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Writing the Narrative of Learning Communities: A Collective Project

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Abstract

This editorial is written by Sara Huntington, Associate Editor of *LCRP*. She reflects on her own experience with teaching and creating Learning Communities and on the role of *LCRP* in the development and dissemination of our collective work.

Over 25 years ago, the Washington Center was instrumental in shaping my approach to teaching as I participated with colleagues from around the region in a grant that supported curriculum planning for librarians and faculty—a project that guided me in the direction of inquiry based education and introduced me to the discipline of de-centering myself in the classroom. Early in my teaching career, the Washington Center taught me that teaching is about learning. Since then, the learning communities movement has taken hold as a broadly accepted approach to teaching. Experiment has evolved into sustained innovation. And we now have a journal that represents our shared goals and the liveliness of a highly diverse set of practices and perspectives.

In this issue, readers will appreciate how researchers continue to work on the complex problem of assessment, from Rita Sperry's (Texas A & M University - Corpus Christi) development of logistic regression models to predict retention and probation status of first year students both in and out of learning communities to Jamie Workman's (University of Northern Iowa) use of grounded theory to characterize the impact of living learning communities on transitional students. The focus on first-year students is also pursued in the research by Tate Hurvitz and Roxanne BenVau (Grossmont) and Megan Perry (San Diego State University), who show how Grossmont College's Freshman Academy has engaged faculty, library instructors, and the professional development office in collaborative projects, such as curriculum planning, which can lead to deeper student learning. There is a good example of effective educational partnerships that have contributed to increased student success and retention and to campus-wide attention on teaching and learning. One common emphasis of these articles—on student learning beyond the classroom—is taken up in the contribution to *Practices from the Field* by Lana Colette-Klingenberg, Kelsey Hribar, and Delaney Fenwick (University of Wisconsin - Whitewater) who discuss the discrepancy between some of their survey results and the observed success of a continuing servant leadership learning community, effectively advancing the discussion about how to measure and document high impact practices.

The contributions to this issue strongly suggest that we need an armamentarium of techniques to narrate the impacts of learning communities—impacts that are complicated by the irrepressible messiness and unpredictability of social phenomena, the stuff that often exists in the interstices of content or that lies outside what's statistically significant. Recently, I designed the curriculum for a learning community entitled "Writing is a Social Act," with the formal definition of rhetoric in mind—from Aristotle to Virginia Tufte's *Artful Sentences*—all to the end of teaching persuasion and style. However, content was overshadowed by how the students labored tirelessly over each other's work—work in which they evinced genuine, sustained interest, as if in fulfillment of

Dewey's observations about the educational potency of being carried away, moved, or fully absorbed in the object at hand. In the end I was struck by the possibility that my students might have learned more of lasting value about the power of collaboration in a learning community than about sentence shape. Of course, this isn't always a dilemma. In his contribution, David Deluliis (Duquesne University) describes a curriculum that supports the fusion of teaching methods and content. Further, the curriculum has been linked to the mission of Duquesne, so that theory and practice can be successfully united in a larger (or higher) communal purpose.

Those of us who attend seriously to the idea that learning is a social act spend a lifetime humbled by the way that planning gets trumped by the surprise of social synergies. As such, we're drawn to experiences that are challenging to document, measure, and characterize. In fact, the contributors to this issue demonstrate how difficult it can be to justify the burdens of collaborative teaching and learning, not only to administrators but also to colleagues and students. In their piece, Robert Hinkley and John McGuire (SUNY Potsdam) address the challenge of persuading colleagues to participate in upper-division learning communities that feature a student research experience. They describe several strategies, including the use of game theory, where the "prisoner's dilemma" is adapted to become "the faculty dilemma," in an attempt to emphasize the overall benefits of cooperation. In contrast, Julia Spears, Stephanie Zobac, Allison Spillane, and Shannon Thomas adopt an entirely different starting point by describing methods used at Northern Illinois University and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis for marketing learning communities to Generation Z. They document the digital savvy of this generation, which can be leveraged to promote and enroll students in learning communities. However, they also have taken measure of the strong preference of these students for in-person advising, which mandates marketing strategies that draw on technology and personal contact—on Facebook and face-to-face.

All of the *LCRP* contributors reveal the central role of narrative and storytelling—whether quantitative or descriptive or both—in documenting the real impacts of learning communities. *LCRP* clearly plays a role in fostering a common language about our practices even as it serves as a forum for a highly eclectic community of scholars and teachers. Equally important, the journal legitimizes what so many of us already understand, which is that teaching is a form of scholarship.

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