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Why you should write for this journal

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Abstract

We need your articles. What we know about learning communities today as whole is based upon the multitude of experiences we have with our students and our colleagues on our varying campuses. The gift offered by the conception of inquiry as stance is an opportunity to embrace a dialectical approach, rooted in what Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe as our “deep and passionately enacted responsibility to students’ learning and life chances and to transforming the policies and structures that limit students’ access to these opportunities” (p. 279). As colleagues drawn together by our shared commitment to constantly find more effective ways to support all our students’ learning and their life chances through this thing we call learning communities, let’s use this journal to deepen our collective work in service of our democratic agenda.

Keywords

knowledge-of-practice, inquiry as stance

Cover Page Footnote

Thanks go to my colleagues in Evergreen's Master's in Teaching Program, Dr. Phyllis Esposito and Dr. Sonja Wiedenhaupt, for ongoing opportunities to practice inquiry as stance in our work together.

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Educators across the U.S. continue to devise ways to use learning communities as a strategy to improve student engagement, student learning, and student success. The variations within our collective practice are substantial, and yet key elements hold:

- As an institutional initiative, learning communities demand support from faculty, staff, and administrators on campus—one person can't do a learning community program on their own, so LC's inevitably present opportunities for honing our collaborative skills;
- Learning communities create possibilities for rethinking curriculum and pedagogy—for instance, the push to include explicitly designed integrative experiences serves as a catalyst, as do discipline-based reforms (like the [teaching-for-transfer writing curriculum](#) or the [Carnegie Math Pathways](#))—and we do this work in the company of colleagues;
- We continue to discover how to use learning communities as a strategy for fostering students' sense of belonging and purpose for being in college.

We have a solid research foundation to build upon, including the seminal research brief from the National Survey on Student Engagement in 2013 identifying features within learning communities that students find most engaging: explicit opportunities to integrate material across learning community courses, assigned out-of-class activities, and the inclusion of peer advisors in the LC instructional teams, all in the context of engaging pedagogical practices (http://nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/HIP_brief_final.pdf). But the actual work of creating and sustaining learning communities on campuses is more diverse, more complex, than these core elements. This journal was designed as a platform to facilitate learning from each other across our very different contexts. As learning communities continue to spread, in dynamic and context specific ways, writing about our practice becomes all the more urgent. We are still in the process of delineating our field.

More of us need to write about learning community work. How can this responsibility for writing become one that enriches and enhances our practice while at the same time expanding the knowledge that informs our field? My aim in this editorial is to invite you to use a concept drawn from the work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle (1999), *inquiry as stance*, to frame future investigations into learning community practice. My colleague, Dr. Phyllis Esposito, who teaches in the education program at The Evergreen State College, introduced me to it last year, and as I've been working with authors and potential writers for LCRP, I've been mulling over its relevance to our collective work.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle are interested in the phenomenon of teacher learning in K-12 settings, because, they argue, teacher learning is central to all conversations about education reform. Teachers can't teach better, or more effectively, without learning—so what then, is the precise nature of that teacher learning and the knowledge upon which it depends? In answering that question, Cochran-Smith and Lytle present three ways of conceptualizing the relationship between teacher learning and knowledge. My hope is that by describing these three models, I can sketch three different approaches to thinking and writing about learning communities.

The first conception of teacher learning Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe is what they call knowledge-for-practice (1999). A core assumption is that better teaching depends on knowing more—more pedagogy, more instructional strategies, more subject matter. A related assumption is that the knowledge needed for better teaching comes from others, from experts. We can and do use this model in our learning community work, and I would argue it plays an important role in our collective practice. Many of the roots of current practice are grounded in Vince Tinto's early work on student departure (1993). More recently, campuses are beginning to use H. Richard Milner's opportunity gap framework as a way to work towards designing more equitable learning opportunities for students within learning communities (2010). Inherent within this conception, however, is the longstanding epistemological divide between research and theory on the one hand--created by experts--and practice, which describes the work of educators in the classroom or in other direct interactions with students.

The second conception of teacher learning Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe, knowledge-in-practice, matches another longstanding feature in our field, the valuing of practical knowledge about teaching and learning that emerges from close examination of, and reflection on, our individual and collective practice as educators (1999). For at least three decades, our field has held to the tacit belief that teaching together in learning communities comprises a form of professional development, not least because team-teaching in any of its multiple versions creates opportunities for educators to learn from observing one another, and through collaborative reflection. Many learning community programs take pains to pair novice teachers with more experienced teachers in an apprentice model. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe it, within the knowledge-in-practice conceptual model, teaching "is understood primarily as a process of acting and thinking wisely in the immediacy of classroom life: making split-second decisions, choosing among alternative ways to convey subject matter, interacting appropriately with an array of students, and selecting and focusing on particular dimensions of classroom problems" (p. 266). Cochran-Smith and Lytle align the valuing of ongoing reflection with the work of Donald Schon and John Dewey, arguing that "the knowledge-in-practice conception of teacher learning is based on the idea that good teaching can be coached and learned (but not taught) through reflective supervision or through a process of coaching reflective teaching" (p. 269).

Articles in this journal frequently report on knowledge-in-practice: insights about implementing living-learning communities; descriptions of curricular combinations leading to increased success for students in science; the effects for students when faculty in learning communities are more, rather than less, collaborative in terms of assignments, feedback, and expectations for student learning. Articles in this issue add to the body of work that comes from adopting a knowledge-in-practice stance. In "Suggestions for Implementing First Year Experience Learning Communities in Teacher Education Programs," Kathryn Hintz describes the design and implementation of a first-year learning community specifically for education students at Minot State University. In "Reflections from the Field: Creating an Elementary Living Learning Makerspace," Kathryn Shively describes how she and her colleagues at Ball State University followed students' lead to create a new makerspace, first as a mobile unit and then as a dedicated space. In their article, "Living and Learning Communities: One University's Journey,"

Kendra Whitcher-Skinner, Sharon Dees and Paul Watkins document the development of a new living-learning community for education students at Southeast Missouri State University, and identify questions that emerged as they began to assess this new model. Lori Ungemah's perspective piece, "How One Learning Community Approached Death," focuses on the unanticipated value and strength of the web of social relations formed within a learning community at Guttman Community College.

We celebrate these accounts of knowledge-in-practice and we need more of them. At the same time, as a field, we need to work on adopting a more dialectical approach to thinking and writing about our practice—identifying the theories that underline our work, examining our practice with those theories in mind, and using what we've learned from our practice to modify those theories. Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe this as knowledge-of-practice, and it represents a relatively new frontier for us. The knowledge-of-practice conceptual model erases the distinction between formal knowledge and practical knowledge and pushes us past the goals of simply doing research or producing findings. Instead, the knowledge that teachers need to teach well "is generated when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation at the same time that they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation" (p. 250). Ultimately, the aim of this dialectical process is to alter practices and social relationship in ways that bring about fundamental changes in our classrooms, our campuses, and our communities. The work is ongoing.

As I have been reflecting on the many conversations I've had with authors in person (at conferences and institutes) and via email, I've come to believe that those of us committed to understanding how and when and why learning communities become transformative experiences for students have much to gain by deliberately adopting this dialectical approach, what Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe as inquiry as stance—which is both a physical and an epistemological orientation. Stance, they write, describes how we position our bodies, how we hold ourselves. As educators, we position ourselves—place ourselves—in relation to knowledge, to learners, to colleagues, to our campuses, to our larger communities, and to deeply rooted questions about the purposes of our work constantly. Yet too often, we aren't aware of how we position ourselves, so the call to practice inquiry as stance is a call to become mindful of how we place ourselves in relation to all the elements of our work. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle write,

"Teaching and thus teacher learning are centrally about forming and re-forming frameworks for understanding practice: how students and their teachers construct the curriculum, co-mingling their experiences, their cultural and linguistic resources, and their interpretive frameworks; how teachers' actions are infused with complex and multilayered understandings of learners, culture, class, gender, literacies, social issues, institutions, histories, communities, materials, texts, and curricula; and how teachers work together to develop and alter their questions and interpretive frameworks informed not only by thoughtful consideration of the immediate situation and the

particular students they teach and have taught but also by the multiple contexts within which they work” (p. 290-291).

In this issue, the article “Daring to Dream: Sustaining Support for Undocumented Students at The Evergreen State College”, by Grace Huerta and Catalina Ocampo, invites us to consider our work as learning community practitioners within the context of current shifting policies on immigration.

Implicit in the process of knowledge building linked to inquiry as stance, Cochran-Smith and Lytle argue, are a set of questions that can serve as lenses for seeing and making sense of practice. Adapted to the context of learning communities and living learning communities in the undergraduate curriculum, these questions might look like this:

- Who am I/who are we as teachers?
- What are we assuming about our students, about our communities, about the communities from which our students come?
- What sense are our students making of what is going on in our LC’s, our LLC’s?
- How do the frameworks and research of others inform our own understandings, and conversely, how are our experiences within LCs/LLCs helping us problematize these frameworks?
- What are the underlying assumptions within our materials, our texts, our assignments and tests, our curriculum frameworks, our assessment plans?
- What are we trying to make happen here in our LC/LLC and why?
- How do our efforts as individual teachers connect to the efforts of our communities, our students’ communities, our campus? How do they connect to wider agendas for educational reform and social change?

We are at a critical juncture in our field, made visible by Carlos Huerta’s article in this issue on the formation of the new Learning Communities Association. The advent of a professional association is made possible because we have developed into a recognizable field of practice, one with its own body of knowledge. At this moment in time, we have the opportunity to ask ourselves about the nature of this knowledge, about the ways we conceptualize the relationship between knowledge and practice. I’m arguing that we can use these three conceptual models described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle to become more deliberate in the ways we make and use knowledge, in how we see ourselves as users and generators of knowledge, and in the very questions we ask.

While the activities associated with knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice serve a purpose, neither is sufficient for our field if we hold onto the longstanding aim that learning communities play a role in reforming and transforming undergraduate education. In the first conceptual model, knowledge-for-practice, I borrow an expert’s knowledge and apply it to my teaching—like checking a book out of the library. This will remain a staple for educators within learning communities, and this journal welcomes submissions that document this process: what theories are you using? How are you applying them to your practice? What are you learning in

that process? However, the role of the teacher within this model remains someone who applies another person's theory.

In terms of the second model, knowledge-in-practice, and the overall goal of creating contexts in which new and experienced teachers can examine what Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe as "wise" teaching decisions, we also welcome your submissions. What "wise" decisions are you and your colleagues making about your learning community practice in all of its facets? What are you learning about establishing lasting collaborative relationships between units and departments? How are you inviting students to help assess ongoing learning community initiatives? How are you creating spaces for ongoing reflection, and how are those reflections tied to shifts in practice?

Ultimately, we need to encourage and support what falls within the third conceptual model, knowledge-of-practice. Engaged in the dialectic between theory and practice, we can become clearer about the theories informing our practice and about the ways our practice leads us to revise those theories. In this way, we generate our own knowledge, including the new questions which arise. We need to continue working to place our work in its historical context, asking what it means to be engaging these learning community strategies at this time and in our respective places. We need to keep our eye not only on the means by which we do our work, but also on the ends to which we are heading—the purpose behind our work.

We need your articles. What we know about learning communities today as whole is based upon the multitude of experiences we have with our students and our colleagues on our varying campuses. The gift offered by the conception of inquiry as stance is an opportunity to embrace a dialectical approach, rooted in what Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe as our "deep and passionately enacted responsibility to students' learning and life chances and to transforming the policies and structures that limit students' access to these opportunities" (p. 279). As colleagues drawn together by our shared commitment to constantly find more effective ways to support all our students' learning and their life chances through this thing we call learning communities, let's use this journal to deepen our collective work in service of our democratic agenda.

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