Getting it Together: Learning Communities[1]

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I recall an afternoon in the late sixties at the University of Washington. English faculty and teaching fellows like myself gathered in the department lounge to hear professors defend their practice. A senior professor, striking a heroic pose, said he entered the classroom knowing as much as he possibly could and he conveyed what he knew. Some younger men proposed a more student-centered approach to undergraduate teaching. One said he no longer lectured but

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[1]Chapter 11 *New Paradigms for College Teaching.* 1997. Wm. E. Campbell & Karl A. Smith, Eds. Interaction Book Company.

answered questions if students prepared well enough to ask them. Another young teacher, it was reported, held class in a coffee house. The challengers of the old order were advised to find work in a college of education, and we graduate students in English received the clear message: thinking about how to teach was someone else's work and not so important to us as, say, analyzing enjambment in Pope's couplets.

Happily, things have changed since then. Faculty members at all levels and from all disciplines think about how to teach more effectively. But paradigms don't shift neatly. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault says we see "wrinkles traced for the first time upon the enlightened face of knowledge" before we see the "space of order . . . shattered" and new fields of knowledge and intelligibility emerge from the interstices (pp.238-239). Certainly many of us at the University of Washington believed in change. Anti-war groups occupied buildings; we marched and demonstrated. The Black Students' Union made demands for new curriculum, and the Upward Bound program sought to make college a real possibility for at-risk high school seniors. Protesting the Vietnam war and grades, one professor gave an "A" to anyone who came to class consistently. For a time, an alternative college within the College flourished in the Arts and Sciences. In all the conversations and arguments, however, there seemed no satisfactory new philosophy for teaching or a methodology for changing the classroom. Why not lecture? And if you don't lecture, what will you do? We all remembered uncomfortable hours as undergraduates when a professor set aside a day for answering our questions and there were no questions.

In our new jobs, we became competent lecturers and read Paulo Freire. For many of us in literature, finding, reading, and teaching fiction and poetry by women, by African-American, Native-American, Asian-American, Chicano and Chicana writers changed our own and our

students' relationship to books, to teaching and learning. Teachers assigned books they had not studied in school, students wanted to talk about the books, and often what we—students and teachers—said about them in class constituted a more elaborate critical response to the texts than any to be found in the scholarly literature. And then we began to approach the canon with new questions. It hardly seemed like school.

While Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* had been around since 1962, the implications of it and of the tide of other more non-positivist linguistic and post-Kantian epistemological theories thoroughly unsettled the humanities and social sciences in the seventies. News swept in from various disciplines and from different points in time. We read C. S. Peirce, Ferdinand Saussure, L. S. Vygotsky, and Ludwig Wittgenstein; we grappled with those Frenchmen and Frenchwomen—Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Michel Foucault; and we appreciated fresh applications and critiques such as Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Clifford Geertz's *Local Knowledge*, and Stanley Fish's always lucid elucidations. (The list goes on and on.) It was language, language, everywhere. From a world out there to be known empirically and represented unproblematically in language, we moved to a world conceptualized and made intelligible in language. We are not entirely sure how this world corresponds with the out there. Frederick Jameson fancied it a prison-house of language; others imagined possibilities. That is, if we understand that eternal Truth will not show itself and that human beings decide what counts as true, then we are more rather than less accountable. What people decide is true may change in time and may vary according to context, but this does not mean that any account of the world (or a novel, or basketball game) is as good as any other. Rather, the account is made within a

community (a scientific society, a literature class, a group of friends), and communities share standards for making and judging accounts.

For many, the shift in epistemological paradigms gave a more theoretical ground to what we thought should—and did—occur in a classroom. What Freire calls the banking model of teaching and learning seemed even more bankrupt; we no longer supposed our business was to know the world and to make small deposits of that knowledge in our students. To understand knowledge as not simply discovered, stored, conveyed, or analyzed, but made, shared, and evaluated, meant teaching is less about simply conveying information and more about providing the time and space for students to practice making, sharing, and evaluating knowledge. We could envision students talking, as if on the edge of the world as it turns into the morning sun and every moment was a breaking into daylight. Still, new theories, revolutionary intentions, and inspiring metaphors do not guarantee classes that work the way we envision them. We experimented with new pedagogies but rarely came together to discuss practice, and for students, even the best set of engaging classes still added up to a fragmented jumble of unrelated experiences.

In 1984, some fifteen years after the meeting in the UW English lounge, faculty and administrators from many Washington schools met at the University to talk about teaching and learning. We talked about how to improve the quality of undergraduate education—how to make the classes more collaborative, how to make the curriculum more coherent. This was the first meeting of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. Now, ten years later, state-supported, based at The Evergreen State College, and committed to making learning communities an important part of the college curriculum, the Center is a consortium of

forty-six colleges and universities which sponsors planning retreats, workshops, small to very large conferences, faculty exchanges, and manages an enormous supply of books, articles, and pamphlets about collaborative and interdisciplinary teaching, learning, and assessment, many written by the Center staff or members.

Here and across the nation, plenty of alternatives to the banking model of learning have been articulated. Many books and articles have discussed the connection between the theory of the social construction of knowledge and the practice of collaborative learning. For faculty members unconvinced by social constructionists, there are many reports and studies of successful practice. Math and science faculty have been persuaded to restructure their classes by Uri Treisman's collaborative schemes for promoting academic success among African-American and Hispanic students in the math department at Berkeley and by other models for problem-based collaborative study in medical schools. Hundreds of teachers have developed successful active and collaborative classroom methods. People who want to change the way they teach have excellent resources—books like this one!

Certainly part of our professional satisfaction these days follows from the emphasis on active and collaborative teaching and learning. For a young teacher, abandoning the lecture as the primary teaching tool may mean giving up researching, writing, and rewriting several elaborate, wit-adorned lectures a week. For the older professor, it may mean giving up a trusted series of lectures, typewritten, the paper fading to yellow. No more revving up for and coming down from a performance each hour. Instead, professors now can confidently adopt any number of active and collaborative classroom methods so that rather than simply listening to a lecture, students learn while actively engaged with each other. We consider ways for helping students in

an anthropology class to grasp concepts such as anomie, or to comprehend the social world of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in an English literature survey, or, in political economy, to distinguish between the Marxian and the Hegelian dialectic. Part of the fun is figuring out what to have the students do, inventing a collaborative process which will help them gain information, skills, and concepts. Our own understanding of the subject often deepens as we think up the collaborative assignment, and, more often than not, when they do the assignment, students exceed our expectations. Their research turns up unexpected facts. Their discussions generate insights we did not anticipate. Their inventiveness bowls us over. People passing in the hall notice the energetic hum of the class. Over the course of a quarter or semester, almost any class engaged in collaborative work may come to feel like a community, and the term "learning community" has been used to refer to several kinds of innovative classrooms.

However, in this chapter, we mean something more when I use the term "learning community." First, we mean, in addition to active and collaborative classroom methods, a curricular structure which includes a collaboration among teachers. (Dreaming up collaborative tasks is fun but dreaming them up with colleagues is really the ticket.) Second, we mean a structure that addresses the issue of curricular coherence by purposeful links among courses in different disciplines. For us, then, a learning community is a course of study designed by two or more faculty which includes work in different disciplines integrated around a particular issue or theme. The Washington Center recently compiled a directory of well over one hundred two- and four-year colleges offering such learning communities.

We argue that even if we change the pedagogy of a course in, say, the English Romantic poets from lecture to a most varied and successful sequence of collaborative activities, and even

though students demonstrate their knowledge in brilliant research papers, lively discussion groups, in parodies, in illuminated manuscripts, in staged Meeting of the Minds where they assume the roles of different poets, in student-created exams (usually harder than any we would dare set)—still, it is English 313. There it is, a tidy box-full as noted in the course catalogue and stored in the closet where students put their college experience—Psych 101 top shelf to the right, Japanese Drama second shelf in the back. Learning communities, as we use the term, assume that the human construction of knowledge may be vast and complex, a finally indescribable cathedral with zillions of parts, with vaults, buttresses and dazzling windows, amazing in its aspects but connected, linked, and, if not available to anyone in its totality, still not itself offerable in several hundred, or million, tidy boxes for easy storage.

Interdisciplinary studies lets the knowledge out of the boxes, so that students set to building connections, buttresses, windows. The box of English romantic poets might be integrated with the contents of any number of history boxes: e.g. the industrial revolution, the rise of the working class, or the French revolution. Students in environmental studies could stand to read the romantic poets, too, and so could students in an art class. We can imagine integrating the romantic poets in various ways to explore particular issues: What is a revolution? What is the nature of nature? What the use of the human imagination? Coherent, thematic, interdisciplinary programs of study are more likely to shape how a student lives, how she thinks, how she understands, how she addresses issues. What students take away from such a program cannot be boxed up.

Integrating courses is not a new idea. One of the early proponents was Alexander Meiklejohn, who established a short-lived Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin

in 1927.[2] Because he believed liberal education prepares people for participation in a democracy and because he thought delivering knowledge in discrete courses in many disciplines tends to hobble it, he wanted undergraduates to discuss issues rather than take courses. Certainly, a student with a closet full of courses may have only the patchiest way to use them in thinking about real world demands and issues. A thematic integration, on the other hand, can show students different ways to analyze the death of marshlands and thus to determine how best to avert it, different ways to approach and interpret Machiavelli's *The Prince* and thus to understand its import, different ways to weigh the effects of drug legislation and thus what to urge. The Meiklejohn education stresses the connection between school learning and "real life" so that long before graduate school, students puts knowledge to work.

During the sixties there was a rush to interdisciplinary team-taught courses, but institutions finally couldn't sustain the cost of two faculty members teaching one course. Experimental colleges with interdisciplinary curricula flourished, then faded. Large, departmentalized institutions driven by the three-course quarter or the five-course semester remain the rule. At such an institution, SUNY Stony Brook, Patrick Hill pioneered learning communities in the 1970's. He explains his motives for restructuring curriculum by telling this story about an undergraduate:

> She was taking a course in behaviorism from 10:00 to 1:00 and a course in existentialism from 1:00 to 4:00. And she was pulling A's in both courses. In the behaviorism course—this was pure Skinner—she was learning about the .67

[2]Toby Fulwiler, co-author of Chapter 3, began his teaching career as an instructor in the Integrated Studies Program at UW-Madison—the successor to Meiklejohn's Experimental College, itself short-lived.

predictability of human behavior and of the illusory character of consciousness and intentions and certainly of their insignificance in explaining human behavior. In the philosophy course, which was focused on the early Sartre, she was learning that we are ultimately free, even to the point of being able to define the meaning of our pasts.

I asked her which course was right. She said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "If you had to choose between the two courses, which one would you choose?" She said, "I like the psychology teacher better."

I said, "That's not what I'm asking. Which one is correct? Which one is correct about the nature of our human being?" And she said, "I'm getting A's in both courses." ("The Rationale for Learning Communities," pp. 3-4)

In response to what he describes as the "atomization of the curriculum" and the "privatization of academic experience," Hill and his colleagues proposed integrated programs which give time for students and teachers to explore not only connections but profound differences in assumptions and methods within and among disciplines. They sought ways to help students to a "common intellectual language" and to exploration of personal values and "life's basic truth."

They developed the Federated Learning Community. Basically, the model included a seminar once a week for a group of students all registered in three courses carefully selected by the planners. The courses would not only link thematically, but would include provocative disciplinary approaches to the issue at hand. The FLC titled "Technology, Values and Society," for instance, included classes in philosophy, history and engineering. Further, a faculty member, freed from his regular teaching responsibilities, traveled to classes along with the students and

lead the weekly seminar. There, students could elaborate on the connections they found among the concepts, assumptions, viewpoints, and facts presented in the various courses. The faculty member had the title "Master Learner" and undertook to learn what the students learned, to write papers when the students wrote papers. Sometimes this was a challenge, as when an English teacher studied calculus. She sought help from mathematically more gifted students, which seemed fair exchange for her support in their essay writing. Furthermore, the teacher/master learner relearned the art of being a student, such as the difficulty of sitting through hours of lecture everyday, tuning out but taking notes. Out of this experience, master learners could provide feedback about pedagogy for their colleagues teaching the three courses.

In the current move for reform, schools have adapted this learning community model in ways that faculty at almost any institution could duplicate. One handy structure links a skills course, perhaps English 101, to a content course. That is, students who sign up for the English course are required to sign up for the content course also. To accomplish a link, an English teacher and, say, an anthropology teacher, meet and discuss just how to organize it. They may visit each others classes, and if there are faculty development resources, teachers may get release time to attend each other's classes for a whole quarter. The two teachers then plan their linked courses to make the best fit. Since anthropology classes usually carry a higher enrollment than composition classes, there may be students in the anthropology class that are not enrolled in the linked English class so the anthropology teacher may feel less free to reorganize than the English teacher. The two teachers work it out. Together they plan a new and improved course of study for the students in the link.

Linking makes teaching more collegial. Teaching with someone else gives rise to more talk during the quarter—about the progress of the courses, about what needs changing, about the students we have in common, about how we teach, and about what we teach. For young faculty and for old hands, a great pleasure in learning communities is learning from each other. As one teacher noted, he is now getting an education he missed the first time around. Faculty members who may not otherwise even meet become friends.

The link offers students a coherent program, enhancing learning in both courses. The English class may work as an extraordinary study group for anthropology, and, rather than seeming like a tedious requirement, the critical thinking and writing skills in composition can have a direct application and benefit as students tackle anthropology issues and assignments. Further, talking and writing in the English class gives students occasions to discuss the complementarity, the overlapping, or the friction between the disciplines. Terms taken for granted when writing "My Family" for English may be put into question when used in anthropology class. "Objectivity" may be one thing in English and another in anthro. Students see what can arise at the edges as ways of thinking come in contact; they see wonderment and disagreement and new ideas sprouting in the interstices. Often astounded that teachers don't always agree, students realize they themselves must discern, think critically, and make judgements. They come to see their learning, their knowledge, as their responsibility. All around, there is a keener investment in teaching and learning supported by the sense of community as students and teachers collaborate.

Several schools offer variations on this model. At Centralia Community College, for instance, in an ethics/political science link, one day each week is for seminar. The two teachers

and the students meet together for the full two hours. During the week, the teachers include work that prepares students to discuss issues that cut across the courses, but in seminar, they give students the responsibility for the discussion. Taking this responsibility is part of the students' learning, and helping them to take it, part of the teaching. Because both teachers join the seminar, students often observe civil disagreement first hand and sometimes for the first time.

Since 1979, students taking a liberal arts AA degree at LaGuardia Community College take the first quarter of English composition in a three-way link called a cluster. Along with composition, students take a course in the research paper, two other courses from science, social science, or the arts, and an integrating seminar hour. For instance, the cluster "Freedom and Seeing" includes composition, research paper writing, introduction to philosophy and introduction to art. "Work, Labor and Business in American Literature" includes the English courses, an introduction to sociology, and a humanities course. At LaGuardia, the same students enroll in all of the classes. This allows the faculty members to rewrite their syllabi in order to pursue themes, to sequence presentations, and to give assignments that make teaching and learning in the cluster more coherent. The composition class also takes on aspects of an integrating seminar where students discuss and write about the material they cover in the other classes. Further, as the cluster often occurs in a student's first semester of school, a freshman has, at the outset, the support of this small group of students and faculty who come to know each other well.

Some learning communities link courses and students but not necessarily faculty. At the University of Oregon and at the University of Washington, a freshman may sign up for a FIG, a Freshman Interest Group. FIG's are clusters adapted for a university and were invented at

Oregon by advisers who appreciate just how alienating the freshman year can be. Rather than leaving entering students to flounder in the huge course catalogue, advisers pre-assemble sensible programs of study and invite students during the summer before their freshman year to select one. A student may choose one of many FIGs, depending on her special interest. For instance, a student with an eye to architecture might enroll in a FIG which includes a survey of the visual arts, landscape, environment and culture, and English composition. A comparative culture link, "Eastern and Western Traditions," offers the literature and culture of ancient and classical China, the history of the ancient world, and English composition. "Ecosystems" includes forest and society, composition and a survey of oceanography.

Although two hundred students may attend some of these classes, the band of twenty-five FIG students moves together through the same schedule of courses and then meets once a week with a peer advisor. These meetings do not proceed as integrating seminars. Rather, peer advisors keep to a fairly strict schedule of projects and assignments ranging from guests or faculty preceptors speaking about work in the field to written reflections on the quarter's work. Writing links tend to make FIG's more integrative, but their primary goal is to help students in their first quarter establish a community in an academic context. Indeed, students love FIG's and so do the peer advisors. Each year more are offered—sixty at UW for fall 1996. The universities do not require extended conversation among the faculty or among the faculty and students. The structure invites it, however, and these conversations do occur.

While Hill pioneered learning communities on the east coast, on the west coast a Meiklejohn-inspired experimental college at Berkeley flourished, and then disappeared in the late sixties. The Evergreen State College in Washington took up the work, accepting its first 1,000

students in 1971. Richard Jones writes that the eighteen founding faculty at Evergreen read Joseph Tussman's *Experiment at Berkeley* and were most influenced by the

> *pedagogical* innovation which [Tussman and Meiklejohn] introduced in order to achieve their curricular objectives: substituting for the traditional format of separate teachers, teaching separate courses, in separated blocks of time, to separate students (who are separately combining different assortments of courses), a format in which *a team of teachers teach the same group of students, who are all studying the same things at the same time, over a prolonged period*. (p. 22)

Evergreen still holds to this model of a learning community. The college does not have typical departments and has few "regular" courses. Instead, professors deliver the curriculum in interdisciplinary programs, called "coordinated studies," taught by faculty teams drawn from different disciplines. Each team plans an organized course of study which constitutes for a large group of students their whole schedule, sometimes for a quarter or two, sometimes for a whole year. In the learning communities described earlier, faculty members may have two or more other teaching commitments, and the time given to the planning and tracking a learning community may seem an addition to a routine teaching load. At Evergreen, the learning community comprises the students' and the teachers' full load.

Faculty have responsibility and latitude in establishing the curriculum. They plan and staff standard programs such as "Molecule to Organism" designed for students who will go on to pre-med or to graduate school in life science. This program includes human physiology, cellular and molecular biology, and organic chemistry and bio-chemistry. "Human Development" usually includes anthropology, psychology, and the biology of human development and is designed for

students going on in psychological and social services. Within each of these and other standard programs, a faculty team may further develop an integrating theme. For instance, the upcoming "Molecule to Organism" will focus on the biology and chemistry of food, the "Vital Stuff." Whatever the focus or particular theme, the students get solid disciplinary work.

Faculty teams may also organize programs in response to current issues. For instance, a teaching team is now preparing "The Millennium: On the Brink of the New Age" for 1997. The year-long program will question claims made by Robert D. Kaplan and others (e.g. in the controversial *Atlantic* article, "The Coming Anarchy") that the categories and political structures of the nation state are crumbling while others—ethnic, cultural, and religious—are emerging. Unrest in several parts of the world, Kaplan explains, follows from the tension between the dying nation state and the emerging power structures. The central questions for "The Millennium" include: is the nation state really crumbling? Are we in a time of tension between political structures? Is it accurate to say that emergent forces cause the unrest and hatred?

To address such questions, the learning community will undertake case studies including the Balkans, India, and the Middle East. The traditional frameworks of the disciplines will provide methodology and concepts. Naturally, history will be taught, and to evaluate claims that the unrest is created by centuries old ethnic hatred, it will be important to do ethnography. Further, to evaluate disciplinary answers to the core questions, it will be important to understand discipline based bias. Therefore, students will study not only history but the methods and assumptions of history, not only ethnographies but what it means to do an ethnography. If "culture" is named the culprit, one question will be, What is contained in the category "culture"—anything that could provoke this degree of hatred? Thus, "Millennium" and other

strong coordinated studies programs explore the interesting tensions between their organizing core questions and the assumptions, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies of the disciplines. Getting ready for programs like "The Millennium" requires no small amount of preparation. In order to deepen and build on the study she does for it, the anthropology teacher will next year join a program centered on the full range of Mediterranean cultures and histories, and after that, one centered on the Balkans themselves. She spent her sabbatical traveling in the Mediterranean last year and has decided that preparing herself for these programs requires her speaking and reading modern Greek, and so she will study modern Greek. It is she says, read, research and teach, research and teach.

Most faculty at Evergreen hold steady to teaching in the discipline they studied in graduate school, though often their expertise not only expands within their own fields but extends to others. A political scientist may first learn about plays written by Camus in one program, may read more in and about Camus, and may come to value how the dramas express ideas he believes students should explore. When planning programs in the next few years, he may suggest they read Camus and offer to take primary responsibility for presentations on his work. Sometimes a faculty member's major interest changes. An historian of 19th century America has become a competent naturalist; a biologist who once researched the inner ear mechanisms which keep fish swimming upright now researches in two other areas: on the one hand, the mechanism of acupuncture and Jin Shin Jyutsu, a Japanese form of acupressure, and on the other, the geometrical proportions and numerology used by people laying out and constructing Gothic cathedrals.

In the past ten years, colleges connected to the Evergreen-based Washington Center consortium have enthusiastically experimented with several kinds of learning communities. Many have found ways to include even the radical structure of the Evergreen coordinated studies program in institutions organized by traditional courses. The key has been to adapt. Because students who finish a coordinated studies program at Seattle Central Community College, for instance, will receive standard college credits for a set of courses, the responsibility of each teacher is to include within the coordinated studies program an amount and a kind of work which meets the expectations of a course in her discipline. If the learning community offers Anthropology 120, English 102, and History 230, the fundamentals of those courses must be part of the program. Teachers assess what is most important, what is absolutely essential for the students to learn. Some teachers consult those who teach the next course in a sequence. Others, often in conversations with their team, interrogate their disciplinary knowledge: what are the basic assumptions, how do they differ from assumptions in other fields, what fundamental concepts, terms, skills must students at this level learn? Through this process, even science teachers have discovered that "essential" is not the same as everything in a 600-page textbook.

Planning a fully integrated learning community may seem unfamiliar to young faculty and even unsettling for experienced teachers. Experienced teachers enter class on the first day, year after year, with a smile because they come with a tried and true syllabus. It includes a sequence of topics, a selection of texts, the timing of artfully worded assignments (all on disk—at one time on ditto masters), models for the mid-term and final, dates for those delicious points to made in one or another already written lecture, afternoons for specific workshops, research trips, and films. All in all, the subject, whatever it is—politics in ancient Greece, intro to sociology, or the

literature of emerging nations—takes the shape of this course, fitted to the teacher's special strengths. (Many of us talk about our educations as a collection of such artifacts: "Howells's Joyce ," "Baenan's cultural anthropology," and "Costigan's English history.") In an integrated learning community, what we teach occurs in a new context, different lights shine on it. We see it differently, often afresh. To prepare for teaching in a learning community, most teachers read more, often much more, within their own fields and outside of it. We venture out from what we know through and through. We may take some treasures from our old Sociology 110 or English 263 and transform them. Moving out of a time-honored syllabus to a fully integrated learning community may feel like space travel—no gravity, some queasiness.

The intrepid team plans on, with confidence in their disciplinary knowledge and pedagogic know-how, to shape a term of study for a group of about seventy-five students. The curriculum for the learning community can include lectures, workshops, lab time, seminars, computer time and training, guest speakers, field trips, films, music, student presentations, peer editing, several kinds of group work and group assignments, exams, papers, portfolios, and self evaluations. This list does not exhaust the possibilities.

For many program activities—lectures, presentations, films, and field trips, for instance—the students and teachers all meet together. At other times students work in smaller groups. A central piece of a program based on the Evergreen model is the book seminar. Twice a week for two hours students divide in groups of twenty to twenty-five and, along with one of the teachers, meet to discuss the book at hand. Meiklejohn considered great books the center of a liberal education, and while not every book we choose is "great," we build coordinated programs around texts, primary texts, significant texts, but not textbooks. Usually the books are chosen

because they help develop the theme of the program, but sometimes program themes arise because people want passionately to use certain books. Usually, seminars cover one book a week, and the selection of the books is critical because they carry much of the program content. This routine seems familiar to a literature teacher for whom content often is the great book—Shakespeare's plays, a novel by Eliot, Douglass's autobiography, and so on. It seems less routine for an anthropologist to assign the *Mismeasure of Man*, or *Tristes Tropiques* rather than a textbook. During the quarter, often one of the faculty will give a preparatory lecture before a book is discussed, but the main work of learning from the text and about the text, of making connections between the text and other parts of the program, occurs in the students' seminar discussions. Many faculty find helping students develop rich, productive seminars the hardest work of the program but also the most rewarding.

Michael Oakeshott proposes we think of different fields of endeavor and inquiry as a "variety of distinct languages of understanding." We think of these languages as a variety of voices, he says,

> each the expression of a distinct and conditional understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of the culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could only be joined, in conversation—an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all. And perhaps we may recognize liberal learning as, above all else, an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to

> recognize the voices; to distinguish their different modes of utterance, to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversational relationship and thus make our *debut dans la vie humaine*. (p. 39)

While an entire learning community constitutes such a conversation, the seminar, the integrating seminar or the book seminar, offers the time and space for a more intense apprenticeship. In seminar, students sometimes discuss the tough, transcendent, often inflammatory issues, in ways that, frankly, make their occasion the best thing in life and give faculty hope for the human race.

The seminar structure in coordinated studies and in other learning community models also has implications for assessment and evaluation. That is, teachers in stand-alone classes note the progress there of, perhaps, ninety or more students in a quarter or semester. A history teacher may have no idea how a particular student is faring in anthropology or math because students don't bother him about problems in other courses, don't mention dropping calculus half-way through the quarter. The teacher probably thinks an adviser keeps track. Teachers in learning communities do better because they routinely talk a lot about students, and students do report in more.

In learning communities each faculty member gets to know each student in the program, but the closest and richest contact between student and teacher is through the seminar. The twenty-five students in a seminar usually stay together for the quarter or semester, usually with the same teacher who evaluates the students' seminar work and who reads and comments on the students' writing. Further, since she attends the lectures they attend, sees the films, and participates in workshops, she keeps track of their work in the whole program, that is, in all of their school work. She understands how each student is confronting and integrating the material.

At the end of a quarter at Evergreen, each teacher writes a lengthy narrative evaluation of each student in the seminar, and each student writes a narrative self-evaluation. Teacher and student discuss these evaluations in conference. At other Washington colleges, we give grades, but we adapt the narrative evaluation process because it has been so powerful for students. Students are sometimes stunned by the attention, by being taken so seriously—as the teacher notes, for instance, the student's curiosity, his ironic approach to the officially significant, his quickness at seeing unlikely connections, his precise and methodical lab work, his particularly lucid explanations during discussion, his trouble with commas, and/or his self-deprecating attitude when making presentations. Ultimately, a student keeps track of himself, but the close contact between students and teachers in learning communities gives the student tremendous support. He gains confidence in reflecting on his own intellectual capabilities, assessing his own accomplishments, and setting himself new goals. Links, clusters, FIGs, and CSP's all help students take responsibility for their own learning.

If these boundary-crossing learning communities seem intriguing and you would like to be involved, find out what is happening on your own campus. Learning communities often appear in honors programs or programs for freshman. General education requirements may be integrated. Certain curricula—women's studies, for instance—may include integrated studies or course-linking structures. Often communication courses, such as writing and speech, are linked to courses in other disciplines.

And remember, it is possible to start from scratch. Talk to someone you would like to teach with. (At Evergreen faculty members are free to "date." They say, "I'd like to teach with you sometime.") Choose your likely colleague or colleagues carefully. Usually, programs arise

from shared interests or from friendship, one usually preceding the other. At Seattle Central, all faculty members who want to teach in coordinated studies attend an annual retreat. Approached by a historian to work in a program about the changing lives of women after World War II, a new English teacher might have to make a quick decision: to join or not to join. It depends on her own interest and strength in the period, her information about the historian, and her assessment of the program's possibilities. She may be persuaded when she suggests that students do oral histories and the historian agrees. After initial discussion, they begin planning, along with, say, an art historian or a sociologist. They learn about each others' styles, they see where their work complements, they draw on unexpected resources of experiences and knowledge, and they may build the program nicely.

On the other hand, things can go wrong. For reasons foreseen and unforeseen, some people are not able to work together, and we learn this by trying. There are many ways to start a learning community. Think about your interests, think about likely colleagues, and give yourself time to get ready.

At schools which offer learning communities, the logistics of time, space, and registration have been worked out, but if you are just starting, remember to handle the logistics well before the quarter begins. Assuming you want to schedule a linked course with another teacher, the simplest way is to schedule the two classes in succeeding hours, e.g. composition at nine and oceanography at ten. (We don't advise, though, scheduling all the courses in a cluster one after the other.) The necessary information and instructions for the students must be in the college schedule. You will want to enlist the help of advisers so that students actually enroll. We have found that enthusiastic advising makes a huge difference in successful learning community

enrollments. Enlisting the support and administrative savvy of a person with formal administrative authority (a Division Chairperson, an Associate Dean, or the Office of the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Affairs) can often help you through the administrative maze.

You may propose an even more integrated link, scheduling a two hour block with double the number of students and team teaching both hours. (If the standard enrollment for oceanography, however, exceeds that for English, the faculty/student ratio would drop and incur some added expense.) You would gain tremendous latitude in planning and organizing the program. The two hour stretch may be spent on a single activity. You have options such as a long film, a nicely organized lecture/workshop on a particular topic, a panel of guests, a book seminar, or lab. Note that you will need one larger space for all the students to meet together and two smaller spaces for students to meet in seminar. Basically, this is also how we schedule large coordinated studies programs: in large blocks of time and with room assignments such that students can meet altogether at some times and in separate seminars at others.

We stress that administrative support is essential. If the head of the earth sciences department seems skeptical, for instance, see if the chairperson of English is more sympathetic. A Dean makes an excellent ally. Administrators have been more supportive if the learning community helps address an explicit need or problem on the campus, by helping freshman succeed in their first term, for instance, by enabling students to build coherence in their general education course work, by strengthening writing across the curriculum, or by deepening faculty development.

Learning communities may also address very specific local problems. It may be that nursing students have trouble with the mathematics required in chemistry. By linking

mathematics and chemistry, the teachers can work together on how to enable the students to think algebraically. Attaching a study skills class may solve the problem of high attrition in a biology class or in world civilization. If ESL students have difficulty following the specialized terminology of a course, a developmental English course may be linked to it. In such an arrangement an anthropologist may discover his illustrative examples are simply baffling because culture-bound. Integrating lower division courses can also help students make better career decisions. Rather than simply fulfilling distribution or general education requirements, an integrated program may provide students with a platform, a clearer sense of what it means to be a environmental scientist, a psychologist, or a politician.

It is important to know that links, FIG's, and coordinated studies have all made a difference in student retention. Vincent Tinto, retention guru, reports that students in learning communities not only persist in greater numbers than students in regular classes, but that learning communities make a significant difference in students' motivation and engagement with the academic enterprise. Other studies suggest that learning community alumni have higher GPA's and graduate at a higher rate. Generally, learning communities promote a sense of community that can make all the difference for many urban, commuter students. They provide rich opportunities for the interactions among teachers and students which Alexander A. Astin's studies show make the most difference in a student's learning and development.

The sense of community can make all the difference for teachers, too. For a young faculty member, observing old hands at work can help her find her particular style and voice, can help her build her own collection of effective teaching tools. Even experienced teachers have revolutionized their practice after a quarter in a learning community. Others have refined their

practice, picking up subtle things they see their colleagues try: suggesting students set a goal at the beginning of a seminar, placing things in a visual order on the blackboard rather than hither and yon, or having students write about what they do not understand in math class. Unlike the guarded atmosphere generated in competitive scholarly research, within a teaching team, within an institution, and even among institutions nation-wide, learning community faculty have a buoyant sense of shared enterprise.

We caution you that teaching in learning communities means work. At the outset it may seem less work because other people share the responsibility for planning, lecturing, Xeroxing, and so on. You may not need to learn modern Greek, but preparing and planning takes time. Collaborative teaching may be exhilarating, but it can also be frustrating and time consuming. You may lecture less, but lectures in learning communities often entail unexpected research because teachers get big, new ideas, modeling the kind of inquiry and synthesis they expect of students. After years of repeating the same courses, insulated in departments, classrooms, and research, teachers who take up learning communities find themselves exhausted (and excited) by teaching and learning with each other in a multi-disciplinary collaborative environment. Yet, learning communities have revitalized lots of ground-down, demoralized teachers.

Because learning communities are exciting and time-consuming, be careful. If your future depends on your spending time in another way, don't undertake them. Also, do not undertake learning communities if your institution does not reward involvement in new teaching initiatives, especially if you do not have tenure. Be aware of the local politics.

If you can, forge ahead. The venture is worth the risk. You stand to gain—or regain—the freshness and vigor forever the heart of education, of knowledge in the making. And so do your students. They tell about learning communities:

> Up until this program, I've been used to getting the answers from the teachers and things on the board. You know, take good notes, pay good attention to what's in front of you. And pretty much feel cut off—you know, the other students are just learning, they don't have the answers. But in this class I've heard some *brilliant* things from other students. I've come to most of my insights through other people. I've really had to look at the way I've been listening to people, and my prejudices in shutting other people's ideas down, and of thinking that I know where the answers spring from.

> The integrated studies model . . . is an extraordinary, powerful, and valuable medium. It was in the context of this model that I began to learn new ways of thinking, rather then simply collecting quanta of information as I had (quite successfully) done at universities I had previously attended. This is the first place I got any *education* at all: where I had the opportunity to integrate bits and chunks of information I was collecting and to synthesize them into a new understanding of the world I live in, of myself, and of my role as a member of society. It's like the difference between collecting a pile of bricks and building a house.

> When I decided to go back to school, I ended up in a coordinated studies program where I had an experience I had never had before. The teacher left the lectern and sat beside me. Instead of having teachers just tell me what I should know, they were there learning with us, being exposed to subjects from new perspectives. That way each teacher also became a student. It wasn't such a power structure anymore, but a learning environment, humanized, where everyone was learning. I learned that I have knowledge, that I have what it takes to pursue knowledge, to gain knowledge. I left coordinated studies with the sense that I was free to learn rather than forced to learn.

Learning communities allow us all to be teachers and learners in the deepest sense, to be discovers, explorers, and builders together.

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