

Enhancing Learning Via Community

By Vincent Tinto

If universities were consciously organized to promote student learning, they would have long ago made effective teaching and shared learning the norm, not the exception, of university practice. Unfortunately, this appears not to be the case.

Universities, it seems, are organized to promote individual, isolated, passive learning and forms of discourse that are very much limited to the narrow boundaries of separate disciplines.

Yet we know that student learning is greatly enhanced when students participate in shared, collaborative learning experiences—when they are active, rather than passive, in the learning process and when their discourse is wide-ranging and interdisciplinary.

If universities were serious about enhancing student learning, we would explore other ways of organizing our work.

To that end, at least as it regards the learning of our students,

let me suggest that we would do better by adopting modes of organization in curriculum, pedagogy, academic work, and assessment that promote, rather than discourage, shared learning and community among our students and faculty.

Among several possibilities, three spring immediately to mind: First, we should reorganize our curriculum into learning communities which enable student learning to span the disciplines.

Second, we should reorganize our classrooms to promote collaborative learning experiences within the classroom so that students learn together rather than apart.

Third, we should employ forms of classroom assessment that encourage students to engage in a shared discourse with us about their learning and provide them immediate information that they can use to improve their learning.

In their most basic form, learning communities are a kind of block scheduling that enables students to

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take courses together. The same students register for two or more courses, forming a sort of study team. In a few cases this may mean sharing the entire first-semester curriculum so that new students in a learning community are all studying the same material.

Sometimes this approach links freshmen by tying together two courses that all freshmen take, typically a course in writing with one in selected literature, biographies, or current social problems.

In larger universities such as the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, students in a learning community may attend lectures with 200-300 other students but meet in smaller groups for a discussion section—like Freshman Interest Group—led by a graduate student or, sometimes, an upperclassman.

At Seattle Central Community College, students in the Coordinated Studies Program take all their courses together in one block of time. The community meets two or three times a week for four to six hours at a time.

Typically, learning communities are organized around a central theme—say, “Body and Mind”—in which required courses in human biology, psychology, and sociology are linked in pursuit of a singular piece of knowledge: how and why humans behave as they do.

At New York’s LaGuardia Community College, learning communities are designed for students studying for a career in business (the Enterprise Center), as well as for students needing developmental academic assistance (the New Student House).

In these examples, the character of the learning experience reflects the quality of faculty collaboration and the degree to which the experience of the linked courses form an educationally coherent whole.

Nearly all the experiments have two things in common. One is *shared learning*. Learning communities enroll the same students in several classes so they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately, in a way that is part and parcel of their academic experience.

The other is *connected learning*. By organizing the shared courses around a theme or single large subject, learning communities seek to construct a coherent first year educational experience that is not just an unconnected array of courses in, say, composition, calculus, modern history, Spanish, and geology.²

Students registering for the same courses or studying the same topic form their own academic and social support groups. They spend more time together out of class

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than do students in traditional, unrelated, stand-alone classes. The common study of a subject and co-registration bring them together quickly as small communities of learners.

More important, students in learning communities spend more time studying and more time studying together. The enhanced social affiliation that emerges from such communities seems to produce, in turn, better academic involvement. Simply put, students spend more time studying because they enjoy studying together.

Not surprisingly, the students in these new learning communities report themselves more satisfied with their first-year experiences in college. And they are more likely to persist beyond the first year.

At Seattle Central Community College, for example, learning community students have continued their studies at a rate approximately 25 percent higher than students in the traditional curriculum. Even in institutions where retention rates are high, such as the University of Washington, students in that institution's Freshmen Interest Groups persist more frequently than those taking stand-alone courses.

These results stem from the simple strategic change of allowing students to share a more connected first-year curriculum. As one stu-

dent told us in a recent study of learning communities:

In the cluster we knew each other; we were friends. We discussed everything from all our classes. . . . We had a discussion about everything. If we needed help, or if we had questions, we could help each other.

Learning communities yield these important benefits:

First, students become more actively involved in classroom learning—and, as they spend more time learning, they learn more.

Second, the new students spend more time learning together. This raises the quality of their learning, and everyone's understanding and knowledge is enriched by their working together.

Third, these students form social groups outside their classrooms, bonding in ways that increase their persistence in college.

Fourth, learning communities enable students to bridge the large divide between academic classes and student social conduct that frequently characterizes student life. They tend to learn and make close friends at the same time.³

Another advantage: The structure of learning communities for first-year students encourages the two separate fiefdoms of faculty

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and student services to work closely with one another in constructing a first-semester curriculum tailored for new students.

At LaGuardia Community College, the First Year Seminars are staffed by both faculty and student affairs people. At Leeward Community College in Hawaii, advisors, counselors, and peer-student mentors meet weekly with new students to discuss both their classwork and the requirements for making it through college.

In practice, many learning communities do more than co-register students around a topic. They often change how students are educated.

Learning communities have reorganized their classrooms to promote shared, collaborative learning among students. Various referred to as cooperative learning, collaborative learning, or team learning, these forms of classroom reorganization require students to work together in cooperating groups and become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of both the group and the class.⁴

Some instructors ask students to take an active role in the construction of knowledge rather than merely listening to lectures. Others require the students to work interdependently by assigning work that cannot be completed without

the responsible participation of each group member.

In a few cases, faculty members assign carefully constructed group projects that call on students to integrate the intellectual matter of several of their classes.

In all cases, faculty have reorganized the educational activities of the classroom to promote active, interdependent forms of learning.

These approaches to teaching and learning, of course, have been successfully applied to non-learning community classrooms. In any form, they significantly improve student involvement in learning and learning itself. And they do so in very much the same manner as do learning communities generally.

Equally important, students often develop a deeper appreciation of the value of cooperation and including many voices in the construction of knowledge. They come to understand that individual learning is enriched when organized cooperatively.

Especially important—in our era of what Robert Bellah calls rampant “expressive individualism” and growing racial, gender, sexual, and ideological divisions—is that collaborative experiences teach students that their learning and that of their peers are inexorably intertwined. They learn that, regardless of race, class, gender, or background, their academic

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interests are, at bottom, the same.

The introduction of cooperative learning, whether in individual classes or in a learning community, increases learning and helps develop educational citizenship, a quality that is in danger of eroding. Again, in the words of a student:

“I think more people should be educated in this form of education. I mean, because it's good. We learn not only how to interact not only ourselves, but with other people of different races, different sizes, different colors, different everything. I mean it just makes it a lot better . . . not only do you learn more, you learn better.”

Assessments are another important element in an effective learning organization. However we organize our curriculum and the activities in our classrooms, we should use forms of classroom assessment that give feedback about what our students are learning and help them participate in a shared discourse with us and their peers about their learning.

Take, for instance, the use of the “one-minute” paper.⁵ At the end of class, students are asked to identify in “one-minute” the most and least well understood topics covered during the class. Normally, this information is a single sheet on

which no identifying name is given. A quick reading of a reasonable sample of these “one-minute” papers yields a good picture of what members of the class believe they did and did not understand.

At the beginning of the following class, the instructor reviews and, where necessary, clarifies those issues that seem, in common, to have not been clearly understood by students in the preceding class.

When used consistently, such assessment and feedback has improved student learning. It does so for a variety of reasons. First, all students, not just those who are unclear about some issues, hear the material again. That alone improves learning. And, of course, those who were unclear about some issues receive useful feedback that enriches their learning.

Second, since students anticipate being asked to report on what they know and do not know at the end of class, they begin paying greater attention during class. This also enhances their learning. Equally important, the quality of their attention changes. They begin to listen critically. They become more reflective.

At the same time, faculty change. The feedback they receive leads them to reconsider and change their teaching. And they do so in a manner directly attuned to what their students are learning at

the time they are learning, not after the fact—all because of a deceptively simple “one-minute” paper.

These changes in our approach to teaching are but three of numerous possibilities. There are other ways to rethink what we do. Take, for instance, the organization of faculty work: In the same way that shared learning improves student performance, shared teaching and learning enrich faculty performance.

Our work should be organized to promote shared teaching and learning across the disciplinary boundaries that now limit us.

Stanford University, for instance, uses study centers where faculty (and students) work and teach together on a common theme.

Unfortunately, the current method of organizing faculty work serves to isolate us in stand alone disciplinary outposts that direct

our energies inward rather than outward toward the building of broader intellectual communities on campus.

My point here is really quite simple. Were we serious in our commitment to making our universities “learning organizations” that consciously promote student as well as faculty learning, we would find the current narrow organization of our work unacceptable.

Indeed were we to begin a conversation about the university by asking how could we best organize our work to promote student and faculty learning, it is highly unlikely that we would accept our current forms that date back to the origins of the university in medieval Europe.

Instead we would look to models of educational community and to their ability to promote the learning we seek. ■

Endnotes

¹ Serge, 1995.

² Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990.

³ Tinto, Love, and Russo, 1993.

⁴ Cooper and Mueck, 1990; MacGregor, 1990; and Michaelson, Firestone-Jones, and Watson, 1993.

⁵ Angelo and Cross, 1993.

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