

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?" by Millie and Malcolm Abel, 12/1/00

I was exposed to the Learning Community Concept this semester when I was engaged to teach an introductory sociology class. Although an adjunct instructor, I have taught at several universities and community colleges throughout the United States and Europe and have faced a myriad of institutional methodologies and conceptual class groupings. This semester alone I tackled the responsibility for eight classes, both here at WCU and at the community college.

While not fully aware of the umbrella academic-social ties envisioned by the Learning Community concept at WCU, my experience this semester leads me to support the finding of Professors Millie and Malcolm Abel as outlined in the Faculty Forum, dated December 1, 2000. I strongly support their contention that Learning Community students have a tendency to "quickly divert the focus from the academic to the social" during class discussions.

My classes are purposely structured to invite and promote open discussion, self-expression, and development of thinking processes. They are hands-on based and include numerous small-group exercises. However, I found I spent considerably more time with the Learning Community class returning each small group exercise to the academic subject matter, as opposed to them continuously drifting into individualized discussions of who was doing what with whom outside the classroom.

While I enjoyed the nearly instantaneous openness of the group due to their 24-hour-a-day contact with one another, their lack of maturity in revealing the most intimate details concerning one another's lives in open forum was many times disruptive. Individual personality conflicts that began in social settings found their way into the classroom. Overall, I felt this class was generally more immature, as a collective whole, in their approach to sociological subject matter as compared to my other classes this semester and those I have previously taught.

Based on my experience with a Learning Community class, solely within a classroom environment, I find no viable strength in the Learning Community concept. If the statistical facts do not support improved retention or significant academic achievement, I do not find from my one small sample that financial support for the program is warranted.

Michael Hagan, Department of Anthropology & Sociology

Millie Abel and Malcolm Abel are correct in many of their observations about WCU's first experiments with Learning Communities. One of the initial motivations for exploring learning communities was our university's poor retention rate for freshmen, so it's reasonable that in the first attempts, the emphasis was on "community," perhaps at the expense of academic and learning outcomes. However, that does not have to be the case.

The General Education Review Committee embraced learning communities not as a retention tool but as a means of fostering shared learning--by students, of course, but also by faculty as mentors, demonstrating the lifelong learning process. The Liberal Studies program document consistently uses the term "Academic Learning Community" to intentionally focus on the learning rather than the social part of the community. In an initial attempt to facilitate this emphasis on learning, the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning offered workshops for faculty involved in learning communities to develop learning community-building course activities.

Our experience in Learning Community 3, Society and the Environment, suggests that students can be interested in academic rather than social, community experiences. Purely social interaction opportunities were poorly attended by our group of students, and it was clear that they were skeptical

Responses to "Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?," by Millie and Malcolm Abel, 12/1/00

of the benefit of these activities. However, required academic activities, consisting of field trips to Jackson Paper and Oak Ridge National Laboratories (closely connected to the environmental content of both academic courses) ended up building true community--the kind that happens incidentally from a shared experience--rather than the artificial type forced by an engineered social situation. Scheduling the academic courses back-to-back, with attendance by all instructors at both academic classes, gave us sufficient contact with our students and showed the students our commitment to our shared academic experience (we learned a lot, too!). We also replaced an ineffective student peer mentor with a very capable peer tutor for one of the academic classes, further demonstrating our commitment to their learning experience and providing reinforcement for their academic skills. The result has been a **learning** and **community** experience in which at-risk students have been able to "figure college out" and have met our raised-bar standards. We genuinely believe they are much more well prepared to succeed academically in their undergraduate careers than they were four months ago, and we got there by putting our resources and energy into our academic classes.

We believe the learning community experiment is worth pursuing; it probably needs some further tuning, and we know it takes a lot of work, but it's also fun, and we believe there is potential for success.

Cindy Atterholt, Chemistry & Physics
Scott Philyaw, History
Nory Prochaska, Math & CS

The value of a learning community is not necessarily in retention, or numbers, or in a sundry of other objectives. This past semester, Dr. James Ullmer and I taught a successful learning community. We engaged our students in rigorous work, we held high expectations, and we merged academic and residential life. Will these students return? Will they stay at WCU? If we only look to answer these questions then perhaps we have displaced what we value as educators. If a learning community helps me teach better and enables my students to do rigorous work, if it connects me to other disciplines in the university and helps predispose my students in favor of writing, or economics, or perhaps academic endeavors in general, then isn't there some value in learning communities--beyond retention rates?

April Lewandowski, English