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Making Knowledge to Strengthen Our Field

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Making Knowledge to Strengthen Our Field

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research methods

If we intend to strengthen the learning communities field, we have to cast a broad net. Learning communities take many different forms. Not only that, learning communities are practiced—and studied—by people from diverse institutional and disciplinary backgrounds. Given current interest in learning communities as a high-impact practice, coupled with demands for accountability, our collective efforts to grow the field are critical. The aim of this journal, *Learning Communities Research and Practice* (LCRP), is to help bring coherence to the rich and interesting work happening across campuses.

Prompted by questions and suggestions from the many reviewers who helped shape this issue, we have been reflecting on what it means to “make knowledge” about learning communities. To that end, we find it useful to compare the evolution of learning communities with the evolution of composition, another field that emerged from a wide body of practice and gradually formed itself within and around a set of shared practices, questions, and recognizable bodies of knowledge, all of which now—decades later—continue to inform and be informed by practice.

In *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, published in 1987, Stephen North was trying to solve a problem that resembles our current situation. Between the mid 1960’s and the mid 1980’s, the field of composition grew quickly. The problem with such rapid growth, North argues, was that the corresponding field of knowledge that emerged seemed “chaotic” and scholars and researchers were not always reflective about their chosen modes of inquiry. As a result, “the various kinds of knowledge produced by these modes of inquiry have been piled up uncritically, helter-skelter, with little regard to incompatibilities.” New studies, he writes, tended to “trample roughshod over the claims of previous inquirers,” particularly classroom teachers, so that “despite their overwhelming majority, they have been effectively disenfranchised as knowledge-makers in their own field” (p. 3).

Conditions within the learning communities field are not as dire—collectively we have created venues for sharing practitioner knowledge ranging from curriculum planning retreats and regional networks to the learncom listserve, and from the National Learning Community Conference to the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities. However, our knowledge-making processes are still a bit helter skelter—hence our efforts to re-establish a peer-reviewed journal for our field, a forum where the results of multiple modes of inquiry, from multiple perspectives, can be presented, reflected upon, and forwarded as the basis for further work.

North also argued that becoming more reflective about the modes of inquiry used for making knowledge is essential in a field that values and, in fact, needs the contributions of three critical groups: *practitioners*, the best of whom organize their practice as inquiry; *scholars*—historians, philosophers and critics—who

inquire into the meaning of various practices; and *researchers*—experimentalists, clinicians, ethnographers—who want to know what happened and why. These distinctive groups overlap, sometimes sharing membership and methods. But through his inclusive framing, North not only described a diverse field but also began to give it coherence.

This journal, representing the efforts of writers and reviewers, as well as the work of colleagues and students in learning community programs across the country, intends to accomplish something similar to what North was proposing. Most readers are aware of the results of MDRC's 2012 study of six community college learning community programs aimed at improving student success in developmental education, "The Learning Community Demonstration Project." The results were modest, and closer investigations of the report revealed significant unevenness in the learning community interventions that were studied. The debates around that study highlight the imperative to improve scholarship within our field—to document effective practices, conduct solid research, and share what we've learned.

Given the multiple ways knowledge can be made within the field of learning communities, this journal is organized around four types of articles: research, practices from the field, perspectives, and reviews.

What do we mean by research? Clearly, multiple modes of inquiry are appropriate, depending on the questions being posed. Whatever mode or method is used, we need to be explicit about our approach and define our terms, particularly what we mean by a "learning community." For quantitative research, standard tests for statistical significance should be used, and results—text, tables, and charts—should be easy for readers to interpret. Findings that aren't statistically significant may point the way to further areas of study. We hope to see more studies that draw upon the multiple disciplinary traditions and methodologies of practice-oriented qualitative inquiry. We welcome case studies, ethnographies, reports of action research projects and other studies that help shed light on the impacts of learning communities on students, teachers, and institutions.

The two research articles in this issue help illustrate the range of methods appropriate to this journal. In "The Play's The Thing: Embodying Moments of Integration Live, On Stage," Sandoval and Mino use qualitative methods to assess students' experiences of embodied learning. Their article creates a foundation for further work exploring students' grasp of threshold concepts within a discipline, particularly when that understanding extends beyond a cognitive dimension. In "Improving Academic Success for Undecided Students: A First Year Seminar/Learning Community Approach," Tampke and Durodoye use quantitative methods to assess the impact of a first year seminar compared to a first year seminar as part of a learning community on undecided first year

students' GPA, academic good standing and retention rates. The results suggest further work, assessing the cost-effectiveness of interventions in terms of potentially different outcomes.

What we intend by “practices from the field” is captured in the distinction North makes between practice based on lore or tradition and practice based on inquiry. He defined—and we define—the latter as practice that is grounded in the same dynamics that characterize good research. Practice as inquiry begins with a question or a problem, moves to consideration of solutions, tries out one or more of those solutions, and discusses the results. At Washington Center, we are regularly asked questions about how schools do things—we anticipate that the articles you submit to this section will help us answer those questions more effectively

Practices from the Field in this issue of LCRP illustrates the possibilities. In “Beyond Improved Retention: Building Value-Added Success on a Broad Foundation,” Gebauer, Watterson, Malm, Filling-Brown and Cordes describe what happens when an entire campus supports living-learning communities (LLCs) through an intentionally-designed collaborative infrastructure. The authors also describe how learning in community seeds an enduring outcome—a disposition for engaged citizenry committed to social justice. Graziano and Kahn’s article, “Sustained Faculty Development in Learning Communities,” describes the development of a rigorous professional development program that supports teaching teams before, during and after their learning community teaching experiences. The program focuses not only on team teaching dynamics but also on designing, implementing and assessing integrative and interdisciplinary learning. Rodriguez and Buczinky’s article, “Linking Classes: Learning Communities, ‘High’ Culture, and the Working Class Student,” describes first-year general education learning communities that link a humanities, a social justice and an English composition class in order to engage predominantly working-class, first-generation students in substantive reflections on western culture. Their discussion of differential outcomes depending on the degree of integration raises questions worthy of further study.

For perspective pieces, as for other work, your assumptions and biases should be explicitly stated when making your case. Perspectives typically address an issue or topic that will be of wide interest to the field. Vincent Tinto’s piece, “Autobiography and Community: A Personal Journey,” reminds us that our professional choices—in his case leaving a doctoral program in physics for a very different direction—are less disconnected from our roots than we might acknowledge. It turns out that “community”—its absence or presence—enhances learning, whether we are students, practitioners, scholars, or researchers.

This issue of the journal does not have any reviews—we welcome them. Reviews are an opportunity to share articles, books and other resources you find

valuable in your practice. Write about the classic texts that inform your work; write about newly published articles or books that can help us reflect on where we are as a field. Reviews should give readers a brief descriptive account of the selected material, followed by a discussion of relative strengths and weaknesses, or relevance, in shaping our collective understanding of learning communities as a field.

Discerning readers may also note that this issue contains no comments from readers.¹ Please consider responding to articles in this or subsequent issues!

Our hope, for this issue and future issues, is to provide a platform for faculty, student affairs professionals, and administrators to discuss their experiences in creating and sustaining learning communities that improve the quality of students' educational experiences. The work of helping students achieve their goals is messy and complicated, and this journal provides a forum for us to discuss that reality. By sharing our work with each other, we can build our field, strengthening practices across institutions. Your work matters. Writing about your work matters. We look forward to a rich and fruitful dialogue.

References

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¹ To submit a comment, choose the Submit Article option from the menu on the left. If you have not used the system before, you'll be asked to create a password. Follow the prompts to add your contact information and your comments (defined by the system as an "article"). Under article type, choose Readers' Responses.