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The Right Time: Building the Learning Community Movement

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The Right Time: Building the Learning Community Movement

Abstract

The author argues that the current conjuncture is a kairotic moment for their own learning community program as well as the national movement to support the development of learning communities in universities and colleges and the array of pedagogical approaches associated with them. With Barbara Leigh Smith (2013), they recognize a link between the social justice movements of the 1960s and the learning community movement both in their commitments to democracy and their organizing strategies. Through relating the story of their own experience as co-directors of the LIU Brooklyn Learning Community program, specifying different inventions, audiences, and purposes driving that initiative, they further suggest that learning communities have the potential not only to reinvigorate teaching and learning but also to contribute to struggles for a more democratic, compassionate society.

Keywords

learning communities, national movement, social justice

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers and LCRPJ editor Emily Lardner for their helpful comments. I would also like to acknowledge my co-director Jose R. Sanchez, colleague Sara Campbell, and friend Hank Smith for their invaluable feedback and encouragement. I thank as well Long Island University's Board of Trustees and administrators for their support of our efforts to build the LIU Brooklyn Learning Communities Program.

Invention

In classical rhetoric, invention relies on the topics or *topoi*, literally the “places to find things,” the basic categories of relationships among ideas by which we discover what to say about a subject. My colleagues and I at LIU Brooklyn have found inspiration in the rich literature and national network on learning communities, imitating what works elsewhere and on that basis inventing and reinventing new approaches, curricula and assignments. We started in 2011 by developing linked courses, a model that is all but synonymous with learning communities. For several years, we focused exclusively on developing interdisciplinary cohorts with themes ranging from Brooklyn history and environmental sustainability to social media, health and social justice, and entrepreneurship. Typically, each community consisted of a composition course, another required core course in the disciplines such as speech, philosophy, history, business, or sociology, and a required, one-credit first-year seminar (FYS) for entering students.

We began with seven communities serving about 140 students; since then, we have experimented with the program’s size and settled on an optimal number (given existing core requirements) of ten interdisciplinary cohorts. In addition to the logistical constraints of the core curriculum, we have had to adjust to staff turnover, the creation of a new advisement office called “Promise,” and the adoption of “intrusive” advising. Different math and science requirements for non-science majors and students in science and pre-professional programs ruled out including math and science courses in interdisciplinary learning communities. Responding to the constraints of the core curriculum and finding a way to include math and science courses were key goals as we worked to expand to the 300 students currently enrolled in learning communities.

In an attempt to meet goals set by a newly minted university strategic plan that highlights learning communities, along with administrative pressure to involve every student in them at some point in his or her college career, we introduced Freshman Scholar (FS)¹ cohorts this year, offering biology and finite mathematics for the first time along with composition and introductory psychology courses—seven classes in total—enhanced by the introduction of a new element of the program featuring undergraduate Peer Learning Leaders (PLLs). The PLLs’ job is to facilitate learning through an assortment of activities in which students learn from one another. It is this intentional formation of communities of learners engaged in study in and out of class, with and without professors, that excites us as educators. So far, we have trained fifteen PLLs to

¹ We have since realized that students in and beyond their first year of college enroll in these classes and have consequently renamed them LIU Scholar learning communities.

meet with students in our new Center for Learning Communities, where we expect them to form concentric communities among themselves and with the student groups they facilitate and their professors. PLL training also includes a session on use of library resources provided by the First Year Success Librarian—a new position created by library faculty—who will spend an hour a week at the learning community “reference desk.”

Additionally, we initiated a “Mindset” initiative based on research by Carol Dweck (2007) on improving student learning and persistence by shifting “mindsets.” According to Dweck, many people believe that their intellectual capacity is fixed rather than capable of growth through practice and learning from mistakes, a mindset often expressed as: “I can’t write.” “I’m no good at math.” Dweck and her protégé David Yeager, director of the Project for Educational Research that Scales (PERTS), have found that brief mindset interventions of about thirty minutes that convey the idea that the mind is malleable can improve student learning by one letter grade on average. Through an initial survey, developed by two LIU psychology colleagues, we hope to gather data about first-year students’ mindsets and eventually reach all LIU Brooklyn undergraduates with a mindset intervention proven to be highly effective elsewhere (see, e.g., Yeager et al. 2013).

Audience

Since the inception of LIU Brooklyn Learning Communities in 2011, my co-director Jose R. Sanchez and I have devoted a large part of our professional lives to institutionalizing the program. Our early efforts built on the remnants of its smaller predecessor, Academic Community Exploration (ACE), led by the campus advisement office, which linked a few sections of composition each year with other courses in the disciplines. Although students traveled together in blocked courses, faculty participants in this earlier program were so peripheral to the endeavor that they were often unaware students belonged to a learning community. Consequently, there was no emphasis on integrated learning. Nonetheless, ACE provided a good foundation, and Jose and I appreciated the work of the ACE staff, especially that of an assistant dean who had previously worked in Florida International University’s robust learning community program.

We now see a marked difference between faculty-driven and administrative initiatives at LIU. As faculty, our leadership ensured that faculty “owned” learning communities, and that the guts of the program were curricular and pedagogical, not merely structural changes in students’ schedules. Our first principle was thus that faculty leadership—in close collaboration with staff—was imperative if the program was to succeed. Accordingly, we declined a suggestion by the Vice President of Academic Affairs that one of us become dean of first-year programs—a position that would have had to be created—arguing that our

identity as faculty enabled us to work horizontally with colleagues rather than in a vertical chain of command, leading to our second principle—fostering curriculum design, implementation, and assessment led by instructors, not by us.

We approach our directorship as a form of activism informed by longtime involvement in social justice movements that taught us about organizing, strategizing, and forming bottom-up alliances. Increasingly, we see higher education itself as a site of struggle to maintain and enhance support for a liberal arts and sciences curriculum that enables the development of capacities for critique and deep integrative learning. Given the roots of our activist orientations in social justice commitments outside the university, from the anti-war movement to recent campaigns for economic justice, we understand the difference between “tempered grassroots leadership” (150), a term used by Adrianna Kezar et al. (2011) to designate internal, often slow institutional change around issues such as faculty diversity, and more militant forms of struggle now occurring in higher education in response to threats to academic freedom, shared governance, tenure, and job security. As co-directors of the learning communities program, we use bottom-up, “tempered” grassroots tactics to engage our colleagues collectively in a process of building the program and to work closely with administrators whose positions and priorities we respect. As faculty, we are subject to the same neoliberal economic and political policies as other sectors, which are responding to attacks against unions, public services and spaces, and decent wages and living conditions. It is this capacity to identify and speak persuasively to different audiences in different contexts that enables us to shift from one role to another appropriately and transparently.

In everyday practice, we benefit through our joint leadership from one another’s perspective on setting goals, dealing with problems, and growing the program. Our respective histories in administering other academic programs and assuming other professional responsibilities on and off campus, like our social movement experience, give us deep knowledge of the culture of LIU and higher education, enabling us to share tasks, tag-team meetings and correspondence, and take the lead on different aspects of the program. Our orientation to building the LIU Brooklyn program thus resonates with Barbara Leigh Smith’s (2013) characterization of learning communities as a national movement “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.” As coordinators, our ongoing task is to operationalize these aspirational goals through intentional, on-the-ground design of a program that is responsive to institutional exigencies from respecting core curriculum requirements to supporting underserved student populations.

As Smith suggests, our approach has been strongly influenced by “movement thinking and community organizing strategies” that enable us to

connect our program with related initiatives; to rely not only on university resources but also on forging relationships with cultural institutions and surrounding communities; and to remain true to our commitment to the creation of structures that foster values of access, intellectual and social integrity, and democracy. Like Alexander Meikeljohn (2001)—whose Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s inspired today’s learning communities—we believe that the purpose of higher education is not only to prepare students for the workplace but also more than ever to equip them with the requisite capacities and skills for participatory democracy. This ethos has been powerfully reinforced by “A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future” (2012), issued by the National Task Force on Civil Learning and Democratic Engagement, which calls on higher education to “Reclaim and reinvest in the fundamental civic and democratic mission of schools and of all sectors within higher education” (vi).

We see this principle of deep, critical, socially conscious learning as thoroughly embedded in liberal arts and sciences traditions. It is what inspired us to become professors and dedicate our lives to research and teaching—to participating in Kenneth Burke’s “unending conversation.” Additionally, we try to be responsive to institutional and political realities that require us to communicate to multiple stakeholders with overlapping but different, sometimes competing, interests, needs, and abilities. Through this awareness of our position in relation to students, faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees, together with our institutional knowledge and experience, we try to be nimble, to improvise, and to keep our eyes on our end goals as well as the steps to get there, knowing the pathways are many and the cul-de-sacs can lead to unexpected discoveries.

Purpose

In addition to the fragmentation of knowledge and narrowing disciplinary focus that worried Meikeljohn, we are all now facing a far bleaker landscape in higher education than he could have imagined, marked by rising tuition, obscene levels of student debt, cutbacks in funding, and the corporatization and financialization of public as well as private education. And while every generation contends with its political and economic behemoths, current and future college students are confronting what may be the biggest, most terrifying planetary crisis in history as climate change continues to alter the face of the earth. We believe that learning communities and their spirit of interdisciplinarity, deep learning, and community-building contribute in small but significant ways to reinventing education at this critical moment in which historical crises converge—crises of institutions of higher learning, our nation, and in this era of climate change, our crisis as a species.

As Smith points out, since Meikeljohn, several factors have contributed to the groundswell of interest in learning communities, including the establishment in 1985 of the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College, which she co-led with Jean MacGregor, and the research on their effectiveness conducted by Victor Tinto in the early 1990s. Like many other colleges and universities, LIU embraced learning communities not only to improve teaching and learning, but also to boost student retention and persistence. While we, too, looked to learning communities as a solution to low graduation rates—and remain concerned about the data—we appreciate the wisdom of former Washington Center Co-Directors Emily Lardner and Gilles Malnarich’s (2008) cautionary note that, “While improved retention is a welcome consequence of learning-community work, it has never been its aim. In the push to improve student retention, it is easy to overlook what research tells us: Students persist in their studies if the learning they experience is meaningful, deeply engaging, and relevant to their lives.”

In that spirit, five LIU colleagues and I, along with faculty from two other Brooklyn colleges, participated in Students and Faculty in the Archives (SAFA), a FIPSE-funded project sponsored by the Brooklyn Historical Society to introduce first-year students to archival research. Four of us from LIU collaborated on designing archival exercises for linked composition and history courses on African American history in Brooklyn, forming the spine of Pathways to Freedom, one of our most effective, long lasting learning communities. SAFA also crystallized the role of research in engaging first-year students in richly meaningful learning through which essential skills of reading, writing, and information literacy are acquired.² What most excites us is the deep, engaged, integrative learning we have witnessed in LIU-Brooklyn’s learning communities, from examining archives of 18th century slave bills of sale at the Brooklyn Historical Society to viewing Mars through an observatory telescope and visiting Ellis Island to contemplate immigration in relation to space travel. Such activities arise from collaborative curriculum design, freedom to develop “out-of-the-box” thinking, and literal and metaphorical spaces on and off campus that help seed and grow such ideas.

Kairos

The backstory. In the spring of 2010, Jose Sanchez and I were invited to make a presentation to the LIU Board of Trustees about how learning

² SAFA culminated in the creation of a BHS website with resources for teaching in the archives featuring articles and exercises developed by faculty in two LIU Brooklyn learning communities—Pathways to Freedom and Leaders Today and Tomorrow. (See TeachArchives at <http://www.teacharchives.org>). For an excellent discussion of literacy acquisition, see Gee (1987).

communities at LIU Brooklyn might improve learning outcomes and persistently low graduation rates. At the time, the Obama administration was formulating its College Scoreboard, a national debate about diminishing graduation rates had begun, and our provost had launched a Retention Task Force. Reverberations from the 2008 economic crash had intensified our sense of the precariousness of higher education. Meanwhile, in 2009, the Faculty Senate had convened its own “Vision Committee,” affectionately nicknamed the “Visioñeros,” to determine how best to remedy low retention rates.

Jose was the chair of that committee. I had a lot of administrative experience from having directed our writing program for many years and was working with a new campus group on sustainability that had begun to imagine linked courses associated with a food coop and urban gardening. When I shared the sustainability group’s idea for a food-themed learning community and Jose reported to the Faculty Senate that the Visioñeros had concluded that learning communities were the best way to address the retention problem, the Senate charged us to design and develop a new program. At our presentation to the trustees, Jose reported on data his committee had gathered, arguing that learning communities would not only improve retention and graduation rates but also have other benefits from enhanced student learning to opportunities for cross-disciplinary conversations and collaborations among faculty. Aiming to situate my part of the presentation in visionary images of the campus—underscoring the potential of interdisciplinary, collaborative education to transform teaching and learning—I created a slideshow based on the idea of *kairos*.

It was *just the right time* for such a program at the Brooklyn campus in light of the rapid development—the so-called renaissance—of the downtown area in which the university is located. Learning communities on their own might not solve the retention problem, but they could engage students in deep, interdisciplinary explorations of concepts, beliefs, and problems. Such communities already existed on the Brooklyn campus in the Higher Education Opportunities Program, Honors, and athletics; but the majority of our students commuted to and from classes without a sense of camaraderie, affiliation, or purpose beyond vocational pursuits. *We were ready to go further; it was the right time to act.* The slideshow concluded with an augmented architectural drawing of a verdant, landscaped Flatbush Avenue—the campus boulevard—after its proposed city-funded, corporate-driven “makeover” to which I added an imaginary banner that advertised a nonexistent LIU Center for the Public Humanities. It expressed a vision of the campus writ large as a learning community. The chairman of the board stood up and astonished everyone, especially us, by announcing that he was giving us a \$25,000 planning grant. Broadly understood, our approach to developing learning communities at LIU Brooklyn is, to borrow Dweck’s term, a matter of mindset. We see our charge as

co-directors as a mandate to create a malleable, multifaceted program—subterranean as well as structured by the core curriculum, reaching beyond classroom boundaries to foster growth through collaboration and community building. We strive to be tenacious yet reflective, in it for the long haul, willing to alter course as needed to achieve our goals. Chief among those goals is to create literal and figurative spaces for deep, critical learning and reflection. For example, the designation of a physical space, our Center, shared with a study abroad program, with small offices, large, open areas, and two classrooms, enabled us to envision an aesthetically appealing, multipurpose “go-to” place for students and faculty to meet, dream, and create. The Center would not have been ours had we not made a dedicated space for the learning community program part of our vision and repeatedly asked for it. Through our respective experience with long-haul social justice movements, we have learned the crucial importance of tenacity, long-range planning, and always striving toward the goal of improving teaching and learning to achieve what Paulo Freire calls “education as the practice of freedom.”

We learn from our failures. We are persistent and resilient. From the integrative learning of interdisciplinary cohorts to peer-to-peer learning in Freshman Scholar classes, we aim to foster critical, scientific, creative, deep understandings of word and world. We agree with the authors of “A Crucible Moment” that “colleges and universities are among the nation’s most valuable laboratories for civic learning and democratic engagement” (2). Thus it is a kairotic moment not only for us at LIU Brooklyn but also for the national movement of learning communities to respond to the exigencies of 21st century political and economic realities as we “tinker toward utopia” (Tyak and Cuban).

Ethos

The idea of ethos in relation to the LIU Brooklyn Learning Communities program only occurred to me during a performance, *The Story of Tap, 2015*, by a friend of mine, Hank Smith. A tap dancer, chronicler of tap, and documentarian of tap legends like Buster Brown, Hank invited three guests to tell their stories and dance in his ongoing narrative of tap dance as an American art form, always looking two ways, toward those who came before him and the young dancers who follow and have so much to learn. His guests were Max Pollak, Kazu Kumagai, and Loretta Abbott, a former Alvin Ailey dancer, whose diverse routes to tap began in Vienna, Sendai, Japan, and Harlem. At the end of the evening, Abbott ruefully remarked, “People in the dance world today, I find most of them—they don’t have anything in here,” clapping her hand to her chest. Hank went on: “Each one of us has a sense of character when we’re on stage. What really engages the audience is character, personality. It’s not about technique, it’s not

about gymnastics.” He stood, back to the audience, and danced for his guests, who watched his feet and nodded to the rhythms he struck as he turned to look at all of us, ten rows deep, one by one, tears in his eyes, inspiring among other things this coda about the ethos of learning communities.

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