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Building a Community of Practice

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Abstract

This editorial reports on the experiences of some of LCRP's writers and editorial board members, which they shared at the 2014 National Learning Communities Conference.

Building a Community of Practice

This month we had the great pleasure of hearing about LC practitioners' work at the National Learning Communities Conference (NLCC). For our session on *Learning Communities Research and Practice (LCRP)*, we invited writers and editors attending the conference to share their experiences with people who might be interested in submitting articles or applying to be members of the editorial board.

Jack Mino, an editorial board member and a contributor to this issue, summed it up when he described the journal as a community of practice. Together—journal writers and readers, along with editorial board members and reviewers—are “building a body of knowledge.” And, through the journal and the other ways we connect—the national conference, regional networks, curriculum planning retreats, the national summer institute on learning communities, and dialogue on the Learncom listserv—our community of practice continues to evolve and expand.

During the *LCRP* session, Carlos Huerta, another editorial board member and writer, spoke to the “revise and resubmit” feedback that is the norm when you submit a manuscript to academic journals. Outright acceptance letters or “accept with revisions” decisions are rare. Carlos described how he has learned to react to critiques as opportunities to improve an article: “So, what are they trying to tell me? What wasn't clear?”

The journal is fortunate to have a group of reviewers who respect the tremendous effort writers put into their work. Typically, they put in hours of focused time, always asking the question, “How does this submission extend the field?” And as Michele Hansen, another *LCRP* reviewer, said during the session, “What are the next steps? What are the implications for practice?”

As teachers, many of us coach students and critique their work. As writers ourselves, we rarely have the opportunity to receive this type of thoughtful, constructive, and generative feedback. All the writers who spoke about their experience with *LCRP*—Michelle Filling-Brown and Richie Gebauer (Cabrini College), Hillary Steiner (Kennesaw State University), Gabrielle Kahn (Kingsborough Community College), and Julia Spears and Stephanie Zobac (Northern Illinois University)—counted the peer review process as a wonderful professional development opportunity. As one writer reported, “I don't know who that anonymous reviewer was, but he or she gave me the best feedback I've ever received.”

For potential writers, submitting a manuscript to *LCRP* is an opportunity to engage in a process where reviewers, lead editors and writers share a common interest—to strengthen a submission as a means to build our field's body of

knowledge. We know that journal readers appreciate this thoughtful behind-the-scenes work.

The articles in this issue do build the body of knowledge about student learning communities. Two of the three *research articles* focus on first-year learning communities. For their article, “Against the Odds: The Impact of the Key Communities at Colorado State University on Retention and Graduation for Historically Underrepresented Students,” Tae Nosaka, a learning communities coordinator, and Heather Novak, an institutional researcher, worked together to measure the educational effectiveness *and* cost-effectiveness of the program’s intervention measures. They use propensity score matching in their analysis to address the issue of how an institution can effectively assess learning communities for specific cohorts in which students are not randomly assigned.

Charles Wynn, Richard Mosholder, and Carolee Larsen (Kansas State University), in “Measuring the Effects of Problem-Based Learning on the Development of Postformal Thinking Skills and Engagement of First-Year Learning,” provide evidence for the effectiveness of another first-year learning community—a gateway history course that incorporates problem-based learning (PBL). Their research provides evidence that the PBL model itself correlated with positive effects on thinking skills and increased student engagement, and that even greater gains were achieved when the course was delivered as part of a learning community.

Emily Lardner’s article on Washington Center’s national survey of campuses’ assessment practices for LCs—“What Campuses Assess When They Assess Their Learning Community Programs: Selected Findings from a National Survey of LC Programs”—details the results of this survey, explores, the implications for campus practice, and highlights areas for further exploration within the field.

The first two *Practices in the Field* describe how, when schedules allow, faculty teaching linked classes can deepen interdisciplinary and integrative learning opportunities by co-teaching selected class sessions. In “Artful Reading, Spontaneous Design: Integrating Philosophy, English and Art in a Creativity Cluster,” Vera Albrecht and Barbara Comins (LaGuardia Community College, CUNY) describe the outcomes when faculty co-teach the final hour of class each week, illustrating for first-year students with little to no background in the arts what it means to integrate their disciplines in a dynamic and improvisational way.

Jody Rosen and Justin Davis (New York City College of Technology, CUNY), in “An Integrated Approach to Learning Communities: Designing for Place-Based, Communication-Intensive Learning,” explain how flexible scheduling to link English Composition and Public Speaking was more effective and integrated than sticking to the traditional one-hour class periods.

In “Now You See It: Using Documentation to Make Learning Visible in LCs,” Jack Mino (Holyoke Community College) shares his and his students’ experiences with documenting student learning through audio and video recording. He describes how this process—along with review and reflection on these tangible artifacts by both students and faculty—can be a powerful tool for enhancing teaching, learning, and assessment, and research.

And, in this issue’s *Perspective*, “Students Connecting with the University Community: The Learning Community as Bridge,” Christina McDowell Marinchak (University of Alaska, Anchorage) shares her experience about the value of “learning conversations” to elicit stories and build understanding for students involved in service learning with communities beyond the walls of the academia.

As always, we encourage all of you to use the journal for professional development and to write about your learning community work. After two years of publication, we are also instituting an application process for joining the LCRP editorial board. Please consider applying; this is an opportunity to contribute in a very direct way to building our field’s knowledge base. You can find more information about the editorial board and how to apply on the home page of the Washington Center (www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter).