## Learning Communities: Chaos or Cooperation?

*"Your presence in the class is disruptive and affects the other students!"*
(A teacher's complaint to the teenage Albert Einstein)

A few weeks ago, faculty received a memo from Fred Hinson reminding us that the new Liberal Studies Program "requires the participation of all freshmen in an Academic Learning Community in the Fall Semester 2001." We are told that this is one part of our "aggressive approach to support student success and persistence in the freshman year." As one who has taught in learning communities ever since they were introduced at WCU, let me tell you that this campus is not prepared for what we are likely to experience next fall.

In an earlier Faculty Forum piece, Millie and Malcolm Abel questioned whether the investment in learning communities was worth it in view of the "gang mentality," the "immaturity," the "lack of self-discipline," and the tendency to divert "the focus from the academic to the social." Others have commented on the rudeness, the disorder, and the general lack of common courtesy that they experienced in their learning communities. Furthermore, virtually everyone I have talked to who has taught in these learning communities also complains about class behavior and lack of civility. Imagine what will happen to the academic environment at WCU when every freshman is in one of these learning communities? If you have ever been a substitute teacher in a high school you might have an idea of what to expect.

In spite of these problems, I am optimistic that in the long run we can resolve these issues, enhance the learning and intellectual atmosphere here at WCU, and at the same time improve "persistence," if that is the proper codeword now. But, to be successful, it may require a completely different approach to classroom management on the part of many instructors. My first learning community course was the worst class I ever had. I admit that at first I just pulled out the stops and exerted heavy-handed authority. Soon the class was orderly enough, but for that class I had become another in a string of insignificant adults trying to control them instead of guiding them in the process of learning. However, after making some major changes in my approach, each experience has gotten progressively better. At some point I remembered a story Eliot Wiggington told about the start of the Foxfire approach to education. One day, as a new teacher, he had turned his back on his class to write notes on the board. When he turned around, his lectern was on fire. That got his attention. But he did what I did not do that first time. He stopped his agenda, which after all was not working, and asked the students how they as a class might go about learning to write well and understand literature. The result was the first *Foxfire* magazine, a collection of contemporary poetry and essays by the students about local Appalachian craftspeople, which became the seed for the Foxfire books and the Foxfire approach to education. The key is to get students engaged to the point that they feel some "ownership" of the course--not an easy thing to do.

Before we move further into this venture, I suggest we thoughtfully examine the causes for these classroom behaviors. Usually, freshmen experience an abrupt change from high school to college. They move into a dorm surrounded by strangers whom they see only occasionally. They move from class to class as isolated individuals, not as a group, and professors as a whole seem considerably more formal, distant, and demanding than their high school teachers. Students

eventually develop social bonds outside of class but they rarely have the opportunity to extend these connections in class because their behavioral standards have already been established before the social cohesion occurred. This is the model used by governments and other organizations that want to minimize social resistance and establish their own authority and control. Unfortunately, the result is often indoctrination rather than intellectual inquiry or genuine learning.

The learning community model starts with a social bonding in the dorm that extends throughout the day. The ideal is that the students will engage as a cohort with the intellectual or academic issues of their learning community. What often happens is quite different. As students move from class to class as a social unit, the instructor becomes an outnumbered outsider whose authority can easily be challenged. Even if the student feels the group is misbehaving, peer pressure is extremely powerful and hard to resist. It is easier to have fun. Classroom management then becomes an issue of control or entertainment. Without a change in our approach, we will, in effect, turn our students back into high school students and ourselves into interlopers.

If we really want this experiment with learning communities to work without turning the campus into a struggle for power, we must ask ourselves several fundamental questions: (1) Which is more important--an orderly class that follows our syllabus and class notes or a class where students deeply engage in the process of learning and inquiry into our field of study even if the classroom is somewhat disorderly? (2) Is our idea of paying attention based on a silent reception of information, or are we more interested in a mindful encounter with the core concepts where students often doubt, question, and reframe the sacred cows of our profession? (3) Do we insist that students first master a hierarchy of fundamentals even if they have to memorize them before moving on to more global concepts or do we believe that students learn best by being presented problems in a larger context that need solving or problems whose solution is still problematic? (4) Do we think that the information we have to teach is essentially stable and that our job is to present it or can we introduce the concepts of our disciplines as conditional assertions open to doubt and contextual interpretation? If your answers favor the first part of these questions, then avoid learning communities.

For those of us who are willing to change our ways, a learning community can become one of the most exciting experiences in an academic career. Based on what I have learned from my learning communities, here are some suggestions on how to make it happen. Start the semester by personally engaging individually with students, finding out their background, learning styles, and academic and recreation experiences. This way you defuse the gang spirit. Next, have the class develop its own code of conduct that everyone agrees on and everyone agrees to help enforce. This minimizes the interruptions and side conversations. Then develop a series of learning strategies with the class. Outline briefly the core issues of the course and some of the intellectual problems with these concepts. Then ask the class to come up with how they might best approach and learn these core issues, problems, and concepts. Next ask how they can demonstrate that they have learned this material. Include a project for an outside audience: perhaps an explanation of a confusing principle for a high school class, a video, a field research project--anything that is a real problem not yet solved with a real audience other than you. These projects should take up most of the course time but should employ the concepts learned or available in the texts or manuals. Once every two or three weeks stop and have the class develop (with your guidance) an assessment instrument to evaluate their learning. Then let everyone (including you) take that test and grade one another.

A learning community should be an opportunity for us to learn as well as for our students to learn. If we are learning with them, we are part of their community and they are part of our academic community as well. What more can we hope for?

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