerging in California. An extensive relationship has been established between IUPUI, George Mason University, Portland State University, and Temple University and other urban universities. A National Learning Community Project at the Evergreen State College funded by Pew Charitable Trusts should deepen this trend toward regional collaboration.

Learning Communities Past and Present

The history of learning communities is an evolving story of reformers and innovators doing their work. It is a story about the power of personal commitments and relationships in building reform efforts. It is also a story about the power of institutional structures, processes, and value systems in shaping our institutions. There is continuity over time with a number of themes in this learning community history. The themes of democracy, access, and classrooms as community particularly stand out. Early learning communities dating back to the early twentieth century were concerned with the role schools play in preparing students for responsible citizenship. The question "education for what" was at the forefront. This influenced the curriculum content and the educational practices. Early learning communities were also concerned about making higher education widely available. These were not enclaves for the elite. Continuing to expand access was seen as critical to the evolving American experiment with democracy.

Another way to look at this history is to note that, across these generations of leaders, we also see dramatically different leadership styles, organizational strategies, and settings. Learning communities in the latter part of the twentieth century are characterized by collaborative leadership models -models which came in with the feminist movement, the civil rights movements, and the reform efforts in the 1960s and 1970s. There has been a shift towards movement thinking and community organizing strategies in the contemporary learning community movement. The effort is more purposefully inter-institutional with the rapid dissemination of ideas and strategies across institutions. There is also a systematic effort to build bridges to related enterprises and to broaden leadership across the movement. In many institutions the learning community effort has become robust precisely because the organizers have been savvy about working with the existing organizational structures and adapting them to their needs.

The Challenges Learning Communities Face

While the learning community movement is certainly succeeding by some measures -if only sheer size, it also faces significant challenges. The most obvious challenge is that of transition and succession as the early adopters move on. All institutions face this challenge. Other challenges are deeper and perhaps more important. I will close by briefly describing four: the challenge of student learning and faculty development; the challenge of diversity, the challenge of institutional change, and the challenge of purpose.

The Challenge of Student Learning and Faculty Development

We know that learning communities can be a powerful platform for both student learning and faculty development. We need to figure out better ways to put what we know about student learning into our learning community designs. Unless learning communities build upon the best approaches to student learning, the structural changes will only produce minimal improvements. Too many learning communities are little more than block registration devices, with little alteration of the teaching and learning environment.

Learning communities across the nation are under-investing in faculty development. So it isn't surprising that pedagogical approaches have changed little. With the imminent retirement of about half of the nation's faculty, this is a very good time to invest extensively in faculty development and to rethink the ways in which we support the development of excellent teachers. Learning communities can be a powerful faculty development structure, especially if they involve team teaching or team planning, which provides a natural setting for the day-to-day coaching that can lead to genuine growth and development. There is no shortage of good literature to draw upon. John Bransford's book *How People Learn* or Lionel Gardner's *Redesigning Higher Education for Dramatic Gains in Student Learning* are good places to start.

The Challenge of Diversity

The challenge of diversity is a multifaceted issue about who participates in learning communities (students and faculty), what the curriculum is and where it is located, and how the teaching and learning environments are structured. Learning communities continue to struggle to address the multiple issues of diversity. At the same time, they have great promise. We know that they can provide a powerful means of serving an increasingly diverse student population. Some schools have used them strategically to address serious retention issues in parts of the curriculum that are not serving students well. Many schools are targeting learning communities on developmental education since this is a graveyard for too many students. These efforts often lead to dramatically improved student retention.

The Challenge of Institutional Change

If the learning community movement is to have lasting impact, the challenge of institutional change needs serious attention. Across the nation we see persistent weaknesses in terms of leadership structures, resource investments, faculty development, real curriculum integration, assessment, and pedagogical change. Effectively addressing institutional change requires a more comprehensive point of view. Eventually the learning community effort must move from being an innovation or an interesting project to being a *reform*. Being a reform requires structural change, reworking roles and relationships, and generally re-engineering the organization so that learning communities are appropriately supported.

The Challenge of Purpose

Learning communities often begin in a flurry of enthusiasm without clear goals or planning. There's nothing wrong with this; it is typical of innovations. But if the effort is to last and have a significant impact, the institution needs to eventually come to a common understanding about their goals and organize appropriately to support them. The question I want to raise here is about whether our vision is large enough.

Learning communities re-emerged in the last twenty years in a period of rapid expansion of the higher education system and a climate of widespread experimentation with new approaches to teaching and learning. At the same time, the education system as a whole has come under increasing public scrutiny. This is a time of rising criticism outside the academy and also a time of growing crisis within the nation's

colleges and universities. At no time have the questions "education for what" and "education for whom" been more pressing.

The learning community effort now stands at a crossroads, at the institutional level and as a national movement. As it is now a large-scale effort, pointed questions need to be raised about how quality can be maintained and strengthened as this endeavor continues to scale-up. If we look back at earlier learning communities, it is very clear what they were about. They had big goals in terms of their vision of society and the role of the academy. They saw learning communities as a means for developing the capacity to live in a democratic society. Now, these very issues are being raised again in a variety of ways -through the service learning movement, through the multifaceted diversity work, and through the larger national conversations about the direction of higher education. The learning community movement is poised to be a major player in this conversation. By re-engaging some of these fundamental issues of purpose and squarely facing the multiple challenges, today's learning communities may find new strength.

Notes

¹ As we use it, the term "learning community" refers to the purposeful restructuring of the curriculum by linking or clustering courses that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional structuring of the students time, credit, and learning experiences to build community, and foster more explicit connections among students, faculty, and disciplines (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Mathews, and Smith).

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