

A Faculty ‘C’ Change: Inspired by Learning Communities

by Randall E. Jedele

Looking back on 27 years of teaching experience, it’s tempting to think the biggest changes have been in technology. Certainly, going from carbon copies and mimeograph machines to word processing and teaching on Blackboard in a Web-blended course has been a huge transition. But the most radical transformation in teaching for me began when I started teaching in learning communities. These teaching experiences were, indeed, a sea change for me because they transformed my pedagogy and how I teach with colleagues.

At my community college, we define a learning community as “a cohort of students taking two or more theme-related classes with two or more instructors.” These classes can be linked, which means they are taught separately with integrated assignments, or they can be coordinated, team-taught in a block schedule. Currently, we average 15 learning communities each semester and I have been involved in both types. When I taught in my first coordinated community, it was as if the god or goddess of pedagogy waved a magic wand and turned me in a new direction. I learned about active learning and what it meant to work closely with a colleague in planning activities, assignments, and assessments. In fact, because my teaching experiences were so powerful, and because I knew I couldn’t be the only one having these experiences, I devoted my doctoral research to trying to determine how others perceived the effects of teaching in learning communities, including how teaching in stand-alone classes might have been altered as well.

Randall E. Jedele is currently the chair of the Humanities Department at Des Moines Area Community College. He is also a writing instructor in the Communications Department and coordinator of the college’s learning community initiative. His doctoral dissertation—Teaching and Learning in Community: A Phenomenological Study of Community College Faculty Pedagogy and Learning Communities—focused on how faculty perceived a radical transformation in their pedagogy as a result of teaching in learning communities.

Ultimately, my dissertation research reinforced what I experienced in my own teaching: Those of us teaching in learning communities did experience a sea change in our pedagogy. We could see how our participation influenced how we viewed what I call “C” changes: camaraderie, cooperation, collegiality, collaboration, curriculum integration, creative teaching techniques, and community building, all of which influenced our growth and development as teachers.

Camaraderie: My best learning communities, whether linked or coordinated, have been with colleagues with whom I already had a strong relationship.

I have seen more than one learning community fail because the two faculty members did not agree on policies such as attendance, due dates, and late papers.

Camaraderie creates a comfort level in a shared classroom. Because the classroom is no longer my teaching arena—but ours—there has to be a connection and an ability to give and take. But the faculty members don’t have to agree on everything or have identical teaching styles. When I taught in a learning community with an Introduction to Literature class and Composition II class, my colleague and I often disagreed on our interpretations of literary selections. At first, this disagreement alarmed the students; but it taught them that they, too, could have their own interpretations as long as they could support their ideas with the text. They marveled at how both instructors could use the text to support our understanding of the selection.

Because of camaraderie, it is easier to agree on an approach to classroom management, which is crucial for the success of a learning community. I have seen more than one learning community fail because the two faculty members did not agree on policies such as attendance, due dates, and late papers. If one member of the teaching team adheres to strict attendance policies and deadlines and the other member or members are lenient, it will not take long for the students to begin working the instructors against each other.

Cooperation: The faculty at the college where I conducted my dissertation research uses the metaphor of marriage when they talk about forming learning communities. Indeed, the same type of cooperation, give and take, and flexibility that helps create a successful marriage is essential in a learning community, especially in a team-taught environment. Cooperation involves sharing time. The three-hour time block is never split in half every class meeting: One day I may need more time than is normally allotted, and another day the next week, my colleague may need more time. Or if one of us wants to show a complete film and have a discussion, the entire three-hour block will be used.

Collegiality: A useful definition of collegiality is “mutual learning and discussion of classroom practice and student performance. Collegial teachers may share lesson plans around interdisciplinary theme units, or work toward common expectations of student work.”¹ Before I taught in learning communities, the only collegial moments were happenstance, usually in the faculty workroom when two of us might realize we either had a student in common or previously had a student someone else was lamenting about. In those situations, we either commiserated or shared strategies that worked for us. When I teach in a learning community, though, it is not uncommon for two of us to discuss student performance on a reg-

When I teach in a learning community, it is not uncommon for two of us to discuss student performance on a regular basis.

ular basis. When a student is successful in one class of the learning community and struggling in the other, because the student is shared in common, it is much easier for one or both of us to approach the student and discuss possibilities for improved performance in the class that is posing difficulties. My learning community teaching partners and I also discuss classroom practices or successful classroom activities and assignments, something I rarely did before.

Before I taught in learning communities, I would never have thought of allowing students to take an exam in groups. In fact, when my teaching partner suggested this concept, I was skeptical. But, because each student had a separate answer sheet and could choose to disagree with the group, I was intrigued with this practice and amazed at the level of critical thinking that was occurring in their group discussions during the tests. The next time I taught a stand-alone literature class, I tried using group tests and was very pleased with the results.

Collaboration: The collaboration begins as soon as a teaching team attempts to create a title and theme for the learning community, and this practice of planning together does not end until the final grades are submitted. Because the collaboration is so intense and time-consuming, it has been cited as one of the pitfalls for faculty participation in learning communities. While there is a serious time commitment involved in the collaboration of assignments, activities, and assessments, the payoff is substantial. The high level of student participation and engagement is worth every minute of collaboration.

Collaboration with teaching colleagues is a daily activity. Before class, we plan the day's activities, and after class, we discuss what worked and what didn't and why. The act of collaboration brings energy into the environment and this energy is often transferred in a positive manner into the classroom. After teaching togeth-

er for several semesters, some of my colleagues even share grading responsibilities equally between the team members.

Curriculum Integration: Integrating curriculum in all learning communities is part of why students become so engaged and the level of participation is always higher than in my stand-alone classes. For example, when I started teaching a composition class with an Introduction to Criminal Justice class, I immediately saw more engagement with these students. When I asked them to reflect about their writing experiences at mid-term, they were excited about writing their assignments on criminal justice issues.

When we integrate curriculum, we often have assignments handed in for both classes. Students love the idea of receiving double credit for one assignment. They also like working on their essays with me before they are submitted in their criminal justice class. I usually don't give exams in writing classes; however, in learning communities, I often include an essay question that I will grade—the points also count in my class—when they take a major exam in the content-based class.

Creative Teaching Techniques: Although I'm sure creative teaching techniques exist in stand-alone classes, the old saying “two heads are better than one” certainly rings true when faculty begin to collaborate and share their best practices. Because of learning communities and my teaching partners, I was exposed to active learning and hands-on classroom activities. As I saw student participation increase in these classes, I knew I had to make changes in my stand-alone classes, so I began to incorporate these creative ideas into those classes as well.

In our collaborative efforts, some of the most creative service learning projects have surfaced in my learning community environments. For example, the first time



we decided to have our students partner with senior citizens, the students were apprehensive about meeting their senior partners because they didn't know what to talk about. When we brainstormed, we came up with the idea of having the students read Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Our dean agreed to buy a set of books for the senior partners, so that when the students met their partners for the first time, they were able to discuss the previously brainstormed questions based on the book. Our students soon realized they had much in common with their senior partners and formed strong, long-lasting relationships with them.

In my learning communities, a stronger community exists between my students, and a stronger relationship develops between the faculty and students.

Community Building: The culmination of the “C” changes leads to community building in a variety of ways. In all of my learning communities, whether linked or coordinated, a stronger community exists between my students as a cohort, probably because they spend more time together in class than if they only took stand-alone classes, and a stronger relationship develops between the faculty and students. Another product of learning communities is the community of faculty who teach in them. When we have meetings on campus or have the opportunity to attend a national gathering of learning community faculty, an obvious synergy electrifies the discussions. These national conferences are the best I attend; everyone is excited about teaching and committed to becoming a better teacher.

Research supports the idea that there are benefits for faculty who participate in learning community teaching environments, suggesting that they:

- Allow faculty to work together more closely and effectively.
- Lead to increased continuity and integration in the curriculum.
- Constitute a valuable activity for faculty development.
- Help participating faculty to view their disciplines in a more revealing light.
- Encourage faculty to share knowledge with one another.
- Broaden faculty members' knowledge about pedagogy.
- Promote collaborative, active teaching.
- Increase collegial trust.

Faculty teaching in learning communities also:

- Find their work to be more satisfying;
- Appreciate the amount and quality of students' learning, students' enjoyment of learning, and students' values and satisfaction;
- Become less isolated when they participate in learning communities.²

When faculty discuss the value of teaching in learning communities, they describe how team-planning or team-teaching opens windows on their discipline and their teaching. They speak of feeling connected to a larger enterprise. They reflect on the value of working closely with colleagues. And, they point to the sense of belonging they feel in a large, sometimes faceless institution.³

Andrea Rye of Shoreline Community College, who studied professional development and “revitalization” of faculty teaching in learning communities at community colleges, found that faculty rejuvenation begins with camaraderie that exists between the faculty members before they formed a teaching/learning team.

‘Faculty members who have initiated, planned, and taught in collaborative learning communities feel empowered by their experience.’

This camaraderie develops into a synergy, that doesn’t exist in stand-alone classes; the synergy also produces collegiality, and cohesiveness that are new experiences for the participating faculty members. These experiences are the factors that eventually lead to rejuvenation.⁴ Another research project found that “faculty members who have initiated, planned, and taught in collaborative learning communities feel empowered by their experience. They indicated that teaching in learning communities was invigorating.”⁵

In addition to camaraderie, collaboration also influences rejuvenation. When teaching and learning together, faculty must work together in the planning, teaching, and assessing the learning community experience, certainly more than when they teach in isolation in stand-alone classes. Although the collaboration requires more time and energy than preparing for stand-alone classes, Geri Rasmussen and Elizabeth Skinner, faculty members at Maricopa Community College, note:

Faculty consistently mention the pleasure they experienced working cooperatively with other faculty members in LC courses. They do not want to return to the isolation of more traditional classroom teaching. They feel revitalized, discover new possibilities in teaching, and see their subject matter in new ways. They feel braver, willing to take risks and are more creative in their approach to instruction. A kind of synergy emerges from the combined thinking of the team teachers.⁶

Other studies reinforce the value of learning communities. These studies suggest that they afford faculty members the “opportunity to work with a team in a laboratory for improving teaching that is tangible, with daily opportunities for reinforcement.” In their estimation, such “modeling, mentoring, and learning inherent in [these situations] are invaluable in faculty development.”⁷

Yet another source of rejuvenation is the collegiality that leads to instructors discussing their students and their pedagogy. Sharon Kruse, professor in the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at the University of Akron, suggests that students, as well as the instructors benefit from collegiality:

While collegial school settings provide much more in the way of consistent expectations for students, as well as providing more intellectual and social interaction for teachers, the most exciting forms of interaction result in genuine collaboration, the essence of which is codevelopment.⁸

Collegiality in learning communities 'breaks down the isolation of faculty and the essential loneliness of teaching as currently conceived and executed.'

Roberta Matthews uses the term “colleagueship” and suggests that collegiality in learning communities “breaks down the isolation of faculty and the essential loneliness of teaching as currently conceived and executed.”⁹ Finally, Jean MacGregor, the director of curriculum for the Bioregion Initiative Washington Center, sees the cohesiveness of learning communities as “putting people in the same boat,” and maintains that all parts of an institution—students, faculty, staff, and the institution’s culture—change for the better.¹⁰

Radical transformations in pedagogy can, in fact, become reality when faculty participate in learning communities. As the late Faith Gabelnick, former president of Pacific University, and her collaborators discovered, “learning communities are often powerful vehicles for the practice of collaborative learning and the promotion of various forms of active learning [among students] . . . their impact on pedagogy is usually critical and long lasting.”¹¹ And these profound changes aren’t just for students, they happen to faculty as well. The same study found that “it is virtually impossible to participate in a learning community without being transformed in some way.”¹² Similarly, Oscar T. Lenning, senior staff associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, and Larry Ebbers, University Professor at Iowa State University, found that learning communities “constitute a valuable activity for faculty development [and that] participation in learning communities broadens faculty members’ knowledge about pedagogy.”¹³

I can vouch for the research findings about learning communities. I experienced a sea change in my attitude and approach to my classes, when I began community building with my colleagues in learning communities. As a result of this radical transformation in my teaching, I am encouraging more faculty to try student-learning classroom communities by joining forces with another colleague to combine two curriculums into one integrated learning experience. 

ENDNOTES

1. Kruse, *Journal of Staff Development*, p.2.
2. Lenning and Ebbers, *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future*, pp. 56-7.
3. Macgregor, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, p. 59.
4. Rye, *The Impact of Teaching in Coordinated Studies Programs on Personal, Social, and Professional Development of Community College Faculty*, unpublished doctoral dissertation. Similar to Rye, several studies discuss faculty rejuvenation and vitality, see Ellertson, 2005; Hodge, Lewis, Kramer, & Hughes, 2001; Matthews et al, 1997; Minkler, 2000; Moore, 2000; Rasmussen & Skuinner, 1997; Schadd, 1997.
5. Tollefson, *Washington Center News*, p. 9.
6. Rasmussen and Skinner, *Learning Communities: Getting Started*, p. 20.
7. Gabelnick et al, *Learning Communities: Creating Connections among Students, Faculty and Disciplines*. p. 80.
8. Kruse, *Journal of Staff Development*, p. 2.
9. Matthews, *American Association of Community and Junior Colleges Journal*, p. 187.
10. MacGregor, *Re-Imagining Our Communities of Practice through Learning Communities*.
11. Gabelnick et al. p. 85.
12. Ibid., p. 54.
13. Lenning and Ebbers, *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future*, p. 57.

WORKS CITED

- Albom, M. *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Broadway, 2002.
- Gabelnick, F., MacGregor, J. Matthews, R. S., & Smith, B. L. *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty and Disciplines*. New Directions for Community Colleges, no. 41. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.
- Kruse, S., D. Louis, "Collaborate." *Journal of Staff Development*. 20 (4) 1999.
- Lenning, O. T. and L.H. Ebbers. *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, 1999.
- Matthews, R. "Learning Communities in the Community College." *Community, Technical, and Junior College Journal*. Vol. 57, (October/November), 1986.
- MacGregor, J. *Reimagining Our Communities of Practice through Learning Communities*, a paper presented at AACI's Network for Academic Renewal Conference, Atlanta, GA, April 2002.
- Rasmussen, G. and E. Skinner. "Learning Communities: Getting Started." Monograph. 1997.
- Rye, A. *The Impact of Teaching in Coordinated Studies Programs on Personal, Social, and Professional Development of Community College Faculty*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Oregon State University, Eugene, 1997.
- Tollefson, Gary. (1991). What Differences Do Learning Communities Make? An Outside-In View: Faculty Views of Collaborative Learning Communities in Washington Community Colleges. *Washington Center News*, 6 (1), 4-9.