

The Challenge of Learning Communities as a Growing National Movement

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Learning communities have become a growing national movement. We estimate that four or five hundred colleges and universities are offering them, and the number continues to increase. LC's are now found in virtually every state, in both public and private colleges and universities, and in a diverse range of institutions. They are strongly present in both two year and four year colleges and universities, and in research universities, comprehensive universities and liberal arts colleges. It's clear that LC's are a broad innovation that addresses a variety of issues, from student retention to promoting curricular coherence, from faculty and institutional revitalization to building engaging general education programs.

On some campuses, the LC effort is very large; on others, it is small. On most campuses, the effort is fragile, even if it has been in place for six or seven years. Although learning communities have a long history on a small scale, the "movement," as a large-scale endeavor, is only about fifteen years old.

At this juncture it's appropriate to ask:

1. How and why learning communities have become so pervasive,
2. What some of the lessons are that we've learned at this point and
3. What challenges this growing national movement faces.

These questions will be the focus of my closing remarks. While addressing these issues I will argue that learning communities are at a critical transition point. On many of the early adopting campuses, they are facing the classic problems of second stage reform efforts, and the movement as a whole is facing challenges as it becomes larger and more diffuse.

How and Why LC Became Pervasive

In raising the question about why LC's have become so pervasive, it's instructive to take a foray into learning community history. I do so not only to acknowledge our predecessors but also because there are important lessons from this early history. Many of the value conflicts we now face in our reform efforts arose in a much earlier time.

Like many reform efforts, this one has numerous roots and branches and a long history of start-up, failure, and rebirth at another time and place. The basic ideas that underlie learning communities are not, in fact, new at all. The roots lie in the 1920's with the establishment of a short-lived program called the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. The program was founded by Alexander Meiklejohn who, along with John Dewey, was a prominent educational leader. Meiklejohn's work focused on higher education and Dewey's on K-12, but they had a common concern about the role of schools in a democratic society and the direction of education in America.

There is now a renaissance of interest in Dewey. His writing about the structure of our classrooms and the ways in which they do or do not reflect the ways students learn resonates with much of the current research on effective learning environments. Both Dewey and Meiklejohn regarded schools as important laboratories for democratic citizenship.

Meiklejohn lived at a time when the elective system became popular and research-focused specialized academic departments were gaining ascendancy. Meiklejohn thought the emerging structure of the research university was becoming antithetical to the task of preparing students for democratic citizenship, a goal which was integral to the very notion of public education. Narrow departments would make it difficult to raise complicated interdisciplinary issues, and the fragmented nature of the curriculum would frustrate teachers who wanted to create a sense of deep engagement and community. He predicted that the university would eventually kill the college.

Meiklejohn saw the division of the curriculum into smaller and smaller units of credit and increasing specialization as critical structural issues that would drive relationships between students and faculty as well as the content of the curriculum. General education would, he predicted, become "someone else's business" or, even worse, no one's business.

Meiklejohn's solution was an interdisciplinary, team-taught two-year lower division curriculum focusing on Democracy. The curriculum was both historical and contemporary, looking at the roots of democracy in fifth century Greece as well as the issues facing 20th century America. The Experimental College tried to explicitly build community and create a seamless interface between the living and learning environment. The pedagogy stressed active learning, seminars, and assignments that asked the students to put the theory they studied into practice, which was a radical notion at the time. Teachers were seen as advisors and facilitators of learning rather than distant authority figures dispensing wisdom from a lectern.

It was not an easy sell. Enrollment was lower than anticipated. The students were often seen as unruly, the teaching method unorthodox. Meiklejohn and the faculty spent much time fighting the values, and power structure of the larger university. Meiklejohn himself became a controversial figure and made a number of political mistakes that alienated him from the powerful faculty in the college of arts and sciences. Despite being a favorite of the new President of the University of Wisconsin, the program faltered and was abandoned after five years. Although it didn't last long, the Experimental College had an enormous impact on its students and recent histories describe it as a high point in the University's history, often referring to it as "Camelot on the Lake."

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The next major chapter in LC history is in the 1960's. This was a period in which the higher education system nearly doubled in size, and the community college system was essentially established across the nation. There were a variety of experiments with structure, faculty and student roles and relationships, curriculum content, and pedagogy. As David Reisman and Gerald Grant point out in their history of this period, most of the reform efforts were modest, what they called "popular reforms efforts." Only a few tried to fundamentally alter the goals and structures of higher education. Cluster colleges were one significant example of a popular reform effort --an attempt to humanize the scale of higher education and promote community by breaking large institutions into smaller units. Many traditional institutions established innovative programs and sub-colleges such as the residential college at Michigan, the Centennial Program at the University of Nebraska, and Fairhaven College at Western Washington University. New colleges were also founded including The Evergreen State College, Hampshire College, the University of California-Santa Cruz, Empire State College, and many others.

Interdisciplinary approaches were an important feature of many of these innovations, but only a few of these innovative institutions significantly altered traditional organizational structures. Many had important internal contradictions from the outset, and they faced substantial compatibility challenges with the rest of the campus as they developed. Throughout this period, there was considerable debate about whether these innovations could scale-up and become cost effective. This issue remained unsettled well into the 1980's.

Very few of these innovative programs survived into the 1990's. For the most part, they operated against the prevailing norms and structures, and on the margins. They also lost their niche, as mainstream institutions picked off many of their innovations, broadly appropriating ideas such as student-centered learning, independent study, writing across the curriculum, active learning, a more relevant curriculum, and interdisciplinary programs.

In terms of learning community history, several of the most important programs in this era were in California. In the mid-1960's the Meiklejohn model was resurrected by a student of Meiklejohn's, Joseph Tussman, at the University of California-Berkeley and at San Jose State College by Merv Cadwallader. In both cases they emulated both the structure and content of the original Meiklejohn democracy curriculum.

Both of these programs were also short-lived but they became seedbeds for future endeavors. Cadwallader carried the idea to a number of other institutions, including The Evergreen State College. Tussman is an important figure in this history because of his eloquent account of the rationale for curricular restructuring in his book *Experiment at Berkeley*. (now reprinted as *The Beleaguered College*). Unfortunately, he made many of the same mistakes Meiklejohn had made 30 years earlier. The model did not seem well suited to a research university. The administration was not unsupportive, but it was difficult to find faculty willing to teach in the program. When the prospects for institutionalizing the program through tenure-track lines dimmed, Tussman lost heart.

But the idea would not die. Learning communities resurfaced with the establishment of a new institution holistically designed around the Meiklejohn-Tussman notions of an integrated curriculum at The Evergreen State College. Evergreen had the advantage of being a brand new institution which could be coherently designed to support interdisciplinary education. And it was.

Meanwhile, a number of institutions on the east coast, notably SUNY Stonybrook and La Guardia Community College, developed adaptations of the learning community idea under the leadership of Roberta Matthews and Patrick Hill. These adaptations made the idea of learning communities applicable to a broader range of institutions, especially research universities and community colleges. The community college link was especially important since they were becoming a significant entry point into college. The involvement of a major research university also brought status and research university leadership to the effort.

Hill and Matthews re-articulated the rationale for learning communities in more modern terms. Patrick Hill, then at SUNY Stonybrook, was particularly eloquent in describing the mismatched expectations between students and faculty in research universities. He was passionate about the growing social and intellectual atomism and the need for community. A serious student of John Dewey's works, Hill joined the argument for curricular restructuring with Dewey's insights about the need to restructure the process of teaching and learning. Hill was also a pragmatist who had a healthy appreciation for the value of experimentation, incremental change, and local adaptations. He tried to develop a learning community model adapted to research universities. At the same time, the idea of learning communities started to flourish in honors networks through the leadership of Faith Gabelnick and John Howarth.

There was a joining of the east and west coast learning community effort when Patrick Hill became provost at Evergreen in 1983. The momentum for learning communities dramatically increased in 1985 with the establishment of the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College under the leadership of Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor. The Washington Center served as a statewide and nationwide dissemination system for the idea of learning communities. It operated in a purposeful way to bring the many different reform efforts --- writing across the curriculum, collaborative learning, learning communities --- -together. It also joined the learning community effort with the robust statewide diversity and assessment initiative. In The Washington Center was important in developing a language about LC's along with a variety of models that could be locally adapted. It was also the first state-funded inter-institutional structure to support innovation in this area, an important milestone in institutionalizing the effort.

In addition to the influence of the Washington Center, a number of other factors contributed to the pervasive reach of the learning community effort in the last decade. The significant research of Vince Tinto, a major figure in the area of student retention, was a critical factor. In the early 1990's, Tinto undertook a major study of the impact of learning communities and collaborative learning. He looked at two very different institutions --the University of Washington and Seattle Central Community College- producing the first in-depth study of two types of learning community--- freshmen interest groups and team taught coordinated studies programs. Focusing on these very different institutions and models was important in assessing the viability of the

idea in different institutional environments and with quite different students and resource requirements.

The results clearly demonstrated learning community effectiveness. Tinto's research painted a complex picture of what highly effective learning environments look like and the many factors that contribute. While his previous work had suggested that "student involvement" was key, the learning community study carefully described how this could be fostered through collaborative learning. The research produced the dramatic insight that involving and academically challenging campus environments could be purposefully built, even on commuter campuses and pretty much within the constraints of current budgets.

About the same time, Alexander Astin's important book, *What Matters in College*, appeared. Between Astin and Tinto, both the dimensions of the problems of undergraduate education and and some solutions were offered. The leadership of people such as Astin, Tinto, John Gardner, Peter Ewell, Carol Schneider, and Pat Cross was very important in spreading the word about LC's, through both their writing and their extensive presentations. Each of them articulated the rationale for learning communities in their own way. They spoke often to very different audiences in academic and student affairs, in research universities and in community colleges. This broadened the reach and re-framed the LC effort in important ways.

Many other factors also contributed to the spread of LC's. The last fifteen years have been a time of broad discussion about teaching and learning. Many powerful pedagogies have emerged on the national landscape: service learning, assessment, writing across the curriculum, inquiry-based approaches to the sciences, multicultural education, collaborative and cooperative learning, and problem-centered learning, to mention just a few. Many of these efforts have been cross-disciplinary, but the disciplines and the disciplinary associations have also started promoting innovations in teaching and learning. It's notable that a number of the recent change initiatives have focused specifically on working within traditional disciplines, for example, the AAHE service learning initiative. Many of these reform efforts have a common aim of promoting active learning, and what has been referred to as "deep learning."

Many innovations fail to develop broad reach simply because they become too intramural, operating on their own track and in isolation of potentially related enterprises. What's notable about the LC effort is that it has often joined forces with these other efforts. Learning communities have provided a broader structural platform for implementing these other powerful pedagogies. This has both deepened the LC pedagogy and aims, and broadened the audience and base of potential allies for the effort. This could go further.

I would be remiss if I did not also say that the interest and support of many different funding agencies such as FIPSE, Pew, Ford, and NSF and especially Title III and IV efforts. National associations such as the American Association for Higher Education, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and the League for Innovation have also supported the movement through continuing threads in their conferences and publications over the last fifteen years. Other more specialized organizations have also carried the torch such as the Freshmen Year Experience Conferences sponsored by the University of South Carolina as well as organizations supporting

work in student affairs. Strategic partnerships have been a key element of LC development and an important dissemination strategy.

Recently regional nodes of leadership have started to emerge beyond Washington state. In the midwest, Delta College in Michigan and William Rainey Harper College in Illinois now jointly sponsor an annual learning community conference that is widely attended. Similar convening campuses are emerging in California at Sonoma State University, Moorpark College and De Anza Community College. This gathering by AACU represents a growing network in the Northeast, which will also soon be hosting a series of campus learning community open houses. An extensive relationship has also been established between some of the urban research universities such as IUPUI, George Mason, Portland State, and Temple University. Early leaders in the movement such as La Guardia Community College remain highly active. A new four year national learning community project at The Evergreen State College funded by Pew Charitable Trusts should substantially deepen and broaden the national dissemination work around learning communities. There's a lot going on...so let me turn now to some of the lessons learned and the challenges of Learning Communities.

The Lessons Learned and the Challenges of Learning Communities

In 1992 Parker Palmer called for a movement for educational reform. In a classic article, "Divided No More," and a later book, *The Courage to Teach*, he argues that we can create communities of learning that reconnect teachers to their students, communities that enable us to live as whole persons with our vocation connected to our spirits. This work resonates with others trying to articulate new visions of community and vocation in the academy. At the same time, there is growing recognition that educational change is a complex business, organizationally and personally. Several new books look at the history of education reform and offer interesting conclusions about what it takes. I'd refer you to Richard Miller's *As if Learning Matters* and David Tyack and Larry Cuban's *Tinkering Toward Utopia*.

The history of learning communities is an evolving story of a movement for improving undergraduate education. It is a story about the power of personal commitments and relationships in building reform efforts. It is also a story about the power of institutional structures, processes, and value systems in shaping our institutions. As we've seen many of the early learning community innovations survived but a few years. Later efforts have been more enduring, but if they do not move to the next stage of development, the movement will eventually run out of steam and not reach its full potential.

There is continuity over time with a number of themes in this learning community history. The themes of democracy, access, and classrooms as community particularly stand out. The importance of active learning and a curricular structure that builds deep engagement for both students and faculty is a persistent message.

Early learning communities dating back to the early 20th century were concerned with the role schools play in preparing students for responsible citizenship. The question "education for what" was at forefront. This influenced not only the content of the curriculum, but also the educational methods and practices. It reflected a clear point of view about the relationship between the larger

society and the academy. Early learning communities were also concerned about access and making higher education available to an ever-greater proportion of the population. Continuing to expand access to higher education was seen as critical to the evolving American experiment with democracy. These were not enclaves for the elite.

Another way to look at this history is to note that across these generations of leaders, we also see dramatically different leadership styles, organizational strategies, and settings.

Learning communities in the latter part of the 20th century are more characterized by collaborative leadership models, models which came in with the feminist movement, the civil rights movements and a variety of wider social and educational reform efforts in the 70's and 80's. There has been a real shift towards movement thinking and community organizing strategies in the contemporary learning community effort. There is a systematic effort to build bridges to related enterprises and to broaden leadership across the movement. Organizationally, the contemporary learning community movement is much more sophisticated. In his book, *As if Learning Matters*, Miller argues that too many reform efforts fail because they rail against the existing structures rather than trying to work with them. In many institutions, the learning community effort has become robust precisely because the organizers have been savvy about working with existing organizational structures and adapting them to their needs.

I want to conclude by raising four challenges. I do so believing that there are ways in which the learning community idea can be made even more powerful in terms of student learning and institutional reform. The four challenges are -

1. The challenge of student learning
2. The challenge of diversity
3. The challenge of institutional change
4. The challenge of purpose

First, The Challenge of Student Learning....

We now know a great deal about student learning. We need to figure out better ways to put this into practice. I think learning communities provide one of the most robust places for this to happen. This goes centrally to the issue of learning community goal and pedagogy, and to issues about how we recruit, reward and retain our faculty, and how we support faculty development. Many faculty are intrigued by learning community theory but have certain anxieties about becoming involved. This anxiety is partly fear of the unknown but it is also a concern about whether they are effective, whether they will work in their fields and whether it fits their own teaching style. Most people want to do well. There are also well felt concerns about just what the learning community effort represents within the institution. How will colleagues view teaching in LC's and how will it be treated when issues like tenure and promotion come up? These are all legitimate questions that deserve an answer.

We know that LC's can be a powerful platform for student learning and faculty development. At the same time, learning communities across the nation are under-investing in the critical faculty development activities needed., and too many learning communities are little more than block

registration devices, with little or no alternation of the teaching and learning environment. Not surprisingly, these LC's do not show dramatic increases in student achievement.

With the imminent retirement of about half of the nation's faculty, this is a very good time to invest in new faculty orientation and development and to rethink the ways in which we support the development of excellent teachers. There is no shortage of good literature and models for doing this. Two excellent resources are John Bransford's new book *How People Learn* and Lionel's Gardner's *Redesigning Higher Education for Dramatic Gains in Student Learning*.

The second challenge is The Challenge of Diversity

This is a multifaceted issue that is partly about who participates in LC's (teachers and faculty), about what the curriculum is, and also about how the teaching and learning environments are structured. We need to continue to assess our efforts in terms of who they actually serve and whether they are actually serving their intended purpose. In my opinion, as a national movement, the rhetoric of LC's is far ahead of the reality in terms of seriously addressing the multiple issues of diversity.

We know that LC's can provide a powerful means of serving an increasingly diverse student population. Learning community approaches, properly constituted, can readily address diverse learning styles. They can be used to dramatically increase student retention, especially among our most vulnerable student populations. Some schools have used them strategically to address the very serious retention issues in gateway courses or parts of the curriculum that are not serving students well. Every school has some of these. Many schools have been emphasizing developmental education since this is an area that is a graveyard for too many students. There are some excellent learning communities explicitly established to support students of color, some around radical collaborations of two and four year colleges such as the Tacoma Community College-Evergreen Tacoma program which has a 90% graduation rate. Learning communities are also an excellent venue for developing a more multicultural curriculum. We've also learned that they will not necessarily attract students of color without a diverse faculty and a curriculum relevant to their needs.

The Third Challenge is around Institutional Change

There are many ways to think about educational reform. As Hyak and Cuban have pointed out in their interesting book, *Tinkering toward Utopia*, education reform is characterized by a naïve rhetoric of enormous progress towards utopia and a reality of small incremental changes. This can breed pessimism. The emotional dimensions of change efforts are important, especially when the goals are long-term. Change agents need to "keep the hope" if the effort is to survive.

Parker Palmer describes how movements develop ways of rewarding people. In the early stages the rewards come from living one's values, from belonging to a community, and from finding a public voice. As movements mature, a more systematic pattern of alternative rewards (must) emerge along with an integration of the movement into the existing organization.

I think we need to think about institutional change in a more comprehensive and long term way. It is not at all unusual for the learning community developmental process to take six or seven or

more years. Thinking in terms of innovation really isn't enough if this effort is to have staying power much less a large impact. Eventually the LC effort must move from being an innovation or an interesting project to being a reform. Being a reform requires structural change, reworking roles and relationships, and generally re-engineering the organization so that learning communities are appropriately supported.

This is an area that needs more serious attention. Across the nation we see persistent weaknesses in terms of leadership structures, resource investments, faculty development, real curriculum integration, and pedagogical change. With the enormous expansion of interest in LC's there has been a loss of focus and quality, and a kind of settling for the lowest common denominator.

Finally, and most important, learning communities face the **challenge of purpose**. Many learning communities begin in a flurry of enthusiasm without clear goals or planning. This is not a bad thing. It's typical of innovations. But if the effort is to last and have a significant impact on an institution, the institution needs to come to a common understanding about why they are doing learning communities and organize appropriately to support them. The question I want to raise about this is whether our vision is large enough.?

Learning communities re-emerged in the last twenty years in a period in which there has been rapid expansion of the higher education system, and a climate of widespread experimentation with new approaches to teaching and learning. At the same time, the education system as a whole has come under increasing public scrutiny. This is a time of rising criticism outside the academy and also a time of growing crisis within the nation's colleges and universities. At no time have the questions "education for what" and "education for whom" been more pressing. At no time has it been more important to look carefully at what we do and be able to document its effectiveness. I think by re-engaging some of these fundamental issues of purpose today's learning communities may find new strength. The learning community effort now stands at a crossroads, both at the institutional level and as a national movement.

If we look back at earlier LC's, it's very clear what they were about. They had big goals in terms of their vision of society and the role of the academy. They saw learning communities as a means for developing the capacity to live in a democratic society. Now, this very issue is being raised again in a variety of ways through the service learning movement, through the multifaceted diversity work, and through the larger national conversation about the direction of higher education. The learning community is poised to be a major player in this conversation. I hope that we can move to the next step with an affirmative commitment to redoubling our efforts.