

LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE HUMAN CONDITION

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Two goals of the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity are (a) to prepare students to be active and engaged citizens in a world that has become interconnected, and (b) to create academic excellence in the area of undergraduate education specifically focused on the linking of scholarship and service (O’Connell, 2007). The McMaster School’s specifically configured approach to learning communities has helped advance these goals. McMaster Scholars, undergraduate students who are selected through a competitive process to implement a research project, are required to participate in a learning community structured to promote academic excellence in undergraduate education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The learning community is not a new concept to undergraduate education, but rather a pedagogy that originated at the beginning of the twentieth century in the work of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn. Dewey’s work focused on student-centered approaches to active learning. Meiklejohn contributed the concept of a structured approach, which aligned curriculum with the notion of community (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews and Gabelnick, 2004).

Dewey promoted both active and student-centered learning as social processes that occur in daily activities of school and local communities. He envisioned teachers as collaborators with students in “shared inquiry” and engaged in experiences that develop students’ individual intellectual assets and promote democratic principles necessary for a civil society (Halliburton, 1997).

Meiklejohn and his work with The Experimental College (TEC) at the University of Wisconsin shared Dewey’s concern for education and democracy. He based the framework of The Experimental College on the notion of integrated education, active learning, diversity of learners, and democratic principles. “Learning community” emerged as a term in the process defining TEC within the University of Wisconsin (Smith et al, 2004).

The work of Dewey and Meiklejohn clearly provide the framework for the variety of forms that learning communities take in contemporary higher education. Jaffee (2007) considers the first year seminar or freshman

experience as the most prevalent form of learning community in higher education institutions (HEI). The learning community concept also grounds the practice in many HEIs of linking two or more courses in order to encourage students to become academically and socially integrated during the beginning of the undergraduate experience (Stevenson, Duran, Barrett, and Colarulli, 2006). In addition, the concept has evolved to include a residential component in which members of the learning community share the same residence hall on campus and take certain classes together. Learning communities have a variety of forms and models with varying degrees of faculty collaboration (Stassen, 2003).

The positive outcomes of participation in learning communities, regardless of the model utilized, are well documented in the professional literature (Zha & Kuh, 2003; Stevenson et al, 2006; Stassen, 2003). The benefits or positive outcomes resulting from participation in a learning community include increases in student retention, student engagement, academic achievement, and social development.

ANATOMY OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY

The structure of the Cambodia Learning Community (CLC) within the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity has developed over a period of several years, between 2004 and 2007. The CLC is philosophically grounded in the work of Dewey and Meiklejohn and theoretically grounded in David Kolb's experiential learning theory. The organization and structure of the CLCs have been informed by the work of Smith et al (2004). They



describe effective learning communities in terms of core practices occurring within four dimensions. They define the five core practices of community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflection assessment as vital to the success of learning communities. These learning practices occur within the four dimensions of community: communities of inclusion, communities of collaboration and interdependence, community as a focus of study and learning, and communities of practice for teachers.

The Cambodia Learning Community is grounded in the idea of a safe space where both faculty and students from all disciplines can study, learn, experience, and develop. The goal is for the members of the community to develop [a] “genuine and intimate intellectual acquaintance with one another” (Meiklejohn, 1930). As a component of this intellectual acquaintance, important decisions pertaining to study and learning are determined collaboratively. Democratic process and practice are established during the initial meetings of each new CLC. Faculty and students determine the learning goals, the expected outcomes, and methods for the outcomes to become apparent by the end of the academic year. They also learn about all aspects of traveling between and among different cultures. Faculty and students work together as scholars--undergraduates learn how to conduct research, and faculty have the opportunity to advance their own scholarship.

Because the CLC travels internationally and spends a significant amount of time in country, it is vital that each CLC member understands the rich diversity of the country they are in. Equally important, each member of the community must begin to understand diversity as it applies to the inclusion



of scholars from diverse backgrounds, levels of experience, and roles within the campus community. Diversity, as a core practice, is a common thread through all aspects of the learning community, from recruitment of scholars to the final reflection.

Just as Meiklejohn considered integrated curricula a principal feature, or core practice, of TEC (Smith, 2003), the members of the CLC strive to incorporate a unified view of knowledge from a series of experiences that promote the idea of an integrated curriculum. Faculty and student scholars create new knowledge and relationships based on new experiences and an integration of information from many disciplines. Students and faculty from disciplines as diverse as business management, social work, education, criminal justice, history, and molecular biology find that new knowledge comes not only from the experience of traveling to a location more than halfway around the world, but also from the integration of knowledge from several disciplines.

The integration of knowledge often results from the core practice of active learning. Scholars within the CLC select a research topic aligned to a specific need expressed by our community partners in Cambodia. The research provides the base information needed to construct a project that serves an expressed need. The learning becomes active as the scholars apply their new knowledge to produce a possible solution to a problem that the partner has identified. Education students develop lessons in math and science for undertrained teachers. They use locally available resources and then model the lessons for the teachers. Criminal justice and history students prepare and deliver professional development workshops for counselors at a shelter for victims of domestic violence who live in a culture that has not yet recovered from war and genocide. Business and psychology students work with activists to develop strategies to create alternatives for women working in garment sweatshops. The scholars are engaged in active learning as they use the knowledge of their particular disciplines to contribute to solutions to alleviate human suffering.

The final core practice of the CLC is reflection. Scholars within the CLC are trained in and engage in professional reflection. Through the process of reflection, CLC scholars create new knowledge. Within the process, scholars identify a key experience or event and reflect on the event through the lens of their individual disciplines. Using Schön's (1983) model of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, scholars reflect on the selected event and determine why the event happened, what it means within the context of academic discipline, and what it means for future practice. Prior to traveling to Cambodia, scholars practice this approach to reflection and

continue it throughout the trip. For example, the learning community views a documentary pertaining to genocide in Cambodia during the reign of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979. Individual scholars isolate an event from the film and then reflect from the perspective of their individual disciplines.

The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity, in its commitment to educate students for citizenship in an interconnected world, has embraced the concept of learning communities as an instructional practice that promotes deep learning that can lead to community benefit. McMaster Cambodia Learning Communities integrate intellectual and social growth through intentional interactions between faculty and students; they also continue to advance the creation of new knowledge to improve the human condition.

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