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Integrating High Impact Practices: A Learning Community Model to Enhance Identity Development, Civic Engagement, and Reflective Practice

Aдриanna Guram

East Tennessee State University, gurama@etsu.edu

Stacy C. Onks

East Tennessee State University, onkss@etsu.edu

Bethany Novotny

East Tennessee State University, novotny@etsu.edu

Teresa Brooks Taylor

East Tennessee State University, taylort@etsu.edu

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Integrating High Impact Practices: A Learning Community Model to Enhance Identity Development, Civic Engagement, and Reflective Practice

Abstract

This article describes the process of developing a pilot learning community at East Tennessee State University, focusing on the collaboration of academic and student affairs administrators. Exploring how the literature on the integration of high impact practices, namely learning communities, service-learning, and domestic travel study informed our decisions regarding the structure and content of the pilot, we examine how this experience set a foundation for institutional exploration of future learning communities praxis. We describe the nature of our collaborations in the curricular and co-curricular learning community components and discuss the self-reflections that were necessary to help guide the learning of students. The article concludes with a summary of assessment results and reflections on major takeaways.

Keywords

high impact practices, service learning, linked assignments, travel study/study away

The purpose of this article is to provide learning communities administrators and practitioners with a snapshot of the collaborative process that East Tennessee State University used to develop a pilot learning community to address issues of equity and inclusion. The process allowed us to link two existing courses to design an integrated community that emphasized identity development, civic engagement, and reflective practice. We hope that by articulating our processes, assessments, and reflections, readers can discover ways to expand their current praxis to consider alternative methods of integrating high impact practices (HIPs) on their respective campuses in ways that expand opportunities for students not yet served.

Background Information: Project Context

High impact practices are defined as practices that have demonstrated positive impacts on student success and learning (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). At East Tennessee State University (ETSU), we were presented with an opportunity to seek funding in 2016 for high impact practice development through the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR). East Tennessee State University is a regional, public institution in the foothills of Appalachia. The student body of ETSU is approximately 15,000, which includes undergraduate, professional, and graduate students. Students are primarily from Tennessee and the surrounding southeastern region, but also represent over 45 states and 75 foreign countries.

We submitted a proposal on behalf of student and academic affairs proposing the development of an integrated learning community that incorporated diversity/global learning, service-learning, and domestic travel study. At the time, ETSU was still governed by TBR and sought development of a learning community to support both institutional and state initiatives regarding student success and retention. The grant would seek to integrate two academic courses currently offered on the campus as a part of the general education curriculum. Learning communities have been a growing focus of our campus environment for a number of years, but we have lacked a formal structure for supporting development of learning communities that integrate academic coursework.

This grant proposal was motivated by two driving factors: the desire to install learning communities on our campus as a high impact practice and to offer students in under-represented and minoritized populations a low-cost travel study opportunity. As noted by state leadership, high impact practices (HIPs) support the Complete College Act and the state's college completion agenda by integrating teaching and learning initiatives at the colleges and universities and by employing an intentional approach to course development and collection of data (Tennessee Board of Regents, n.d.). NSSE data has consistently noted that student participation in multiple HIPs increases the probability of students' academic success; furthermore, participation in HIPs increases student engagement for underrepresented students (NSSE, 2007). Of particular note, research conducted by

Finley & McNair (2013) on the participation in HIPs by underserved students indicates that one of the highest areas of gain is in service-learning. Research demonstrates that participation in service-learning provides benefits not only to participants, but also to faculty and community members who participate in the project (Mettetal & Bryant, 1996). For these reasons, ETSU had increased interest in the development of HIPs.

In addition, through this grant, we wished to offer an affordable travel study opportunity for under-represented and minoritized students. Study abroad programs and other travel student opportunities had been cost prohibitive for under-represented and minoritized students in the past as many are facing economic hardships in attending college. This grant opened the door for a travel study opportunity for these students.

The grant authors felt that a pilot bringing high impact practices together within a learning community model might garner data that could inform development of similar learning communities on our campus. Because of existing relationships with the department chair and the faculty members, two faculty members from the Department of Counseling and Human Services were identified as collaborators in developing this learning community. Two staff members, the Director of the University Advisement Center and the Assistant Director for Academic Initiatives in Housing and Residence Life, had authored the initial grant. This model of inter-department course integration was new for our institution but made sense in the way we chose to focus on service-learning and intercultural dialogue.

At the first meeting of our planning team, team members discussed the focus of the grant: designing a learning community to examine historical and modern contexts of poverty and educational access in indigenous populations in the United States. Participants in the community would gain an understanding of their own identities, the history of indigenous peoples and colonization in the United States and would apply an understanding of power and privilege in their roles as change agents at ETSU and as global citizens. As the grant program was focused on Student Engagement, Retention, and Success, we as the planning team felt that the goals identified here would align well with the parameters of projects that could be funded by this initiative. We spent time in an early planning meeting discussing our identities and prior knowledge in the focus area of this learning community because we recognized that this would be critical to understanding our own positionalities as it came to creating the student experience.

We also recognized that it would be important to more fully explore what we wanted the outcomes of the learning community to be before determining the structure that would best produce those results. Our planning team collectively refined our mission and outcomes for the learning community, which we internally

called the *EPIIC* Learning Community pilot (Exploring Poverty in Indigenous Cultures):

- **Mission:** the EPIIC Learning Community will expand inclusion, diversity, and equity initiatives at East Tennessee State University as faculty, staff, and students grow and learn together in community
- **Student Outcomes:** Students in the EPIIC Learning Community will experience a hands-on learning experience exploring complex ideas of education and poverty in curricular and co-curricular experiences; demonstrate an ability to reflect on personal identities and the identities of others; and explore the application of service-learning to coursework and future careers.
- **Instructor and Staff Outcomes:** Faculty and staff working with the EPIIC Learning Community will work in collaboration to build integrated learning across coursework; reflect on their own learning and growth in the topics presented in the learning community; increase connections for students between service-learning and course topics; and work to develop a framework to integrate high impact practices within the curricular structure at ETSU in the future.

After refining our outcomes, the team decided to utilize *Understanding Cultural Diversity* (UCD), a course offered in the general education curriculum, and *Exploring Issues of Poverty and Education with Indigenous People*, a course developed from the existing Introduction to Service-Learning course, as the coursework for the learning community. Introduction to Service-Learning is a course within the general education requirements of the institution, and its goals are to develop critical thinking skills, participate in reflective practice, and enhance individual capacity for empathy. This course required a 20-hour individual service placement and group project, which was completed with an indigenous community at the travel study site we identified in New Mexico. This site was selected because a campus colleague had an existing relationship with an indigenous community member in the state, and this individual was willing to allow us to be hosted with the community during spring break. All four of the planning team members committed to travel with the students on the travel study during spring break.

Review of Relevant Literature

Learning communities have been a growing part of higher education in the United States since the 1980s as a vehicle for increasing participation in high impact educational practices (Rocconi, 2011; Kuh, 2008). One operationalized definition is “curricular linkages that provide students with a deeper examination and integration of themes or concepts that they are learning” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, as cited in Fink & Inkelas, 2015, p. 15). Tinto’s (2003) discussion of the commonalities of learning communities—shared knowledge, knowing, and

responsibility—was a core piece of the literature reviewed as the coursework was developed.

Lenning and Ebbers' (1999) examination of linked/clustered coursework served as an important model for structure of the learning community at ETSU. These curricular communities represent a sub-category of learning communities, in which two or more academic courses are aligned, allowing integration across disciplines (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). This model is one of the more common versions of curricular learning communities. Pairings of courses are generally interdisciplinary and can serve as foundations within majors or minors or represent general education courses that build foundational skills for advanced coursework (Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith et al., 2004). The faculty role is to intentionally seek to develop connections between coursework and assignments so that students who enroll in the linked system are able to synthesize learning (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). The team noted a critique by Browne and Minnick (2005) that student satisfaction, GPA, and retention are not enough to assess intellectual development in learning communities. Because this learning community pilot incorporated a week of travel during the semester that would integrate service-learning opportunities, the planning team also reviewed relevant service-learning literature.

Service-learning is an example of experiential education that engages students in a variety of activities that allows for examination of community and human needs that intentionally promote learning and development (Taylor & Kridler, 2013). Eyler & Giles (1994) state that the concept of community was core to Dewey's philosophy, as it is identified as a foundation for democracy, in its connection to moral, intellectual, and emotional elements of life. Research demonstrates that students who engage in service-learning have increased beliefs and values associated with service and community, experience gains in academic achievement, and are more likely to align career interests with service (Taylor & Kridler, 2013). Research also demonstrates that engagement in service-learning has a positive impact on student orientation to social justice, enhanced commitment to social responsibility, ability to demonstrate gains in tolerance of difference, and social responsibility of those who participate (Swaner & Brownell, 2009). Research by Astin and Sax (1998) points to service-learning's effects on reduction of group stereotypes and increased demonstration of intercultural understanding. Jacoby (2003) notes that reflection is what results in student learning and growth. We also noted that Whitley (2014) articulated that it can be difficult to examine student learning through reflective practice. As such, we agreed to develop specific guidelines and evaluations for structured reflective assignments. As an integration of high impact practices, the planning team realized that there was significant overlap in outcomes of learning communities and service-learning: "service-learning and learning communities offers administrators, faculty, and students in higher education a unique opportunity . . . to reflect on core purposes of our

scholarly institutions as they relate to a democratic society” (Eaton et al., 2003, p.1).

Logistic Coordination

Course Integration and Development

Understanding Cultural Diversity (UCD) is a general education course at ETSU that satisfies one of the Social and Behavioral requirements. One of the early challenges we identified would be present was the learning community cap and its relationship to the UCD course. Since this pilot was developed using a grant, the maximum number of students who could participate in the community was 15; however, a typical course section of UCD is capped at 25-30 students. The *Exploring Issues* course would enroll only students in the learning community; however, the team was aware that not all the students who enrolled in the UCD class would be in the learning community. This created a unique challenge as the instructors sought to integrate coursework: to keep the UCD class cohesive since their experiences and relationships with one another would be vastly different. In addition, students who were not enrolled in the learning community would be limited by a one-dimensional lens that came with taking UCD on its own and not being able to expand on their experiences through the other course in the learning community. The instructors were able to identify ways to integrate coursework in a variety of capacities, including linking readings and reflections in both courses, in a way that did not penalize the students in the UCD course who were not participating in the learning community.

The UCD course broadly covers understanding people and their social environments, focusing primarily on factors that influence human behavior such as culture, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, discrimination, economic forces, organizations, and communities. *Exploring Issues of Poverty and Education with Indigenous People* focused specifically on the topic related to the travel study and service-learning components of the learning community. Each course was adapted to include content that was specific to the learning outcomes, including a section on indigenous peoples in UCD and service-learning specific to poverty and education in *Exploring Issues*; this content had not previously been included in either course. Working collaboratively, the instructors were able to intentionally link ideas and projects across the courses to provide students with a complex and enriching learning experience. The instructors co-facilitated classes multiple times throughout the semester, designed assignments to incorporate material from both of the linked courses, and co-led pre-travel meetings for students who participated in the travel study experience. The two staff members on our team visited the *Exploring Issues* classroom a month into the course; this time was spent helping the students better understand the culture of the indigenous

people of New Mexico and cover logistics required for fully participating in the travel study over spring break. This interaction also provided an opportunity for these individuals to become a part of the learning community experience since they would be living and working with the students during the week of travel.

Travel Study

Concurrent to the planning of the coursework was the development of the agenda for the on-site experience in New Mexico during spring break. The two staff members of our team took this portion of the learning community, making use of our strengths and experiences. The necessary logistics of this somewhat isolated travel site to be coordinated included recruiting participants, establishing the service-learning sites, securing housing, and coordinating travel and food for a week of travel.

ETSU, while having a study abroad department, does not have an established office for coordinating domestic travel study experiences, so the team needed to seek a diversity of ways to inform students about the learning community travel study opportunity. The staff set up at the campus study abroad fair, even though travel would occur within the United States; this outreach proved to be fruitful, as two of our initial applicants came from speaking with us at this event. We also sent electronic communication out to campus residents, as well as individual communication to students through academic advisement in the fall term. The Clemmer College of Education at ETSU also sent out an email to all students; this was done as the College housed the two linked courses for the learning community.

As logistics were coordinated for this learning community, the planning team decided to include an undergraduate peer mentor in the planning and implementation of the learning community to help prepare materials for student reflection during our week of travel. Research by Koerner and Harris (2007) indicates that mentoring can assist in student professional and personal growth. A study by McGuire and Doty (2010) highlights reflection and reflective praxis in the mentoring process with youth. The student we selected had been recently examining their identity as an indigenous person and was preparing to graduate in the spring term. They were also going into a higher education/student affairs graduate program the following year. We asked this student to create a document that could be used for reflection during the week. This modified journal included information about the indigenous people we would visit, the historical and modern contexts of education and poverty in indigenous communities within the United States, an outline of the planned agenda for the week, as well as reflective prompts for the students to complete each week. The student enrolled in the *Exploring Issues* course and, as such, was able to build relationships as a mentor with the other students throughout the semester.

Because of the remote location of the spring travel study site, a decision was made by the staff coordinators to travel in December 2016 to meet with the local coordinators directly. This decision proved invaluable since changes were made to the plans for meals and service once it was clear that the local travel would be more complicated than initially understood. It was also important for the planning team to ensure this travel study would be a mutually-created experience with the indigenous community leadership, one that did not exploit the community we were being welcomed into but instead allowed us to learn and grow together.

The service-learning in New Mexico included working on clearing fields for a farm-to-table meal program in the school system, speaking with community elders about healthcare, and connecting participants with high school students to discuss college access and preparation. Time was allocated to take students to identified cultural sites to help build a historical understanding of place and the people we were working with on this experience. Indigenous community members were also invited to a dinner that the learning community participants prepared for them on our last night in New Mexico; this action provided another opportunity to create authentic engagement across difference while on this travel study.

Assessments

Using Reflective Praxis as Assessment: Digital Stories

In order to address Whitley's (2014) note that evaluating student learning can be difficult through reflective practice, one major aspect of the integrated coursework focused on providing structured reflective assignments in the *Exploring Issues* course to investigate and evaluate culture, identities, and issues of poverty and education. Course material given to students in both the *Exploring Issues* class and UCD included excerpts from the text provided by leaders of the indigenous community. Students used reflection to consider how storytelling and oral traditions have preserved culture and language during colonization of indigenous communities.

For the final project in the *Exploring Issues* course, students created a digital story that examined the connections between the learning community coursework, their travel study, and service-learning engagement. To prepare for the final project, students completed a series of self-reflective assignments including *Who Am I*, *Where I'm From*, regular journal entries with prompts, and assignments completed in the UCD course that integrated with the students' final presentations. Students were asked to apply these connections to their planned future careers/next steps. This activity also made connections to storytelling in indigenous communities. Research demonstrates that digital storytelling integrates the student-centered learning practices of engagement, reflection, project-based learning, and use of technology in classroom instruction, while also being an effective tool for

communication (Wang & Zhan, 2010). Additionally, digital stories have a positive effect on engagement and information literacy (Robin, 2008).

In the *Exploring Issues* course, most class meetings involved guided discussions to progress through the process of preparing a reflective digital story. After exploration of their own background, prompts for the travel study included “What?” (observations, issues, and expectations), “So What?” (skills/knowledge learned, needs, perspectives changed), and “Now What?” (long-term goals, and application). Students utilized these reflections to develop a theme for their story, a script, and identifying images and sounds to include.

An adapted version of the AAC&U Civic Engagement *VALUE* rubric (AAC&U, 2009) was utilized as the evaluation tool for the digital stories. The rubric focuses on diversity, communities and culture, analysis of knowledge, and civic identity and commitment. The learning community team members provided feedback on the digital story presentations at the last class period; this provided all of us an opportunity to see student reflections of the totality of the learning community. The stories themselves demonstrated the depth of student learning that had taken place over the course of the semester. Students cited particular acknowledgment of how the travel study and service-learning integrations had given a hands-on application of the intended outcomes of the learning community. These outcomes included understanding complex issues of poverty and education, examination of personal identities, and application of service-learning course work and future careers. Campus partners were invited to watch these presentations, which also provided a vehicle for the students to practice public speaking.

Quantitative Assessment of Travel Study and Learning Community Structures

In addition to the assessment of student learning that occurred through reflective assignments in class, student outcomes were assessed by our team at the conclusion of the learning community. An anonymous, voluntary electronic survey that was distributed had an 80% response rate from the participants. Some of the key assessments from our quantitative assessment include:

I got to know the classmates in my learning community better than in my other classes this semester	100% Strongly Agree
I got to know the faculty in my learning community better than in my other classes this semester	80% Strongly Agree; 20% Agree
I feel more connected to ETSU as a result of my participation in this learning community	80% Strongly Agree; 20% Agree
My learning community helped me understand the content in my courses at a deeper level	80% Strongly Agree; 20% Agree
I would recommend this learning community to another student	100% Strongly Agree

Qualitative assessment responses also indicate students articulating a variety of outcomes, including an increase in awareness of topics related to justice and intercultural competency, a stronger desire to commit to civic and service engagement, and enhanced interpersonal skills. Additionally, students felt that the service-learning component to the coursework helped confirm their career aspirations or helped them to reconsider options that would better align with their areas of interest. Students articulated that the service-learning helped them to see an alignment of learning objectives for service and their coursework.

A year out of the experience, students were asked to complete a follow-up interview. The respondents continued to comment on the impact of a cultural immersion as having helped to enhance their awareness of self and others and having also highlighted the importance of recognizing power and privilege and its relationship to poverty and education. Two quotations captured from these interviews, which were conducted over Zoom by the Assistant Director for Academic Initiatives, demonstrate this learning:

- “I don’t think I understood the concept of justice very well before this learning community experience. I very much believed in equality, but when you’re looking at terms of social justice and equality, you need to hear what’s people’s perspectives and experiences, and that their needs are being considered.”
- “I learned about intersectionality and how these things can affect someone. You can be female, you can be an African American, you can be a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and how people may fit you into stereotypes that come along with everything. But I also learned how to break down those barriers. We can be powerful. We can do something.”

Concluding Thoughts

The outcomes for both student and participating faculty/staff were life changing. It was expected that learning would occur, but the depth of the experience through the linked learning and travel was unexpected.

In addition to broadening the scope of student understanding of indigenous people, the linked courses provided a structured support system for students. For the students, it offered support to participate in a travel study opportunity that had not been open to them before based on limited income. For the majority of these students, this travel opportunity was the first experience flying and in traveling outside of a 300 mile radius of their homes. These students also recognized the differences between their life experiences and those of the indigenous people and, in some instances, could identify shared experiences as well.

Those of us who traveled with the students had our own transformative experience. Faculty and staff members rarely spend 24-hour days with students, seeing them in a social and academic experience. The chance to witness student

learning and growth was strengthened by the structure of this learning community, which involved us preparing meals as a group, coordinating logistics with one another, and processing our daily activities. While not necessarily feasible in all learning community models, we highly recommend the opportunity for more faculty and staff collaborators to find ways to infuse this type of experiential learning into existing structures of learning communities. We also found that digital storytelling served as a powerful tool for evaluating student learning and reflection. Empowering students to utilize a multimodal format to identify how they have grown through an experience could be utilized in a variety of courses, including first-year seminars and capstone courses. We encourage educators to consider how this format might strengthen existing learning community offerings.

More importantly, the faculty/staff collaboration strengthened the relationships between two campus populations of employees that do not typically have an enmeshed relationship in student support and learning. It was an eye-opening moment to understand how powerful the collaboration could be for student learning and enrichment.

With the exception of the grant-funded travel, all aspects of this learning community model could be replicated with existing campus and community partnerships without the need for additional fiscal resources. Local resources could include points of interest, state/national parks, and community agencies. It is important to note that collaborating with the Office of Financial Aid could assist with adding travel into the student's cost of attendance.

Although the grant that funded this experience has concluded, the desire to collaborate and build a sustainable model for our campus to expand learning communities has continued. As a part of the knowledge sharing for this experience, the instructors and staff had the chance to present their findings and lived experiences teaching in the learning community at a campus institute in summer 2018; they were afforded an additional opportunity to educate peers at the *High Impact Practice in the States* conference in February 2018. We were also able to present at our state's Biennial Conference on Diversity, Equity, and Completion, where several campuses were interested in our model of domestic travel study integration. As a planning team, we continue to seek opportunities to help lead the integration of these high impact practices on our campus, and are thankful for the learning that we experienced in this pilot program.

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