Examining Student Perceptions of Benefits of Participating in Learning Communities at a Public Liberal Arts Institution[1]

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Abstract

A midsize public liberal arts university began a coordinated effort to make learning communities available to freshman in the Fall of 2016. The purpose of our research study was to explore the students' perceptions of the benefits they received by participating in these learning communities. Our goal in conducting this research was to better understand students' impressions of their experiences and then share those findings with the wider university community. While there are many types of assessments that can measure the effectiveness of teach communities, this study specifically focused on what the students' reported. Researchers hope that the results of the study will be useful for the university as they look to grow and further develop learning community courses.

Keywords: Learning Communities, First-Year Experiences, Student perceptions, Cross-curricular learning

1. Introduction

Learning communities have become a staple on many college campuses. Best known for creating a sense of academic community, LC's are often required for freshmen during their first semester of college. Learning communities are implemented in a variety of ways in order to best suit each university's needs. It is important to note the students' perceptions of these LC's in order to ensure that they are being utilized to their fullest potential. The question that this research study sought to answer is "What are students' perceptions of the benefits of participating in a learning community?"

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Learning Communities Defined

Although learning communities have been around for some years now, they have recently become a topic of interest at Midwestern State University. Kellogg (1999) contends that learning communities are not a new educational innovation, but have been in existence for almost 90 years. The history of learning communities began with Alexander Meiklejohn who is said to be one of the main pioneers of learning communities, as he is credited with establishing the famous two-year Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. At this college, students and professors read and compared both classic Greek texts and modern-day American literature. During the summer, students were to make connections between both texts in an essay (Kellogg, 1999, Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Fink and Inkelas write that another key figure in the development of learning communities was the philosopher John Dewey.

John Dewey advocated for students' holistic development and the concept of shared inquiry, and found that learning communities were a way to bridge active engagement and collaboration (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). These learning community pioneers would set the stage for the growth and expansion of learning communities as they are known today. Learning communities have gained wide popularity in college campuses across America. According to Cross (1998) learning communities are "groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning" (p. 4).

Learning communities serve to build a sense of academic community, by strengthening group identity and integrating course content from diverse fields (Kellogg, 1999). Learning communities can be defined as a group of students who have co registered for two or more courses that are taught collaboratively with a minimum of 3 integrated lessons for the purpose of fostering a sense of academic community (Cross, 1998; Schnee, 2014; Brighton & Phelps, 2012; Tinto, 2003).

2.2 Models

Learning communities are implemented in a variety of ways in order to best suit each university. Five major learning community models exist today, although some may be blended together to fit each university's goals (Kellogg, 1999). The linked courses model connects a group of pupils with two courses. One course often covers a content area, while the other is usually an application or current social problems course. (Kellogg 1999; Tinto, 2003). One example of the linked courses model classes would be pairing a freshman writing class and a history course (Tinto, 2003). Courses are normally connected with an overarching theme which promotes interdisciplinary learning (Tinto, 2003). In a similar vein, learning clusters are like linked courses, but instead of offering two paired classes, they pair multiple courses together. (Kellogg, 1999; Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Tinto provides an example of a cluster of courses, with the pairing of political science, US history and a freshman seminar course (Tinto, 2003). Kellogg (1999) writes about the freshman interest group model that combines three first year classes with a central theme. This model differs from the others in that it is often scheduled around academic majors and features a peer advising component in which a peer leader helps the freshman adjust to college and course work (Kellogg, 1999). According to Kellogg, in the coordinated studies model, students and professors alike take courses that are built around an interdisciplinary theme. These courses are often taught in blocks. An example of this can be seen in Evergreen State College with themes such as reflections of nature that combines visual arts, sciences, literature and computer science. Federated learning communities are by far the most complicated model, as students are required to complete "three theme based courses in addition to a three credit seminar taught by a Master Learner" (Kellogg, 1999, p. 4). This master learner is a professor from a different subject who completes the course along with the students, then teaches a seminar where he or she serves as a guide and facilitator of discussions (Kellogg, 1999; Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Although the five models vary in structure and pedagogy, they all share the same principle of community learning.

2.3 What Makes Them Successful

There are several components needed to make learning communities successful. Tinto (2015) writes that the three key elements are 1) shared knowledge, 2) shared knowing and 3) shared responsibility. Shared knowledge helps to foster higher order thinking, as the courses students are taking are not merely random courses, but are carefully selected in order to get the most out of each class. The idea behind shared knowing is that students who are enrolled in courses together get the chance to form relationships with each other both socially and intellectually, and have the opportunity to discuss their ideas amongst each other. Tinto concludes that shared responsibility is the idea that students are to be codependent on each other and that learning is a team effort. In addition, it is important for faculty to discuss with other faculty their syllabi, lesson plans and an assignment for each class in order to ensure each course complements each other (Kellogg, 1999; Tinto, 2015). Careful planning and pedagogy are crucial in making learning communities a successful educational tool.

2.4 What it Affects

Learning communities affect how information is generated. Belenky and her colleagues (1986), found that many women teachers and students demonstrated *ways of knowing* that are different from those of the male model that has dominated academe for so many years. The male model is characterized by what they referred to as *separate learning* which is a way of learning that is impersonal and objective, involving detachment, critical argument, analysis, and other descriptors that are associated with the scientific method. Many women on the other hand are connected learners.

Connected learners search for knowledge is best accomplished through connected conversations "in which each person serves as midwife to each other person's thoughts, and each builds on the other's ideas" (Clinchy, 1990, p. 123 in Cross, 1998, p. 6). Connected conversations are an integral part of learning communities. Students within a learning community should have different attitudes from non-learning community students because these students are engaged in more student and faculty interactions (Bonilla, Buch, & Johnson, 2013). Shared experiences, argues Bonilla et al (2013), should result in shared attitudes.

Learning communities also affect student engagement and interaction. "The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (Astin,1997,p.398 in Doolen& Biddlecombe, 2014, p. 28). Two tenets of student engagement are the amount of time and effort invested by the student and interaction between peers and faculty members (Doolen& Biddlecombe, 2014).

2.5 Barriers

One of the barriers of learning communities is time constraints. It requires ample time to come up with effective syllabi and extracurricular activities (Mendelson, 2006). As a result it may be difficult to find educators willing to participate in Learning Communities. Faculty members are often asked for a multi-year commitment and time must be made for collaboration with those from other disciplines and departments (Janusik & Wolvin, 2007).

A primary challenge for learning communities is the start-up costs. These costs include funds for development, advertising, housing, faculty and staff salaries, recruiting, student activities, and general logistics. Despite studies that have documented benefits of learning communities, another challenge faced is the lack of empirically tested theoretical claims (Janusik & Wolvin, 2007).

2.6 Measurement

One way to measure the learning outcomes of learning communities is to create a model, or assessment specifically focused on student learning outcomes. According to Suskie (2009), learning outcomes are a values statement of what we want students to learn and why. For example, the Department of Residence at Iowa State University used a "programming model based on five learning outcomes: Academic skills, personal skills, understanding and appreciation of differences, leadership skills and civic and community responsibility" (Iowa State University Department of Residence, 2012 in Gansemer-Topf, Tietjen, 2015).

Another form of measurement of the student's perception of learning is to provide participants of learning communities with peer mentors who would be responsible for documenting and reporting their experiences. According to Gansemer-Topf, & Tietjen (2015), peer mentors would document two interactions that they had with learning community participants that directly related to the desired outcomes. Mentors would submit notes to their supervisors from in-person conversations, emails, classroom interactions, or other creative interactions that emphasized a particular outcome.

Developing and using a survey is another form of measurement. A university in southeastern United States created the Evaluating Academic Success Effectively (EASE) survey. According to Bonilla et al., (2013), the survey comprised of a variety of questions built to find out about first year and new transfer student's level of engagement, their attitudes, use of campus services, student behaviors, educational background, and inclusion in first year programs.

3. Methods

The methodology included a 47 question Likert-model student survey that was administered to 5 learning community classes. The survey was tested for reliability by a non-participating LC class prior to being administered. The survey explored both the academic and social benefits that students perceive they receive from participating in the LC. The questions were divided up into 12 domains: Scheduling of Grouped Classes, Class Connections, Attitudes of Professors, Interaction of Faculty Members, Campus Support of Academic and Social Needs, Workload of Paired Classes, Overall Satisfaction with College Experience, Meaningful Friendships in the Classroom, Increase in High Order Thinking Skills, Connecting Ideas across Disciplines, Student Engagement with Peers and Student Engagement in the Classroom. These 12 areas were used to explore the benefits that students perceived in their LC course. From those who were surveyed, a total of 107 surveys were answered. For the semester in question, there were a total of310 students participating in learning communities. The survey return rate was 35%.

4. Findings and Conclusions

Findings are based on the student surveys administered (Appendix 1). Seventy-six percent of students reported that they were unaware of relationships of course content before participating in the learning community (figure1)

**Previously Unaware of Curricular Connections**
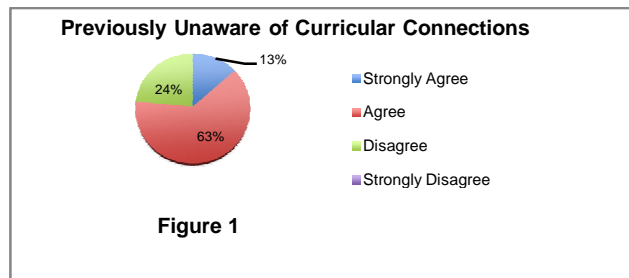
Figure 1

However, 79% indicated that they were able to make connections between the LC classes through coursework that was meaningful and impactful (Figure 2).

**College Experience Improved by LC**

Figure 2
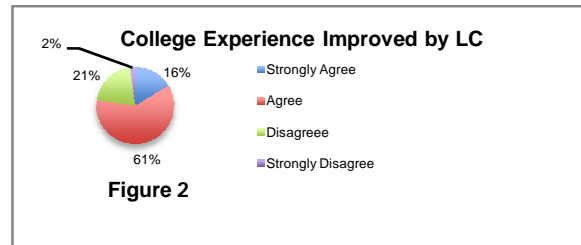
It is interesting to note that close to the same percentage of students went from being unable to see curricular relatedness between courses as those that were able to then understand theconnections as a result of the LC involvement.

Furthermore, a majority of students (77%) reported that in the LC courses they enjoyed working with peers, felt comfortable doing so and felt that it improved their academic performance (Figure 3).

**Higher Order Thinking Skills**

Figure 3
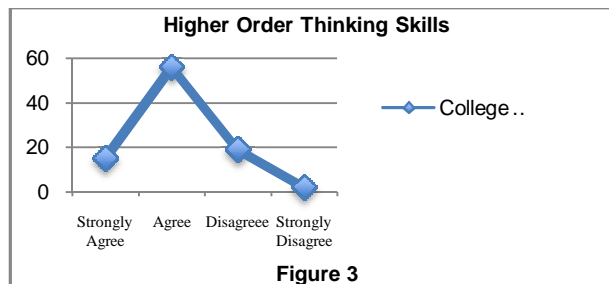
Students also reported that they paid attention in class, participated in class discussions and asked and answered questions regularly. The surveys revealed that students understood the purpose of learning communities, were satisfied with their implementation and looked forward to their learning community courses. These students reported that they were able to make meaningful connections and build relationships with their classmates.

Ninety-two percent of LC students recognized that they were asked to use higher order thinking skills in learning community coursework (Figure 4).

Collaboration and Academic

College Experience Improved by LC

Figure 4
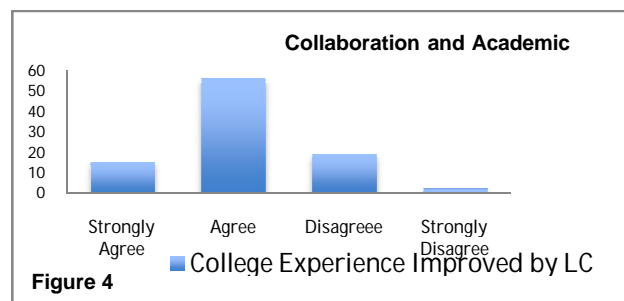
Moreover, it was reported that scheduling was not an issue in the learning communities and the students felt that professors were positive, worked together and were more accessible to them because of the learning community.

According to the surveys, students felt the campus was providing them academic and social support so they might be more successful. While the students did not feel the workload was lighter in the learning community courses, they did feel it was appropriate. Finally, it was noted that over 77% of students believed that their overall college experience was improved as result of participating in a LC (Figure 5).

College Experience Improved by LC

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagreee
- Strongly Disagree

Figure 5
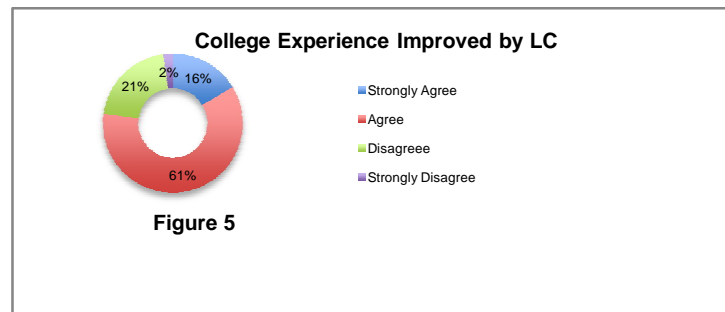
5. *Area for Further Study*

Overall, students' experiences in learning communities were found to be positive and beneficial. The positive perceptions shown above reflect the data that was collected and analyzed from the student surveys. There is still area for exploration in the observation and interview data has recently been collected from the same participant group to better understand the experiences of the students in the minority who did not express the positive perception described above.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1

Student Perceptions of the Benefits of Learning Communities Fall 2016

Place a tick in the column which best expresses how you feel about the following statements.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
1. I would have preferred taking the classes in two different semesters.						
2.The two classes fit my degree plan.						
3. Scheduling (in terms of dates and time) was not a problem for me.						
4.There was an apparent connection made between the two courses in the projects I was given.						
5.There was an apparent connection made between the two courses in the class discussions/ lectures.						
6.There was an apparent connection made between the two courses in the daily activities I completed.						
7.The connection between the two classes was meaningful and impactful.						
8.I was unaware of how the content of the two classes were related before being in a Learning Community.						
9.The professors created their syllabi with thought given to the other professor's syllabus. (i.e. tests were not on the same day, assignments were not due all at once).						
10. Both professors displayed a positive approach to the joint classes.						
11.Professors were willing and able to explain the purpose of the joint classes.						
12.I had more individualized academic interaction with my professor because the course was a Learning Community.						
13.I got to know my professor more because the course was a Learning Community.						
14.My interactions with faculty members were positive overall.						

15. I believe that the Learning Community is a tool that the university offers to support me academically						
16.I believe that the Learning Community is a tool that the university offers me to support me socially.						
17. I felt that the Learning Community helped me to be more successful.						
18. I felt that the Learning Community helped me to integrate socially with the university.						
19.My workload is lighter because of the joint classes.						
20. The workload for the joint courses was just right.						
21.I feel that I have more work in the joint classes than I would have in two separate classes.						
22. I manage my workload better because of how the joint classes are organized.						
23. The amount of group work vs individual work I was given was just right.						
24.I understand why Learning Communities were implemented by my university.						
25.I am satisfied with the way that my university implemented Learning Communities.						
26. Overall, I looked forward to attending my Learning Community each week.						
27.My overall college experience was improved due to the Learning Community.						
28. I have made new friends/acquaintances through Learning Communities.						
29.It was easier to get to know my classmates because of Learning Communities.						
30. I felt comfortable and at ease while working with my group members.						
31. I can see myself hanging out with students/peers from Learning Communities outside of the classroom.						
32.I made meaningful connections/friendships with my peers.						
33.I had to *evaluate* concepts or ideas in order to complete my Learning Community in class activities, assignments and/ or projects.						
34. I had to *analyze* concepts or ideas in order to						

complete my Learning Community in class activities, assignments and/or projects.					
35.I was asked to produce evidences of my learning through projects or assignments in my Learning Community.					
36.My Learning Community promoted interdisciplinary thinking.					
37. I am able to apply information from one class to the other.					
38. The flow of information from one class to the other is natural and easy.					
39. I was able to make connections between the content in both classes on several occasions.					
40. I enjoyed working with my peers and felt as though we were a community of learners.					
41. I did not mind working with my peers.					
42.Working with my peers improved my academic performance.					
43. I paid attention to lectures, activities and classroom discussions each class period.					
44. I felt more comfortable in the classroom because I knew some of the other students.					
45. I answered questions regularly.					
46.I asked questions regularly.					
47. I participated in class discussion regularly.					