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Sustained Faculty Development in Learning Communities

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Sustained Faculty Development in Learning Communities

Abstract

While it is common for learning community programs to provide professional development to support their faculty, such support may not be sustained. This article reports on a professional development framework instituted at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY, that includes activities for faculty teams before, during, and after the semester. This cyclical practice grew out of administrators' recognition of the need for faculty not only to create shared assignments for students, but also to assess their students' work in response. Based on the principles of: (1) supporting collaboration, (2) promoting reflective teaching to encourage integrative thinking and learning, and (3) respecting faculty members' agency, we present a professional development model that aims to equip learning community faculty with tools to transform their teaching and their students' learning.

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Keywords

faculty development, professional development, integrative assignments, linked classes, learning communities

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) offer a comprehensive definition of learning communities as representing “an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community, enhance learning, and foster connections among students and their teachers, and among disciplines” (p. 20). While block programming restructures students' time and credit, it is up to faculty to restructure students' learning experiences through such collaborative activities as aligning course curricula and designing what Lardner and Malnarich (2008) describe as purposeful integrative assignments. Learning community programs generally offer support to help their faculty with this complex work; however, we have observed at our college and at colleges across the country that this support is often front-loaded—that is, offered primarily at the stage when faculty are first planning learning communities. As program coordinators and learning community faculty ourselves, we realized the need for ongoing faculty development throughout the semester in order to strengthen faculty collaborations as well as the quality of integrative assignments and supporting classroom activities. To this end, we have implemented the model for sustained faculty support we present here.

Sustained Faculty Development in Learning Communities: Why?

Grubb and Associates (1999) showed the importance of viewing teaching as a “collective activity,” noting the impact that faculty development initiatives can have on students' experiences. However, the numerous pressures that college faculty often face, such as varied and complex student populations, heavy teaching loads, and publishing demands limit possibilities for professional development, when such opportunities are available. This unfortunate reality can bring about, among faculty, a sense of deep isolation in their professional lives (Grubb et al., 1999).

Following Smith et al.'s definition above, learning communities (LCs), by design, provide a remedy for this kind of isolation. In LCs, the interaction between and among linking faculty can serve to influence how instructors view what Jedele (2010) calls “C” changes—“camaraderie, cooperation, collegiality, collaboration, curriculum integration, creative teaching techniques, and community building” (p. 108). However, it cannot be assumed that just by linking courses these “C” changes will occur, or that faculty will be prepared to do the innovative work needed to promote students' integrative thinking. Lardner and Malnarich (2008) stress the need for intentionality in LC collaboration, and call for the kind of faculty development program “that is a learning community for faculty” where faculty “notice what needs work, pay attention to research, try out

new ways of working in the company of supportive peers, share insights, refine, and revise...” We believe that to answer this call, sustained faculty development is needed. In accordance with Boylan’s (2002) assertion that “ongoing, long-term professional development programs are the most effective” (p. 47), our aim at Kingsborough Community College is to provide our learning community faculty with ongoing opportunities to engage in such activities as identifying shared pedagogical approaches, course objectives, and themes; locating and revisiting places of overlap between and/or among courses; and designing and then redesigning activities, assignments, and projects through assessment measures relevant to LC goals. Because of its complexity, we see this work as necessarily dialogic and continual.

Learning communities began at Kingsborough in 1995 after a team of prospective coordinators and faculty went to the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities offered through the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. Bringing what they learned back to our campus, our LC coordinators offered faculty development opportunities for participating faculty as they set up their learning communities. Early on, the need for within-semester support was recognized in order for faculty to sustain collaboration and identify students who might be in need of supportive interventions. However, it was only over the past few years, as we reflected on student work that fell short of our expectations for integration, that the need to support faculty in assessing student learning in order to improve instruction has become apparent. As a result, we implemented end-of-semester support as well. Since assessment results inform planning for the following semester, faculty development has become, in essence, cyclical (see Figure 1).

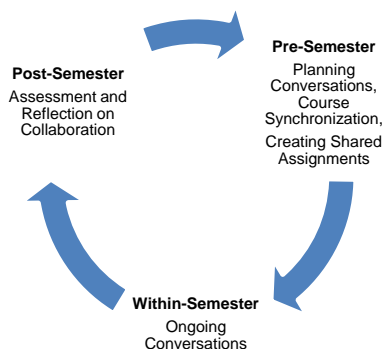


Figure 1. Cyclical faculty development

At Kingsborough Community College, we offer three learning community programs targeted to different populations—first-semester students, first-semester

students needing ESL support, and continuing students. In some of our LCs, tutors and librarians are actively engaged alongside faculty, and faculty development includes these colleagues as well. While there are differences in how the activity framework introduced below is implemented within each of our LC programs—according to their unique histories, populations, and needs—the discussion paints a broad picture of our ongoing efforts to ground professional development opportunities in the following three principles: (1) supporting collaboration, (2) promoting reflective teaching to encourage integrative thinking and learning, and (3) respecting faculty members’ agency—pre-semester, within-semester, and post-semester.

Pre-Semester Faculty Development

The success of learning communities with a variety of student populations has been well documented (e.g., Boylan, 2002; Malnarich with others, 2003; Scrivener et al., 2008; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004; Song, 2006; Tinto, 1997, 1998), as evidenced by such measures as student satisfaction, persistence, and grades. However, from a pedagogical perspective, the richness of the learning community framework lies in its potential to encourage students’ integrative thinking. Integrative thinking, which has been identified as a General Education goal by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2007), is a core student learning outcome across our student populations at Kingsborough. Therefore, the central emphasis of our pre-semester faculty development is on helping faculty integrate their courses and create assignments through which students can demonstrate integrative thinking.

When new learning communities are created we invite participating faculty to attend a two-hour “pre-semester workshop,” where they are asked to address the nuts and bolts of their course planning—having “pre-semester conversations,” synchronizing course curricula, and drafting shared assignments and/or projects and activities that will support student work. “Pre-semester conversations” are designed to help faculty begin to get to know each other—in terms of their teaching perspectives as well as their collaboration and classroom management styles (see Appendix A). Following these dialogues, we ask faculty to compare their syllabi side-by-side to look for places where course topics, themes, and issues can be related to each other. If there is potential for connections to be more fully emphasized, we invite faculty to consider re-ordering their introduction of course content. Even if particular topics, themes, or issues cannot be addressed concurrently, we have found that a side-by-side examination of curricula can prepare instructors to refer back to or anticipate connections in their linked courses.

At this pre-semester meeting, we also work to facilitate linkers' development of at least one shared assignment or project that asks students to demonstrate integrative thinking, and to consider how this work will be graded. Lardner and Malnarich (2008) stress the importance of such an assignment as a foundational LC practice. Following recommendations from the Washington Center, we believe that students should be offered opportunities to demonstrate that they have achieved and integrated student learning outcomes for each of the linked courses, and that they have done so in the context of a real world issue. The inclusion of a real world issue is what makes the assignment relevant for the students and encourages an understanding of "the complexity of real world problems and the value of sophisticated skills for understanding and managing those problems" (Fogarty & Dunlap, 2003, p. 10). (See Appendix B for an instrument to guide the creation of shared assignments.)

As they consider a vision for their joint assignments, we also invite faculty to attend to how these assignments will be supported or "scaffolded." Our notion of scaffolding involves asking students to produce pieces of work that may be shorter, more targeted, and/or more supported by faculty in anticipation of larger, more integrated, and more independent work (Johnson & Pratt, 1998; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). For example, a shared assignment in a philosophy and sociology LC might ask students to "explain and evaluate the Occupy Wall Street movement from the perspective of conflict theory and Kant's categorical imperative." Students could then be asked in separate assignments (such as low stakes writing) and activities (such as reading jigsaws) to explain conflict theory, explain the categorical imperative, analyze another event in terms of conflict theory alone, analyze the ethics of another event in terms of the categorical imperative, and explore the Occupy Wall Street movement. We have found that such scaffolding better prepares students to bring content together in the shared assignment.

Regarding the issue of grading shared assignments, we ask faculty to consider whether student work will be drafted and who might read and respond to the various drafts. While it might seem ideal for all linking faculty to read and offer feedback on all drafts, this may not be logistically feasible, and we have in fact seen that too many sources of feedback can be overwhelming for students. We leave this process in faculty members' hands. Instructors also need to decide if they will grade separately, using different criteria, or collaboratively, and how much the shared assignment grade will contribute to the overall grade in each course. If faculty choose to grade collaboratively, we have encouraged the creation of shared rubrics that include weighted criteria representing student learning outcomes from each linked course. While collaborative grading may add to the coherence of the LC, we have found that uniformity across courses is not

necessary as long as differences in grading—and the justification for those differences—are transparent to faculty and students.

Similarly, while the adoption of the same classroom management policies and procedures may send a message of coherence to students, we do not see such common practices as crucial as long as faculty and students are aware of differences, understand the reasons for them, and do not expect that a practice in one course necessarily holds in another. Because faculty come to LCs with different personal histories and teaching perspectives, we have found that honoring where each member is coming from, and encouraging transparency between and among linkers and linked classrooms, can serve as a bridge to shared understandings as work in the link evolves. Given, however, that active, collaborative learning is one of the “core pedagogies” associated with LC programs because it “recasts learning as a social and interactive activity” (Malnarich with others, 2003, p. 38), we encourage faculty to expand their use of these pedagogies, including the degree to which they offer students opportunities to “write to learn.” We also ask participants to reflect on their use of pedagogies, such as lecture, that may be more aligned with the “transmission” perspective on teaching and learning (Pratt, 1998) than with the more constructivist philosophy that underlies the LC framework.

Pre-semester workshops also include the creation of a team plan for continuing collaboration before the semester begins as well as for regular communication throughout the semester. We encourage in-person meetings during the semester whenever possible—ideally weekly. Our institution is able to compensate faculty for this collaborative work; other colleges, however, might find alternative ways to demonstrate to faculty that this work is valued.

Within-Semester Faculty Development

During the semester, we continue to support collaboration by encouraging faculty to be in regular communication about their learning community content (including scaffolding activities for the shared assignment), students’ progress, and their own linking process. All sorts of issues can conspire to undermine even the best course outlines—for example, an unrealistic estimation of students’ background knowledge or time-management abilities, the lack of availability of course materials, and even inclement weather. As a result, faculty must often make adjustments to course outlines as their courses progress. While such changes may be disruptive even in stand-alone courses, if not coordinated between or among linked courses, the coherence of the LC and students’ success on joint assignments could be compromised. Therefore, it is important for LC faculty to continually update each other on what is happening in their courses so crucial links between or among courses can be maintained.

An important aspect of supporting collaboration during the semester is for program coordinators to be checking in with faculty about what is working and what is not. In addition, in response to faculty input about pedagogical questions or needs that arise, or in response to relevant topics or issues raised at pre-semester meetings, we also offer short workshops or sharing of “best practices” around such themes as teaching with technology, critical reading, and civic engagement as part of program-wide meetings during the semester. While these workshops to date have been designed to address issues that are program-specific, program coordinators have also begun to collaborate to offer faculty development opportunities that have appeal across our three campus programs as well.

Post-Semester Faculty Development

In our work with faculty, and as faculty members ourselves, we found that when we assessed student work on integrative assignments, there was little evidence that students had engaged in the integrative thinking that the assignment prompts were meant to motivate. Subsequent investigation suggested that the prompts themselves were flawed in one of two ways. In one case, the prompt was written in such a way that students could adequately respond to it without demonstrating the integration that was intended. For example, an assignment in an LC that linked Mental Health with Philosophy asked students to report on a mental health agency and to choose the philosophical view that was most consistent with that agency’s mission statement. Student work for that assignment invariably discussed the agency, including a line such as “This agency’s mission is most compatible with the philosophy of philosopher X,” and then went on to talk about that philosopher’s view—never mentioning the agency again. In the other case, the prompt was sufficiently salient in requiring students to demonstrate integrative thinking, but, upon reflection, faculty recognized that students were being asked to do a task for which they were not prepared, and the need for scaffolding assignments and activities became clear. As a result, we created an instrument—the *Decision Tree for Assessing Integration and Revising Joint Assignments and Activities*—designed to guide faculty not only in assessing student work for evidence of integration but also, when necessary, in reexamining their prompts and course curricula for ways to promote deeper integrative thinking (see Appendix C).

At the end of each semester, faculty teams in a workshop setting read through samples of student work for shared assignments and answer the questions on the left of the tree. A “yes” response to any question directs faculty to the next question in the sequence, while a “no” response directs faculty to suggestions for either improving the language of the prompt or designing scaffolding activities. The tree does not define what integration looks like, but leaves this task to the

teams themselves. It has been our experience that faculty members' expectations for how students will demonstrate integration arise organically from each assignment and are, therefore, task-specific. Our use of the decision tree therefore reflects our three faculty development principles by communicating our respect for faculty members' agency, supporting their collaboration, and allowing us to "close the loop" as an end-of-semester reflective practice.

The post-semester workshop additionally provides a space for faculty to engage in reflection on the LC program, their team collaboration, and their own practice. We begin this workshop by asking faculty, "What worked? And what didn't?" with respect to the LC program, encouraging an open exchange among faculty and program coordinators. We also ask them, within their LC teams, to reflect on and discuss questions such as: What aspects of your LC do you feel were most successful? What aspects of your LC do you feel were least successful? In what ways do you think your team communication can be strengthened? Finally, we ask faculty to complete an online survey (see Appendix D). While we have not yet carried out a formal assessment of our faculty development program, responses to this survey indicate that faculty value the sustained focus our program provides.

Conclusion

In choosing to implement LCs, we are, in effect, taking the view that the act of learning is not a solitary mental endeavor but a multidimensional "social achievement" within a community and a constellation of activities, tools, and goals (Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). If we take the perspective of learning as a complex and relational process, we must also view our teaching through the same lens. While the learning community model provides a highly successful framework for creating teaching and learning collectives, the practice of creating such collectives requires a great deal of institutional support. As Grubb and his associates (1999) note, "transformations in conceptions of self and teaching" occur not in a day but over time, strengthened by "a community of like-minded individuals working on the same issues" (p. 298). At Kingsborough, we have found that through administrative efforts to provide the conditions for collaboration to develop, faculty become equipped to undertake this transformational work. By offering sustained opportunities for faculty development—before, during, and after the semester—our aim is to move our instructors toward reflective, agentive, and integrative teaching practices in ways that respect who they are and who they are becoming, so that they can move their students toward reflective, agentive, and integrative learning within a community.

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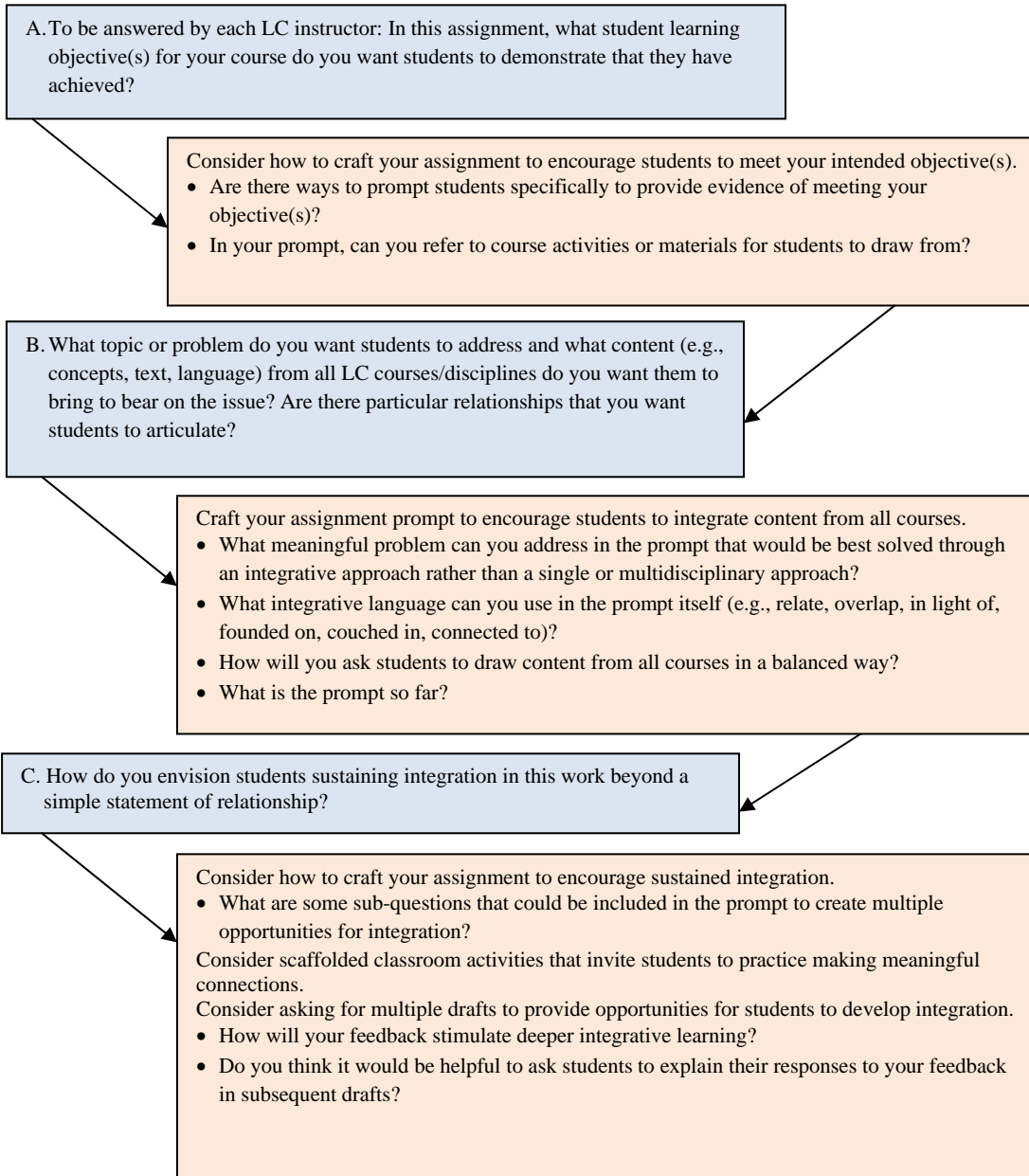
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Appendix A

Guiding Questions for a Pre-Semester Conversation

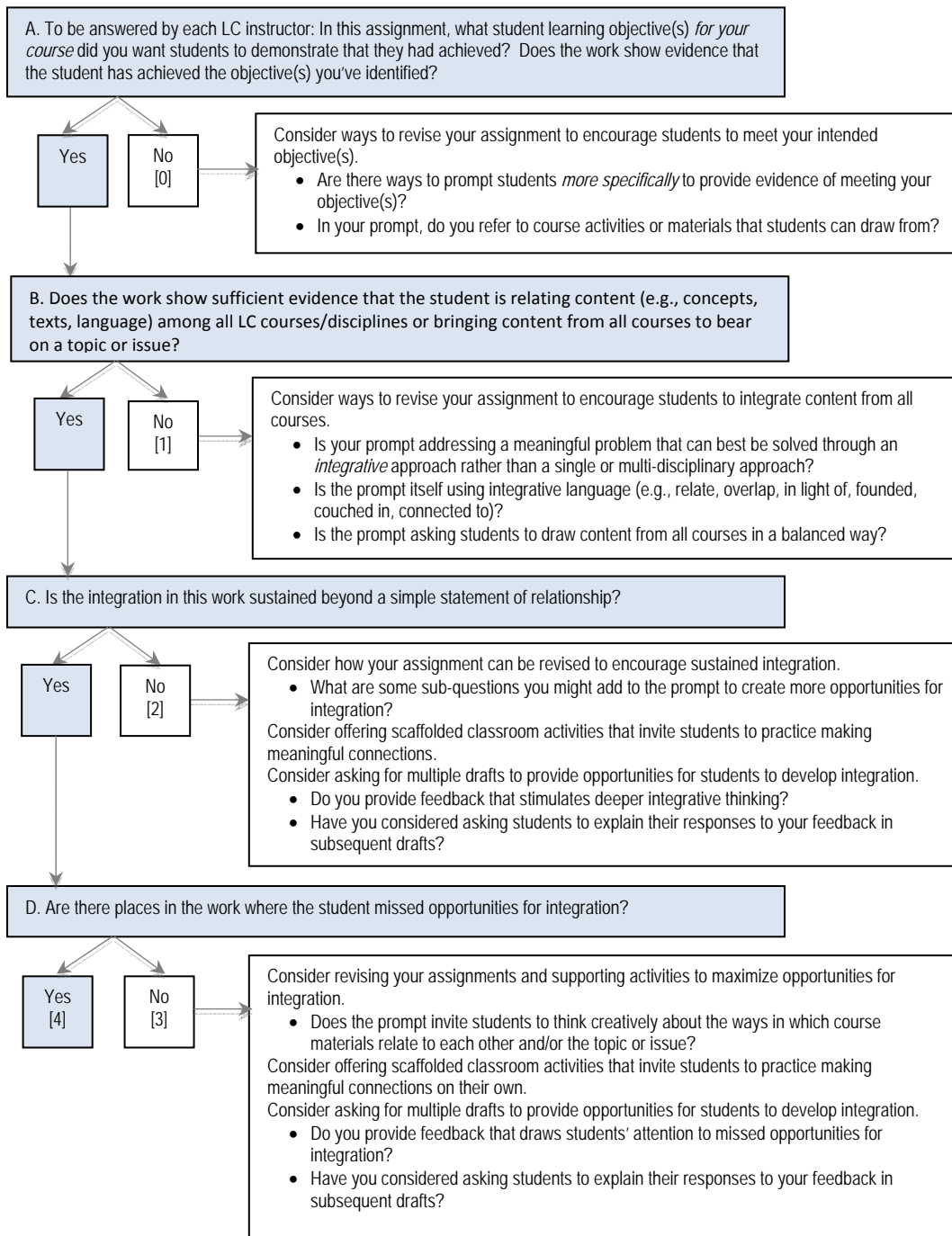
1. How do you prefer to communicate (e.g., work/personal e-mail, office/home phone, face-to-face)?
2. How much time can you commit each week, before the semester begins, to plan the LC?
3. What are your meeting preferences during the semester (frequency, location, time of day, over breakfast or lunch)?
4. Would you consider adding some group work, some short free-writing, and/or more active student participation?
5. How flexible are you concerning the sequence of course topics? Are you comfortable with a change?
6. What is your attendance policy?
7. How do you assess student learning (e.g. writing assignments, exams, presentations)?
8. How much reading and writing do you require of your students?
9. What do you see as the specific challenges of working with students in your course?
10. What is your teaching perspective?
(Take the online survey <http://www.teachingperspectives.com/drupal> and discuss.)

Appendix B Creating Shared Assignments



Appendix C: Decision Tree for Assessing Integration and Revising Shared Assignments & Activities

The purpose of this tree is to provide a guide to assessing student work for evidence of integrative thinking. To answer each question to the left, consider your students' work. If your answer is "Yes," move on to the next question. If your answer is "No," consider the suggestions in the box to the right as a way to modify your prompt and/or course activities. When you reach a "No" there is no need to move on to the next question. If your answer is "maybe," consider the suggestions in the box to the left as if your answer were "No" but then continue to the next question. The numbers inside the "No" box can serve as a way of identifying a stage of integration.



Appendix D
Post-Semester Faculty Survey

1. In which learning community or communities do you teach?
2. Have any of your teaching practices changed as a result of being learning communities faculty?
 - a. If you answered "yes" above, how have your teaching practices changed?
 - b. If you answered "yes" above, what would you say has driven these changes? Please consider: work with your teams, faculty development workshops, your own research, assessment of student work, classroom dynamics, etc.
3. What do you see as the benefits and challenges of collaborating with other faculty to create a learning community?