

Designing a Learning Community in an Hour



The idea in this exercise is for your team to engage in some boundary-crossing curricular brainstorming. Often planning conversations start with what students will learn, and these conversations are usually based in existing courses. The purpose of this exercise is to practice inventing a new curriculum around topics or ideas that bridge or meld disciplines (and to have some fun getting to know one another!)

Pretend that you have been asked to be a learning community teaching team for a group of beginning students at a college for an entire semester. Recognizing that you all come from colleges that vary in size and mission, for the sake of this exercise assume that your students are college-ready freshmen at a campus that could be either commuter or residential. (If residence life staff are on your team, then, naturally consider the opportunities you have!)

Assume for this exercise that all the administrative logistics have been successfully worked out, and your job is simply to design and deliver the academic experience for the students. Although it will be a challenge, try to stay on task with all the steps of this exercise, and to keep your side conversations about each other's existing learning community programs to a minimum.

For those of you who are faculty members, it requires each of you "to leave your syllabus at the door" (but not your disciplinary background!) and to engage in some intellectual bridge-building with your colleagues.

Every group will be given some flip-chart paper and a colored marker or two. Each team should appoint a time-keeper and an individual who will agree to be "scribe." Do not proceed with this process UNTIL you're sure you have these materials, and an agreed-upon scribe and timekeeper.

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1. GETTING FOCUSED TIME: About 5 minutes

Begin with some quiet reflective time to read through these instructions and to do some thinking and/or "free-writing" in response to the following task:

If you had the opportunity to teach in some sort of learning community format, what THEME or THEMES might intrigue you? Ways to get started: what larger interdisciplinary questions, issues, ideas or problems might be intriguing for you and for students to explore?

2. GENERATION OF POSSIBLE THEMES TIME: 10 minutes

Your scribe should begin recording information as information is shared in this task. Also, your group's timekeeper needs to keep time for this task.

Taking no more than 3-5 minutes per person (be disciplined about this) introduce yourself to the group, and name (no need to elaborate on) what courses you usually teach or what niche you have on your campus. Then, describe what larger interdisciplinary questions, issues, ideas, or problems are intriguing to you right now.

3. CHOOSE A THEME TIME: 10 minutes

Once your group has generated ideas for possible learning community themes, see if you can come to consensus on any common theme, question, or topic that could conceivably be the organizing idea for a learning community. If members of your group are widely divergent in your interests, you should simply take a leap of faith and settle on one of the themes with which everyone feels comfortable working in this exercise.

4. FLESH OUT THE THEME TIME: 25-30 minutes

Given an imaginary quarter or semester in which your group were teaching collaboratively around this theme, what might you and your students do? Flesh out the substance of your program in brainstorm fashion -- that is, GENERATE particular sub-themes, concepts, authors or titles of texts (reading of primary sources is encouraged!), films, field experiences or research projects which might illustrate the THEME. No need to prioritize or to lock in a sequence at this stage. In the interest of generating just as much as you can, please use this brainstorming protocol.

Generate as many ideas as you can. Don't get bogged down judging or discussing the merits or fine points of each suggestion: the idea is to generate as much as you can now and to do the sorting and refining at a later date.

- Create a "group memory" as you work: record all the ideas suggested (in LARGE print) on your newsprint paper so all members of your group can see. To the degree that you can, keep the newsprint in front of everyone, so your group has a common sense of its thinking.
- In the brainstorming process, repetition of earlier suggestions is okay.
- Resist the temptation to embark on side conversations about learning community implementation or the merits of a particular idea: try to stay with the brainstorming process.

5. MAKE A SUMMARY POSTER OF YOUR WORK: TIME: last 5 minutes

Summarize some of the key ideas or activities in your learning community design. At the top of the page, give your program a title and make a note of the disciplines involved, e.g.

"American Dreams, Lost and Found" English Composition: Research Writing
History: 20th Century America
Introduction to Film Studies

POST YOUR WORK FOR ALL TO SEE