

12-17-2018

Launching Integrative Experiences through Linked Courses: The Future Educators Learning Community (FELC)

Jamie Brown

Central Michigan University, brown3jl@cmich.edu

Holly Hoffman PhD

Central Michigan University, gerki1hh@cmich.edu

Kristina E. Rouech PhD

Central Michigan University, rouec1k@cmich.edu

Elizabeth A. VanDeusen PhD

Central Michigan University, vande4ea@cmich.edu

Recommended Citation

Brown, J. , Hoffman, H. , Rouech, K. E. , VanDeusen, E. A. (2018). Launching Integrative Experiences through Linked Courses: The Future Educators Learning Community (FELC). *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 6(2), Article 4. Available at: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol6/iss2/4>

Launching Integrative Experiences through Linked Courses: The Future Educators Learning Community (FELC)

Abstract

This article describes the first implementation of the Future Educators Learning Community, and particularly, the impact of three linked courses and instructor collaboration. With supporting literature and the context and background of this learning community as the foundation, our experiences are structured into three distinct categories: preparing, implementing, and reflecting upon our journey. Pertinent logistics are discussed as well as the importance of ongoing communication and collaboration in response to real-time feedback from students. Throughout this initial implementation, recurring themes emerged that extended meaning for both students and instructors. The article concludes with important lessons learned, as well a poetic representation of the initial Future Educator Learning Community.

Keywords

learning community, linked courses, linked assignments

In the spring of 2015, the Dean of the College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) at Central Michigan University (CMU), a mid-size, public research university located in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, decided to establish a team of faculty from each department within the College to focus on teaching and learning. Faculty members from five departments (Counseling and Special Education; Educational Leadership; Human Environment Studies; Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Services; and Teacher Education and Professional Development) initially met and brainstormed ideas to pursue, with the intent of improving student outcomes, such as retention, as well as helping students to feel more linked to campus by having a connected group of peers. A focus for the project was identified by the end of the spring semester, and the team began exploring the student engagement literature, resources, and instructional as well as organizational models. The model of Learning Communities emerged as a high-impact practice to consider and study (Kuh, 2008).

We began studying student engagement inside and outside of the classroom with a focus on the role of instructors and staff in student success. The goals we set included engaging instructors, students, and student affairs professionals as a high-impact practice (HIP) and aligning CEHS student support practices with the university strategic plan. We chose to implement learning communities as a vehicle to achieve integrative experiences for students engaged in the program.

The implementation workgroup created a pilot, the Future Educators Learning Community (FELC). The FELC is a smaller community located within the Education and Human Services Residential College (EHSRC). Developed as a partnership among three CEHS academic departments, the FELC would enroll a small group of future educators in three linked courses: Introduction to Teaching, Human Growth and Development, and Introduction to Leadership. To further support degree requirements and academic rigor, two of the linked courses were designated as Writing Intensive (WI). Learning community instructors joined together to teach the linked courses that would focus on the common themes of education and leadership and include integrated assignments. Our broader workgroup developed our mission and outcomes to guide this work:

- *Mission:* CEHS learning communities will enhance student development and success by providing dynamic, focused, diverse, and integrated experiences in which students, staff, and instructors learn and grow together.
- *Student Outcomes:* Students in learning communities will experience higher academic achievement; increase curricular and co-curricular collaborative interactions with other students, instructors, and staff; demonstrate improved knowledge and skills related to career opportunities; and show a greater rate of persistence.

- *Instructor Outcomes:* Instructors in learning communities will experience increased implementation of active and collaborative teaching and learning strategies; increased proactive knowledge of their students and their path to success; and increased connections between their learning community, interdisciplinary and integrated learning, and scholarship.

Preparing for the Learning Community

To gain more knowledge about learning communities, their development and their influence on student engagement and success, a workgroup attended the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at Evergreen State College and developed an initial action plan for a teacher education and leadership learning community. The participants in the Summer Institute included a subset from the original group as well as individuals who would assist in moving this initiative forward, in this instance a Learning Design representative and a professional focused on budgetary matters in the EHS Dean's office.

Logistics

Preparing the course structure before the semester was an important step. The advisor of the EHS Residential College created an application for the learning community as part of a residential college that was already in place. Students were informed of the option to join the learning community when they applied to be part of the residential college. Applications were accepted on a first-come, first-serve basis, and the learning community was capped at 25 students. Several logistical steps needed to take place in order for the courses to be scheduled appropriately for students. Permission had to be obtained from three different department chairs and the college dean in order to offer a set of three linked courses and create a learning community. FELC members were enrolled in the specific block of classes at academic orientation. The three instructors met to decide when to offer each of the courses and decided on twice weekly courses that would be run consecutively in the same classroom. Once the course schedule numbers and location were settled, the instructors began work on the content of the courses.

Professional Development

Linked courses and integrated assignments are two key aspects of a successful learning community (LC). We followed closely the workbook created by Graziano, Schlesinger, Kahn and Singer (2016), which explicates three important windows of time for colleague conversations: before, during, and after

the semester. As the authors explain, before the learning community begins, LC instructors should discuss logistics and preferred modes of communication that will serve their ongoing collaboration. Additionally, each individual should reflect on their perspectives and beliefs regarding classroom collaboration, teaching and learning, and classroom management. The goal of this step is not to emerge with one philosophy; rather, it is to honor and blend individual characteristics while operationalizing an integrated system. This is also the critical time to develop shared assignments that reflect the student learning outcomes and unique LC goals and to begin the discussion of shared grading. During LC implementation, the central goal is to maintain collaboration that fosters proactive learning and problem solving. After the semester, LC instructors should assess student work and look for evidence integrative thinking while reflecting and retooling for the next semester.

Course and Assignment Development

The importance of meaningful and authentic integrated assignments are highlighted in the work of Ball (2016) and the idea of Passion Projects—creating environments and authentic assignments that motivate students as well as foster retention and persistence. Passion Projects reflect topics chosen by students in response to pressing community needs that impact them directly and about which they care deeply. This type of project-based learning fits well within learning communities that are designed to connect interdisciplinary learning inside and outside the classroom while serving important issues in the lives of students and their communities. The work of Hintz and Genareo (2017) provided a detailed roadmap for our learning community since it was also embedded in teacher education and was created, in part, due to student enrollment decline and issues related to retention and persistence. Additionally, their learning community at Minot State University included linked courses, a field experience, a theme, committed instructors, and formative and summative data collection. Using this foundational scholarship, we moved forward with our LC design with dedicated instructors and grounding themes.

For this LC, the three specific courses, which centered on education, human development, and leadership, were selected due to the natural overlap of content in preparing future teachers. The three instructors met on a regular basis throughout the summer to analyze learning outcomes, review course topics, and identify common academic themes. In an effort to integrate the policies and calendar for all three courses into a single syllabus, the instructors compared their three syllabi and discussed general course policies (attendance, homework, technology, grading/points, etc.). The final shared syllabus included standard university language regarding civility, academic integrity, accommodations and support services, as well as agreed upon policies that typically vary by instructor.

The format of the syllabus allowed for comparison between classes in a column format in order to make clear to students any areas that might vary from class to class, for instance, content topic and due dates.

Out of this discussion emerged the goal of linked assignments that connected with content of all three courses: a field experience (observing in a K-12 classroom for 10 hours); volunteering in the community for five hours; and a required a research component. These three expectations were combined into a final project for which students were assigned to a school in teams to observe and design an event/after-school program based on research about the needs of their unique school community. This project was implemented in the courses and referred to as FELC Tank. Following a model based on the popular television show, *Shark Tank*, the small groups collaborated to determine a specific need within the school where they completed the classroom observations. These ranged from children impacted by poverty to particular interests such as STEM. The groups researched effective models and evidence-based strategies and then began to plan school-wide activities to address this need. The groups pitched their ideas about school support, the research supporting their model, and budgets and implementation plans to a team of judges. These judges included the three instructors, as well as three guest judges who held leadership positions within the college.

Implementing the Learning Community

Several concepts emerged as this integration came to life: communication, collaboration, and flexibility. During the implementation phase, continuous informal assessment of student interests, needs, and concerns was vital. Instructors, each with unique approaches, addressed the specific needs of incoming freshmen who were balancing new opportunities and adjustments. With the individual expertise and teaching style of each instructor, the community of learners grew as connections between individuals flourished.

Communication

Additionally, open-ended assessments and surveys assisted in gathering input from students. For example, when asked about what worked well throughout this experience, students commented on the community development, the positive aspects of group work, and the alignment of three courses on the same day. With regard to items to change in the future, students reported an interest in substituting a different course that would meet course requirements of the teacher education program and offered suggestions—for instance, to more evenly distribute course project deadlines throughout the semester, to move to

different rooms for each course, and to modify the school connection field experience requirement.

Collaboration

Monitoring the needs of students was a crucial component of this community. The team discussed several issues related to academic needs, as well as social and mental health supports. Referrals were submitted to offer support and a community of wrap-around care to holistically support students in the community. The level of communication among the instructors provided a network of support for the students. For example, challenges and successes were shared as the team members met consistently throughout the semester. Additionally, instructors shared proactive and informal messages of regarding class climate, questions, pressing issues, and themes. This approach contributed to the consistent framework of support offered to students and instructors alike.

High levels of collaboration among the implementation workgroup and the instructor team resulted in significant learning opportunities for students. Continual active learning activities filled the class periods, including guest speakers, field trips, student presentations, reflection, and hands-on field experiences. High demand speakers, such as the University president and college dean, shared insights with the students as they visited the learning community. Additional speakers, including professionals from the field, addressed specific topics such as career services, the teacher education program, and registered student organizations, fostering a multitude of interdisciplinary perspectives. In addition, hands-on field trips to the adventure center, library, an early childhood learning laboratory school, and other campus resource centers assisted students in exploring the wider campus community.

Combined course assignments required extensive collaboration among instructors and students. An introductory project required students to complete a personal timeline, a leadership concept map, and an educational autobiography and to combine these into an electronic presentation to connect the content of all three courses in a reflection on their past and how it informs their future. The culminating project, as explained earlier, was divided among the three different courses and was based on students completing an observational field experience in small groups. The project required combining aspects of each specific course to create a service learning event that could be implemented based on the individual needs of each school. Proposals were presented in an entrepreneurial competitive format, which was judged by fellow students, interns, instructors, community and campus leaders.

Flexibility

Because we recognize that flexibility is key through the implementation of any successful pilot program, several adaptations were made during this process. The final project needed to be modified due to changes in field placement responses and needs of the schools. Schedule adjustments were made to address the need for additional clarification and resources to support student growth and completion of major assignments. Flexibility in teaching style, course material delivery, and classroom policies among the instructors assisted in increased knowledge about alternative or optional methods and ideas that might not have previously been considered or implemented. This flexibility allowed the instructors and students to be more successful as they completed course requirements and allowed for an increased sense of community and opportunity to learn significantly from each other.

Reflecting on Initial Implementation

After the success of the first semester, the implementation workgroup and the instructor team spent time reviewing assessment outcomes based on both quantitative and qualitative measures collected through the university, other course feedback, and the Online Survey of Students' Experiences of Learning in Learning Communities - Washington Center at Evergreen State College (Malnarich, Pettitt, & Mino, 2014). In reviewing the pilot, the instructor team also compiled their own feedback based on their experiences and observations from advising staff connected to the learning community. Based on these data and experiences, three areas emerged as aspects of the learning community to refine and enhance for future FELC cohorts: logistics, shared assignments, and outcomes.

Logistics

The first change will be an adjustment in the physical classroom space and course scheduling. While the combined courses initially took place in a functional space with moveable desks supportive for team and active learning, instructors and students alike noted the lack of external windows and natural light. Another environmental change is a shift in the course times. In the first year, FELC met from 11:00 a.m. to 3:15 p.m., which did not provide an adequate break for lunch. The schedule of the courses was adjusted slightly within the block the first year to allow for a longer break between the second two courses. Future cohorts will meet earlier, from 8:00 a.m. to 12:15 p.m., thus allowing students to utilize their campus meal plans for lunch and to have a block of afternoon time to observe or volunteer at local schools. A final change will be a shift in the order of the

courses, with some flexibility to adapt that order periodically to meet course needs as well as to respond teachable moments and unique interests.

Shared Assignments

Upon review of shared assignments, the team also recognized a need to strengthen the themes of our weekly discussions and assigned readings. For example, discussions of ethics in the classroom could be better connected to ethics and leadership. The variety of personal assessments and reflection activities assigned in each course could also be better aligned to weekly discussions. A shared discussion in all courses would allow for better integration and application of concepts and explicit connection of these to the teaching profession or related careers, for example, how Introduction to Leadership, an elective, fits into teacher education program requirements, a question raised in some of the student feedback. Further connections to leadership development in the curriculum will help students connect theory to practice in their future careers in the classroom. The team will also review major course assignments to make adaptations, specifically to the final FELC Tank presentations titled. The team determined that the evaluation method for the final project—the shared rubric and use of guest judges to offer additional perspectives—was successful. Although the project was successful, future modifications will include increased integration into direct student observations of local school climates. The team will also work ahead to solidify school placements and clarify student roles in both observations and project planning.

Outcomes

The team set a high bar for student and instructor outcomes. Regarding students, although not enough time has elapsed to detail insights about long-term persistence or higher academic achievement, the short-term goals yielded positive results. For example, all students in FELC joined additional service initiatives across campus and within the university throughout the remainder of the school year. Additionally, many of the initial FELC members indicated an interest in assisting with the second cohort of the learning community. With respect to instructors, the outcomes were reached: team members continue to collaborate extensively on scholarly projects and have extended their activities outside the college. For example, they have been invited to give presentations to support other learning groups across campus, such as graduate assistants and teacher candidates, with the result that this collaborative model has spread across the university and schools in the state. In addition, team members have shared their commitment to integrated learning in other venues of their professional roles in

both teaching and service initiatives. As the new school year approaches, the team is ignited by the commitment to support a path of success for all students.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the FELC experience, the planning and implementation teams reflected on their experiences as facilitators, models, and advocates for university students. Unanimously, a decision was made to continue the learning community initiatives during the upcoming fall semester. As word spread throughout the college about the inaugural learning community, outside interest, engagement, and learning opportunities have continued. Original team members are dedicated to fulfilling roles on the implementation and/or research and assessment teams. Continual brainstorming, researching, and discussing possibilities among the teams as the reflection process is sustained, and we prepare to welcome 25 new freshmen to the new learning community in the fall.

Reflections of the inaugural FELC experience from the instructor insights, in combination with a review of the student feedback, led us to a rich collection to review. Through the lessons learned and insightful experiences to support the designing and implementing of new initiatives, we were able to pinpoint the successful components of this particular learning community. Hearing and appreciating voices from various perspectives, intentional and thoughtful planning, as well as a strong emphasis on open and clear communication, all contributed to meaningful and supportive learning experiences for each student and professional involved.

As a summary of our work in this initial implementation of our learning community, particularly related to linked courses and integrated assignments, we conclude with a poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997; Richardson, 1992), inspired by student feedback of the experience. Poetic transcription is a qualitative research technique, designed to help focus on what is essential to an experience. In using this technique, the words of the students form a poem-like text that seeks to deepen collective meaning and communicate this to a wider audience. A member of the implementation workgroup and instruction team member reviewed student feedback on prompts relating to what worked and suggestions for change at the end of their LC experience. The words of students, woven together with her experiences collaborating with the other instructors, creates a new third perspective—a combination of student and instructor insights. Because each one played a significant role in transitioning the learning community dream into a reality, the authors and instructors from the Future Educator Learning Community are named in the poem, which is influenced by the ancient poetic form known as abecedarian, in which lines are arranged in alphabetical order (see Figure 1).

integrated Assignments in service to our community
 navigating Breaks and schedules and book club
 the Collective
 dynamic, focused, and Diverse experiences
 creating our Educational biography and entrepreneurial spirit
 ongoing Flexibility and, well....FELC in general
 learning from Guests and group presentations
 introducing human development Holly: caring and advocating
 we are all Interconnected
 Introducing the study of influence Jamie: laughing and leading
 what it takes to be a teacher Kristina: firm and just
 we are all Leaders, wherever we are
 developing friendships based on Meaningful work
 exploring and planning the Next steps in our careers
 Observing in real schools, real people
 what made this work? Professors collaborating
 questioning and Quizzes for thinking and learning feedback
 Reflection that leads to new insights
 the power of Snacks and school connections
 Time to work together...and more treats
 Understanding
 accessing the wide Variety of resources on campus
 Willingness
 learning and e Xtending knowledge beyond our classrooms
 by your students, You will be taught
 the Zest to problem solve and tackle complex issues

Figure 1. FELC poetic transcription. This poem, based on student feedback, summarizes the experience of the FELC learning community.

References

- Ball, C.L. (2016). Sparking passion: Engaging student voice through project-based learning in learning communities. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 4(1), Article 9. Retrieved from: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol4/iss1/9>.
- Glesne, C. (1997). That rare feeling: Re-representing research through poetic transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(2), 202-221.
- Graziano, J., Schlesinger, M.R., Kahn, G., & Singer, R. (2016). A workbook for designing, building, and sustaining learning communities. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 4(1), Article 6. Retrieved from: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol4/iss1/6>
- Hintz, K., & Genereo, V. (2017). Suggestions for implementing First Year Experience learning communities in teacher education programs. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 5(1), Article 2. Retrieved from: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol5/iss1/2>

- Kuh, G.D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Malnarich, G., Pettitt, M.A., & Mino, J.J. (2014). Washington Center's Online Student Survey Validation Study: Surfacing students' individual and collective understanding of their learning community experiences. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 2(1), Article 1. Retrieved from: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol2/iss1/1/>.
- Richardson, L. (1992). The consequences of poetic representation: Writing the other, rewriting the self. In Ellis, C. & Flaherty, M. (Eds.). *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 125-136). London: Sage Publications.