Learning Community Goals: Instructor Interviews
Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, Assessment Committee
College of Education and Human Development
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Summer 2007
Learning Community Goals: Instructor Interviews,

Introduction

In the fall semester of the 2006-2007 academic year, the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (PsTL) Assessment Committee proposed an evaluation plan for the current Learning Communities (LC) in PsTL. A beginning step of this plan was to assess the extent to which the goals of the LCs were reflected in LC courses. The Assessment Committee recommended that goals that were explicitly stated on LC course syllabi be identified and instructors be interviewed to identify additional, implicit, goals. The committee then requested that the implicit and explicit goals be compared to statements of the LC programs goals to see if the LC program was effectively implemented.

Goals of individual courses were identified and then compared to six Intended Outcomes of Learning Communities (IOLCs). The six IOLCs were obtained from the Learning Community Initiative Grant Report which was created by Pat James, Pat Bruch, and Rashne Jehangir (see Appendix I). The intent for the PsTL learning communities was that this set of goals would be implemented in each theme-based LC. The IOLCs are:

- Develop a strong sense of belonging to the learning community and to the university as a whole
- Develop a repertoire of ways to think about and express ideas, emotions and experiences
- Develop the ability to work collaboratively with others
- Bring lived experience into the classroom and explore connections between the academic community and the other communities.
- Strengthen students' feelings of self-efficacy by learning more about themselves as individuals and as members of the community.
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- Develop and transform relationships with those who are both similar and different from themselves.

Course goals were obtained from sections in the syllabi such as objectives, goals, outcomes, and course descriptions. Instructors who taught in an LC were interviewed to obtain feedback about their course goals. The purpose of the interviews with instructors was to seek information about course goals that were not explicitly stated on syllabi, and to see how well LCs implemented the intended outcomes. Information from the syllabi and interviews was combined to determine the extent to which the original six IOLCs were represented in the LCs.

Method

Design

The project began with analyses of the PsTL Learning Community Initiative Grant Report, the Collective LC Goals Matrix, and the syllabi of those LC courses offered during the fall semester of 2006-2007. Three types of LCs were offered in PsTL in the fall 2006 semester: theme-based LCs, Commanding English LCs, and TRiO LCs. The four theme-based LCs include Identity Mosaics, Speech in American History, Engaging Democracy, and Multicultural Relations/Multicultural Literature. The theme-based LCs “integrate courses from various disciplines around one theme, encouraging students to think about an issue from different perspectives”; Commanding English LCs are for “students whom English is not their home language” and “English language support is built in through small class size, tutoring, supplemental reading courses, and feedback on drafts of papers”; TRiO LCs are offered as large lecture content courses with small accelerated learning seminars of no more than 20 students each (PsTL Program Brochure, 2006, p. 2). The document analyses resulted in the development of a new Course Goal-IOLC matrix for each LC course. The matrix listed course goals in rows
and the six IOLCs in columns with a colored cell representing a connection between the two (See Appendix II for a sample matrix).

Because instructors wrote the syllabi and determined the course goals, the second step was interviewing instructors so their perspectives would be accurately reflected in the Course Goal-IOLC matrix. The interview questions, protocol and procedures were developed by the Assessment Committee.

*Interviewer.* Research Assistant, Yiyun Jie, conducted the interviews. Reports on the interview process were made to the Assessment Committee during weekly group and/or individual meetings. The Committee provided feedback and assistance with facilitating the project. Assistance included polishing the invitation messages, developing interview questions and interview guide, obtaining departmental support for the project, and contacting individual instructors.

*Interviewees.* The identified interviewees were instructors who offered a course belonging to a PsTL LC during fall semester 2006. A total of 27 instructors taught in four theme-based LCs (Identity Mosaics, Speech in American History, Engaging Democracy, and Multicultural Relations & Literature), nine Commanding English LCs, and four TRiO LCs. Sixteen of the 27 instructors were interviewed during the fall semester, beginning in the middle of November 2006 and going through the middle of December 2006. Two instructors from the theme-based Learning Communities were interviewed at the beginning of spring semester 2007. Of the 18 instructors interviewed, ten taught in a theme-based LC; four instructors taught in a Commanding English LC; and the other four instructors taught in a TRiO LC.

Few instructors from the Commanding English LC participated in the interview process. However, the director of the Commanding English program provided opinions from the
perspectives of both an instructor for the grammar course and the coordinator of the Commanding English LC. Furthermore, most CE instructors were interviewed during the Commanding English Program Evaluation which was conducted in May 2006. This evaluation may be referenced for their perspectives of the CE program.

Each of the TRiO LCs contains one target course and a Structured Accelerated Learning course (SALC). The target courses are usually big lecture classes enrolling both LC and Non-LC students. The Structured Accelerated Learning course is the component that defines the learning community. Given this circumstance, three of the four instructors interviewed for TRiO LCs were instructors for the SALC sections.

**Interviewing**

A message was sent from the Department Chair of PsTL to all instructors introducing the interview project and encouraging instructor support for it. Following that, the interviewer sent a follow up email to the 27 LC instructors. The email clarified the purpose for conducting the interviews, expected length of interview, and an invitation for individual meetings.

Prior to each interview information was sent to the instructor so they had time to look over the interview questions and prepare for it. The information sent to each interviewee included four documents: a list of interview questions, goals obtained from instructor’s course syllabus, the six intended learning outcomes for LCs, and the matrix file of how course goals were categorized within the six IOLCs.

Each interview averaged 30 minutes in length; they were usually conducted in the instructor’s office. The entire interview was recorded to provide a reference during transcription.
Transcribing

The interviewer transcribed the interviews almost verbatim. However, some editing was done to reduce repetitions and fragmented expressions.

Analysis

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of the interviews was to gather feedback from instructors to clarify the categorization of their course goals and to provide additional information about course goals that was not included on the course syllabus. The analysis was based on an interpretation of the interviews and was used to flesh out the connections between course goals and IOLCs.

Steps of the analysis included editing transcriptions from oral style into written format and reviewing transcriptions to identify emerging themes. To make the analysis and report more focused and applicable to the intended readers, the major themes were developed around interview questions. Themes related to connections between course goals and intended outcomes comprised the main findings. Other important opinions and/or themes that were raised by instructors, but were not directly related to the main purpose of the project, were listed as other findings and are discussed in the results. Also provided are recommendations for ways to address challenges identified by instructors.

Results

Summary of Matrices Data

Results from the matrices are summarized and presented in Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3. These tables present an overview of how Interdisciplinary LC courses reflect the six intended outcomes. Only Interdisciplinary LC information was included in this report because the six
intended outcomes are specific to interdisciplinary LCs. The Commanding English LCs and TRiO LCs have different goals specific to those programs.

Table 1 presents the number of courses addressing each of the intended outcomes of LCs (IOLC) explicitly stated in syllabi and implicitly reported after instructor interviews. For example, in row one, three course syllabi were identified as explicitly reflecting IOLC1; after instructor interviews, all ten courses showed a connection to IOLC1 explicitly and implicitly. Table 2 provides disaggregated data at the level of specific Interdisciplinary LC. Among the ten courses that comprise the Interdisciplinary LCs, almost all of them reflect the six intended outcomes after instructor interviews (see Tables 1 and 2). For the six intended outcomes, we observe that intended outcomes one (sense of belonging) and three (work collaboratively) were explicitly stated in syllabi less often than the other IOLCs.

Table 1: Interdisciplinary LC Course Reflecting Each Intended Outcome in Syllabi and After Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended Outcomes of Learning Community (IOLC)</th>
<th>Interdisciplinary LCs (N=10 Courses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syllabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC1: Develop a strong sense of belonging to the learning community and to the university as a whole.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC2: Develop a repertoire of ways to think about and express ideas, emotions and experiences.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC3: Develop the ability to work collaboratively with others</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC4: Bring lived experience into the classroom and explore connections between the academic community and the other communities.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC5: Strengthen students' feelings of self-efficacy by learning more about themselves as individuals and as members of the community.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC6: Develop and transform relationships with those who are both similar and different from themselves.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Interdisciplinary LC Course Reflecting Each Intended Outcome in Syllabi and After Interviews: Disaggregated to Interdisciplinary LC level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended Outcomes of Learning Community (IOLC)</th>
<th>Identity Mosaics (N=4 courses)</th>
<th>Speech in American History (N=2 courses)</th>
<th>Engaging Democracy (N=2 courses)</th>
<th>Multicultural Relations (N=2 courses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syllabi</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Syllabi</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC1: Sense of belonging</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC2: A repertoire of ways to think</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC3: Ability to work collaboratively</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC4: Bring lived experience and explore connections between communities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC5: Strengthen feelings of self-efficacy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC6: Develop and transform relationships with similar and different others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 indicates the connection between specific course goals and intended outcomes, both explicitly in the syllabi and after instructor interviews. The N represents the number of specific course goals obtained from the syllabi of Interdisciplinary LC courses. For example, in the Identity Mosaics LC, 32 specific course goals were identified from all four courses. Ten of them addressed IOLC1 explicitly in the syllabi. After the instructor interviews, the number increased to 18 because implicit connections were identified. On this specific course goals measure (Table 3), across all four Interdisciplinary LCs, the number of specific goals associated with each intended outcome category was larger when collected through the interviews. The differences between the number of specific goals identified on the syllabi and those identified during the interviews was typically large. However, for some LCs, fewer additional specific goals were identified through the interviews.
Table 3: Specific Course Goals Reflecting Intended Outcomes in Syllabi and After Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended Outcomes of Learning Community (IOLC)</th>
<th>Identity Mosaics (N=32 goals)</th>
<th>Speech in American History (N=15 goals)</th>
<th>Engaging Democracy (N=9 goals)</th>
<th>Multicultural Relations (N=10 goals)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IOLC1: Sense of belonging</td>
<td>Syllabi 10</td>
<td>Interview 18</td>
<td>Syllabi 0</td>
<td>Interview 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC2: A repertoire of ways to think</td>
<td>Syllabi 14</td>
<td>Interview 23</td>
<td>Syllabi 9</td>
<td>Interview 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC3: Ability to work collaboratively</td>
<td>Syllabi 4</td>
<td>Interview 12</td>
<td>Syllabi 5</td>
<td>Interview 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC4: Bring lived experience and explore connections between communities</td>
<td>Syllabi 10</td>
<td>Interview 21</td>
<td>Syllabi 0</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC5: Strengthen feelings of self-efficacy</td>
<td>Syllabi 12</td>
<td>Interview 25</td>
<td>Syllabi 5</td>
<td>Interview 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOLC6: Develop and transform relationships with similar and different others</td>
<td>Syllabi 8</td>
<td>Interview 18</td>
<td>Syllabi 4</td>
<td>Interview 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Interview Data: Overview of the findings

The main focus of this interview project was identifying connections between individual course goals and the intended Learning Community outcomes. The major findings, in regard to this aspect, show that, overall, the intended outcomes of Learning Communities were collectively addressed in PsTL’s current Learning Communities in a variety of ways, such as course content, assignments and group activities.

Other findings from this interview project were unintended outcomes. These findings are combined into four categories below and discussed later in this report.

- The comprehensiveness of the intended outcomes for LCs
- Learning Community impact on instructor development.
  - Instructors’ experience with Learning Community
  - Instructors’ value towards students’ learning
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- Collaborative teaching as professional development
- Strong social engagement among Learning Community students
- Administration issues
  - Student registration for Learning Community classes
  - Assessment related information

Main Findings

The specific Course Goal-IOLC matrix developed for each course was discussed with the instructor of that course during the interview. After the discussions, matrices were modified based on instructors’ suggestions and explanations. Examples were requested from instructors to support their suggested changes in the matrix. For most of the 18 new matrixes, the connection between course goals (after incorporating the implicit goals provided by instructors) and IOLCs were more inclusive than the initial matrix. Many of these connections were added because the IOLCs were implicitly embedded in the course through content, activities, and assignments. A comment often heard would be similar to “I almost want to say that almost all of these things (course goals) do these (intended outcomes) in one way or another”.

In summary, instructors’ explanations and examples for adding the connections fell into four categories: course content, in-class discussion and group work, special projects and assignments, and special LC events and activities. Examples of these four pedagogical activities or approaches are provided below. A more complete list of activities is provided in the Appendix IV.

Course Content.

The nature and content of courses directly addresses some of the IOLCs. For example, the writing courses and oral communication course deal directly with students’ communication
skills. Courses from the Engaging Democracy LC address many of the civic engagement issues which partly reflect the “sense of belonging” goal. Courses from the Multicultural Relationships and Literatures LC challenge students to critically understand multicultural issues. Courses from the Identity Mosaics LC help students build a better understanding of their own identities as well as others’ who are both similar and different.

In-class discussion and group work

Almost all of the instructors mentioned that they use in-class discussions, small group work, and activities as a way to achieve many of the IOLCs. For example, one instructor mentioned:

“All of these things (the course goals) involve groups, we have group discussions, that in some way, partly fulfill the sense of community … I have them write responses to music. Each student will have to share with others. There are 24 students in the class. Each of them is responsible for talking. So I consider them to be community building.”

Another example would be:

“We try to talk about these issues (multicultural issues) with one another. Through communication, they actually become tutors for each other. One of the things they learn to do is to learn from one another based on their lived experience. So the questions are all about how these things (multicultural issues) are reflected in their real life. For example, when we talked about sexism, women are going to talk about how they have been affected by sexism and men are going to talk about how they perpetuated sexism. Through these discussions, they get to know one another.”

Special Projects and Assignments

Instructors create many special class projects and assignments to achieve the specific course goals as well as the LC goals. Three good examples include the Experiential Simulations Project, Mock Jury Trial, and Special Team Building activities.

Experiential Simulation Project: “In the ES project, students do not know whom they are working with in groups. Group identity is implemented and developed. When they found out
their group members at the end of the project, some of them were surprised about who they were actually working with and how different their perception might be from reality and how that perception might have influenced their behaviors and others. For example, two students disliked each other in class. But they actually worked together on an ES project. And they both worked along very well and really liked each other on the project. One of them named the other as his favorite person to work with.”

Mock Jury Trial “is a great way to address sense of belonging to the LC. Students work together for about 3 to 6 weeks and put on the trial. Each student plays the role of either an attorney or a witness in a full jury trial and a paper is also required. I try to put the team work spirit and sense of responsibility to your team member throughout this activity.”

Special Team Building. “I divide my course chapters and divide my students according to the chapter content. Each group of students is responsible to research into the content area that they are responsible for and I have them present at each table. They need to do little introduction of that chapter to the other students at the table. I also divide my students into teams and have them come up with a specific name for their team. They also develop symbols and metaphors for their teams.”

Special LC Events and Activities.

Instructors talked about a variety of events and activities designed for the entire LC but not for any specific individual class. Instructors commented that these community building activities also address many of the IOLCs. For example, the Commanding English LC has a special event for the entire community called First Friday Meeting, which “in the first Friday of each month the whole group comes together and we do something deliberate with them there”. Some of the topics they have covered in these Friday Meetings are: how to be successful in
college (with outside facilitator to foster discussions around this topic), study abroad, and a senior student panel presenting on how they chose a major.

The main question asked during instructor interviews was to what extent do the LC course goals align with the pre-determined six IOLCs. There was a fair amount of discrepancy between the interviewer’s categorization of the LC goals and the instructors’ perspectives. These differences were not unexpected, and were identified during the interview. Two reasons for the differences emerged from the interview data. The first reason was that the initial matrix captured explicit connections, thus the implicitly implemented goals -- the “hidden curriculum” was not included. The second reason was that the initial matrix limited the comparison to an individual course itself, which tended to underestimate the interrelationships between courses of a particular Learning Community.

*Explicit and Implicit goals.* Some instructors have a specific section designated in their syllabus describing goals for the learning community. For these courses the connections between the course goals and the intended outcomes are explicitly identified. For courses that do not have this explicit syllabi content, the intended outcomes tended to be implicitly carried out through class activities and course assignments. One instructor, when answering the first question that asked whether any course goals were left out said,

“All of the learning community goals, which are articulated from the grant that you sent me, are lived out in our learning community. They are all implicit goals. But when I saw the goals that you took out from our syllabus, they were explicit goals. They are not as obvious. Thus, all six learning community goals should be added.”

The instructor later added,

“Almost all of them satisfied the six learning community goals, but I could see where they are not explicit. You have to have the experience of the course to understand how they are satisfied.”
Another instructor commented that,

“…sometimes some of the goals are more like embedded in the course discussion, assignments and activities, but are not listed as a goal in the syllabus. I can see that to have them listed out as a goal in the syllabus will also be helpful for me as an instructor and for my students as well.”

To one instructor, the decision to include a goal on the syllabus depended on whether it could be measured.

“…the written course goals, which hopefully you can measure. There are all sorts of other course goals that you don’t put down in writing, because you know that there is really no way you can evaluate it. You still hope you are doing something …”

Interrelationship among Learning Community courses. For some of the supplemental courses, the initial categorization seemed to underestimate overall connections with the intended outcome, because the supplemental courses work collectively with other courses to achieve the LC outcomes. For example, one instructor mentioned at the very beginning of the interview that

“It’s the whole program that’s a learning community more than this particular course. … and that’s (the entire Learning Community) probably more interesting and relevant ….”

This statement pointed out a limitation of the initial design of the interview project. The interview process focused on individual course syllabi but neglected the interrelationship between courses.

Another instructor’s statement addressed this issue more specifically,

“I do things in my class…the key is that for both of the learning communities (TRiO and Commanding English), it is their (students’) relationships with the supplemental instruction person...(that defines them as a community). Then it’s just communication (between instructors). 'Do we (instructors of the target course and supplemental class.) communicate’? ‘Do we know what’s going on in each other’s classes’?”
Other Findings

Other findings consisted of issues expressed by instructors during the interviews. They are categorized into thematic areas below.

*Intended outcomes.* One of the interview questions asked instructors, based on the experience of their own learning community, whether they would like to add any other intended outcomes to the six IOLCs. Most of the instructors described the six outcomes as “comprehensive”, “pretty good”, and “described what [our] learning community does”. Very few suggested any changes or additions. However, for instructors who suggested changes, academic goals were talked about most. One instructor commented that

“I think these six outcomes are very much on the affective side. … I want to add the cognitive domain. ‘Students will be able to take a science course at the university at the 1000 or 3000 level and pass it’. That’s a good goal. It is academic. Study, pass, take the exams, be scared about the finals and still pass them.”

Another instructor mentioned that,

“I guess I would also add students’ developing and understanding of the college level (academic) work and engagement. That is what the students are doing in their first year. With the learning community, maybe having that sense of community and having instructors communicating with each other, facilitates that kind of (students’) development at a new level of critical thinking.”

Besides adding the academic outcomes to the IOLCs, instructors are challenged with how the IOLCs could better articulate the LC’s intended outcomes. For example, one instructor commented:

“We need a very clear set of intended outcomes, for teachers, for students, and for administrators. These (the six IOLCs) to me still feel too [broad]. They are lovely in their intention, but there is still a little bit…they remind me of my own syllabus in their wording [she felt her own course goals were too abstract]…in that it sort of says everything… ‘Develop and transform relationships with those who are both similar and different from themselves…’ that’s rather large in itself and …all of them…it’s almost
like so broad that it could mean nothing. So I am curious to how we can work with these [IOLCs] to make them more concrete and maybe a little tighter. I agree with all the values that are reflected in here, to me, it’s more of a wording issue. These are worded so broadly as if anybody could see themselves doing these really, because they are almost so open-ended.”

One opinion expressed in response to this question was to incorporate students’ voice when developing the Learning Community goals.

“I think all of these (intended outcomes of a learning community) need to be developed with the students. The students must get involved with this. … They must be directly involved with the developing of these goals because they can tell you exactly…because it is their life…and there are all types of students.”

Instructors’ issues. The level of instructor experience teaching in an LC varied. PsTL’s LC instructors included both new professionals who have less experience teaching and instructors who have been involved in Learning Communities for many years.

There are also different levels of commitment to the Learning Community goals. Not every instructor agrees with the importance of the six IOLCs. Different courses within LCs have different foci. For some instructors, the academic knowledge and study skills seem to be more important than social engagement as an outcome; others think the social engagement is an important part of students’ learning, thus an important goal to have.

The reasons for this discrepancy varied. Some are because the instructors have a different value and philosophy for their teaching and students’ learning. There is one comment advocating for academic goals:

“There is probably data that say students who have an inspiring community are more likely to engage, therefore they are more likely to pass the class. Good. That’s evidence that support learning community. That’s a good thing. But if you start putting all of your energy into developing those relationships, you don’t have any energy in the cognitive domain. … And it is the academic achievement we should care about. That’s what I don’t see in the learning community yet. Hey, it’s important to formulate interactions. It’s important promoting this oneness
sense with the university. That’s all fluff. The important part is our students succeed in their academics.”

To the other end, we have an instructor saying that:

“All these (social interactions) are important things; these are not just frostings on cakes. These are very important values. … We have students say that yeah I learn better because I heard more different kinds of views and sometimes that has to be explicit for students to understand that it is happening.”

Another reason for this discrepancy may be related to the format of a class, which may not allow the instructors to spend time emphasizing social interactions. This will be discussed later in the Administration Issues section.

**Collaborative teaching as a development.** The sufficient amount of communication and collaboration among instructors helps instructors’ professional development. This topic was frequently addressed by instructors during the interviews. For example, one instructor said that,

“As I looked through all of these, I feel, we are not about the students, but more about instructors. Both to talk with each other about the students we share in common, seemed to facilitate a deeper understanding of our students … and also always to be able to be in other instructors’ classroom, which seemed to help me…So these seemed also coming out from the learning community, not focused on the students end, but more on the instructor end.”

Instructors not only identified collaborative teaching as benefitting their development, but also suggested it had a positive impact on students. One instructor even suggested that this impact from collaborative teaching be added as a learning community goal.

“Then another additional goal (for the learning community) would be to model collaborative teaching. So they (students) are seeing a model of a course work; we (instructors) are putting our heads together to develop a framework or structure for how this learning community might work for our students. The students can see something besides a lone professor that gets up there and dispenses information. They see instructors trying to create some synchronicity between the courses. To me that is very important.”
Strong social interaction among learning community students. While most of the instructors interviewed supported the social engagement goals of learning communities, some brought up the issue of negative impacts because of the strong social interactions, such as too much in-class chatting and small groups that cause conflicts. Instructor interventions could be helpful to address these issues. For example, one instructor mentioned that,

“Students definitely got more involved and close to each other. But there is a down side of it. There is more chatting going on. But of course as an instructor, I always address that and set the guideline at the beginning of the semester.”

Some instructors also felt challenged to intervene more in classroom management when the strong social connections among Learning Community students became negative,

“They are definitely getting very comfortable with each other, maybe too comfortable with each other, because they behaved … you wouldn’t be like that if you do not know people well enough, wouldn’t step on people’s toes…being too familiar with each other, I almost feel they are tired of always being together…I almost feel that there’s a lack of respect.”

Another instructor used conflict incidents to teach students interpersonal communication skills, which is one of the intended outcomes of a Learning Community.

“Conflict that gets extracted in a class is great! It can be a distraction for the class if you don’t know how to manage it as a teacher. But if it comes, it is great, because I take it as a teaching moment. … I try to help them to see how they could express their opinions in a supportive way.”

Administration issues. Formats and structures of the class may have an impact on how effectively a learning community gets implemented. Issues related to class size, the student population in the classroom, and how students are grouped into one section were raised by instructors.

“As students register for our classes, they (registrar) put all the TRiO students in one section. I don’t think they had any white students in it. And the other section, the majority of the students are white. It’s kind of odd that the two sections were separated in that way. I noticed in another class of our learning community where those students remained on the separate
side of the room. I think …that the students’ experience could have been different if they had been more mingled together.”

“I once had over 60 students in my class, which is a learning community class, not a stand-alone class. That one, we had a lot of troubles…so we made some changes after that…we break the course into two parts … This semester I have only 32 students in my class. It is a much better experience compared to that one.”

“There has to be at least 25% of the class be students of color. Otherwise, they won’t be able to see it (the white privilege). Less than 25%, it would be very hard to teach multicultural relations.”

Assessment related information. Many instructors do formal or informal types of assessment for their courses, mostly focusing on students’ learning in regard to the course content and instructors’ teaching. Besides having students fill out the University required Student Evaluation of Teaching form during the end of the semester, some instructors had students answer specific assessment questions. Other instructors used informal assessments, such as short reflective writing about their classes.

“I use the standard SRS form from (the Department) and an on-line survey (of) myself, with 25 questions. That’s (the on-line survey) much richer. I have been collecting data for several years. That one gives me a better picture of what do you do for this class to succeed … There are likert-scale, and open-ended question.”

Some instructors collected information at various times during the semester: one week into a semester, and middle of a semester and/or end of a semester.

“About a week into the semester, I was curious to know why the students signed up (for my learning community) because they were interested in the issues or did they do it just because of their schedules or their advisor. And then the second question I asked them was what they looked to get out of this course…."

“ ‘One minute paper’, I do it three times in a semester. There are questions asking them to rate how helpful this class is … Students could write about things that they need help with. Something could be written expression, do not need to be verbal or cannot be.”
Instructors were willing to cooperate with the assessment committee when talking about the assessment of their LCs. Once a broader plan of the assessment of LCs is in place, more communication with the instructors participating in the learning community would be helpful for data collecting.

“But I wish to design my own assessment at the end of the semester and ask specific questions about the learning community. If you would have any input in what you (assessment committee) are looking for that would make a stronger report … and if I dove tail it with what I want to assess, I am happy to work with it.”

“I don’t have one (assessment for my learning community). I will wait for the one that comes from your group (assessment committee).

Discussion

In this section, some of the issues that emerged, such as LC structures, course goals and intended outcomes, faculty buy-in, and assessment are discussed. Looking at all these issues holistically, we see they are ultimately inter-related. Thus, we organized our discussion around three aspects: How are LCs at PsTL similar and different from each other? What are the similar and different challenges they faced? How could we address these challenges in the future?

The Three Models

Three commonly described LC models are well represented in the PsTL curriculum. They include Team-Taught Programs, Paired or Clustered Courses, and Cohorts in Large Courses (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). Some characteristics of these LC models are summarized in Appendix V.

The LCs offered in the fall semester of 2006-2007 clearly represent these three models. The theme-based LCs (Identity Mosaics LC, Speech in American History LC, Engaging Democracy LC, and Multicultural Relations & Literature LC) are examples of the Team-Taught Programs model; the Commanding English LC is an example of the Paired or Clustered Courses
model; and the TRiO LCs are an example of the Cohorts in large Courses model. The three models were developed to address specific student learning and/or developmental issues with different pedagogical and course format and structures. Commanding English LCs and TRiO LCs enroll a distinct student population and have specific goals for those students.

Commanding English LCs incorporate several characteristics from both the Team-Taught model and the Paired or Clustered Courses model. Students take some theme-based courses and/or large lecture courses; however, the smaller classes where language and reading proficiency are taught are a priority for the Commanding English LCs. This feature of the Commanding English program is the key factor that distinguishes it from other LCs.

The TRiO LCs program is a federally funded program which also has specific admission requirements. TRiO students are from lower SES families, 1st generation students, and/or people with disabilities. The goal of TRiO courses is to reinforce and accelerate the learning of concepts introduced in large courses. For this group of students, language may not be the priority issue that they struggle with, but they face other types of challenges as they transition to college.

The Challenges

Although the findings show that many issues identified during the instructor interviews were commonly seen regardless of LC model, some of the issues may be more frequently associated with one type of LC. For the Cohort in Large Lecture LC, two commonly seen challenges are lack of faculty interest and lack of interdisciplinary teaching experience (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). In the TRiO LCs the “target” course is a large lecture course taken by many undergraduates. The second course is a “support” course designed to enhance student learning in the target course. The support course does not have unique content, but is focused on helping students develop the skills required for success in the target course.
In these LCs the instructors of the target courses determined the content and pedagogy of those courses and the instructors of the support courses worked to support that content. There was no expectation for team curriculum planning other than the instructor of the target course making materials available to the instructor of the support course and answering any questions the support instructor might have. The TRiO LCs were not designed to facilitate cross disciplinary learning.

There was the potential, however, for the TRiO support courses to offer students the opportunity to become part of a small community of TRiO students. Many TRiO students enrolled in multiple support courses where they had the opportunity to interact with TRiO students in more than one course. In this type of LC, the community support is developed within the support courses and program components rather than directly through modifications in the targeted content courses.

Clustered Courses LCs and Team-Taught LCs are more challenging in terms of curricular integration and faculty collaboration. Faculty who participate in these LCs are especially challenged because it requires them to teach in a more complex social environment. Teaching is no longer an isolated activity but rather a community commitment. Team teaching requires team building, collaborative skills, and collective responsibility. Instructors need to share information about their courses and teaching with others.

Moreover, instructors in these types of LC develop their own “community curriculum” through discussing connections across the discretely taught courses (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). Therefore, it is up to the instructors to help students move beyond learning course by course, and to build content connections within all the linked courses. Instructors often develop various LC activities and joint assignments, which take extra effort. Their challenges involve
Learning Community Goals: Instructor Interviews,

pre-semester and in-semester planning, and also coming together with colleagues to shape how learning outcomes will be met and how the different disciplinary perspectives can share teaching and learning space.

In summary, all of the challenges might be observed in any type of LC. The reason they were discussed separately is that some of them are more commonly seen in one type of LC due to goals, structure, characteristics and intentions.

Addressing the Challenges

Initially, one of the identified reasons for the discrepancy between the interviewers’ and instructors’ goals and IOLC mapping was that the original matrix failed to capture implicit course goals. While it is true that not all intended outcomes are always explicitly communicated through the written syllabi, this may create a situation where course goals and IOLCs are too loosely articulated to enable readers to identify the connections by reading the documents.

Because the majority of the students enrolled in these LCs were first year college students, it is legitimate to question the extent to which students understand the planned learning outcomes for a learning community from syllabi.

Therefore, to break down some of the big concepts and broadly stated goals in the IOLCs should be considered for future curricular development. The intended outcomes and/or purpose of LCs should be articulated in a more tangible and measurable way.

Secondly, at all stages of planning, implementing, and assessing, we need to both look at the LCs as a whole and separately pay attention to their different structures, characteristics, and focus. It is important that each LC clearly define its own specific purpose and intended outcomes at the planning and the implementation stage, and continuously revisit these purposes. Also, assessment should be taken into consideration early in the planning stage. While
developing the LC goals and intended outcomes, it is helpful to think about the other end—how would these outcomes be assessed. These planning and reassessing activities are critical to program sustainability and maximizing program impact.

Thirdly, the LC development is a substantial reorganization of the curriculum. Thus, the leadership, faculty, administrators, and students should all be part of this curricular development. Faculty are one of the key factors for a successful LC (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). As presented in the Results section, there are mainly two kinds of issues associated with instructors. One is the variation in instructor experience with teaching in a LC; and the other is different levels of commitment to the LC goals. These issues, if not addressed properly, will be problematic. For example, if the faculty do not have a clear and common understanding for the expectation for curricular integration, the experiences for students might be more social (taking classes together) than academic (curriculum integration). Various faculty development opportunities (formally or informally) should be provided in a supportive environment for faculty to discuss teaching and provide feedback in relation to expectations for curricular integration.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The interviews with instructors were intended to find out their opinions about the course goals, the intended outcomes of their Learning Community, and the connections between the two. Most of the interview questions were descriptive and asked about instructors’ experiences and their observations about their Learning Community courses.

The 18 interviews with the Learning Community instructor generated a rich amount of information about PsTL’s Learning Communities offered in fall 2006 semester. In addition to the primary interest on connections between course goals listed in syllabi and intended outcomes of
Learning Communities, challenges and unintended observations in regards to the implementation of Learning Communities were raised by instructors. The following conclusions were synthesized for further discussion:

- Currently, Learning Community courses collectively address intended outcomes through course content, assignments, group activities, and instructors’ in-class implementation. Goals listed in the syllabus were not always as explicitly written as they could have been so as to make the intended outcomes more obvious for the students.
- In the six Learning Communities outcomes, intended outcomes related to the social engagement objectives outweighed the academic engagement objectives.
- Instructors felt it would be helpful if the IOLCs were rephrased to be more concise and easily assessed or evaluated.
- Instructors reported unintended outcomes from Learning Community courses in a variety of areas. One major area is the level of commitment to different LC goals based on different teaching philosophies.
- LC instructors felt collaborative teaching may be a potential area for professional development.
- Learning Community instructors observed a positive impact on students' outside of classroom learning which they connected to the strong social engagement aspect of the LC. They also reported an increase in the occurrence of challenging classroom situations in their LC classes.
- Administrative issues were raised that relate to how students were registered in Learning Community sections. Formats and structures of classes may also have an impact on how effective a Learning Community gets implemented.
Based on the interviews, recommendations were provided for more in-depth discussions that should include instructors, administrators, and students:

- Given the circumstances that at least three types of Learning Communities are offered by PsTL, the formats and delivery models vary (e.g., TRiO, CE, and theme based). Therefore, from a departmental perspective, a fundamental question needs to be answered: what is PsTL going to define as a Learning Community? The answer to this question needs diverse input from all stakeholders of PsTL including students, instructors, administrators, etc.

- The purpose and intended outcomes of LCs should fit with the broader organizational culture, especially while undergoing organizational reform, reflecting on the alignment of LC goals and the mission of the department/College/university.

- Further development of Learning Communities has to take into consideration the needs and aspirations of future CEHD/PsTL students.

- To enhance effective implementation of Learning Communities, expectations and objectives for instructors need to be more clearly developed. Opportunities that help instructors to share and discuss common issues and strategies should be considered to facilitate implementation.
Reference


Appendix I: Intended Outcomes of Learning Community

- Develop a strong sense of belonging to the learning community and to the university as a whole
- Develop a repertoire of ways to think about and express ideas, emotions and experiences
- Develop the ability to work collaboratively with others
- Bring lived experience into the classroom and explore connections between the academic community and the other communities.
- Strengthen students' feelings of self-efficacy by learning more about themselves as individuals and as members of the community.
- Develop and transform relationships with those who are both similar and different from themselves.
Appendix II: Interview Questions

- In the email I sent you earlier, I attached a list of goals identified in your course syllabus. Are there any additional goals that should be included in this list? If so, what are they?
- Are there any goals that are implemented in your class, but have not been identified in the syllabus? If so, what are they?
- Six “Intended Learning Outcomes for Learning Community” were listed in the email I sent to you. I used these goals to classify the course goals on your syllabus. Do you agree or disagree with my classifications? What changes would you like to make if needed? Please explain your classification.
- To what extent do the six Learning Community goals describe all the outcomes of your learning community? What else would you like to add to this list?
- Overall, how well do you feel your course goals reflect the Learning Community intended outcomes?
- What else would you like to share with me in terms of your course goals, Learning Community goals and the connections between these two?
- Have you identified any unintended outcomes happening in your learning community that surprised you or were unexpected?
- Does your learning community have any plan to assess the outcomes? If yes, what is your plan?
Appendix III: Sample Matrix for Course Goals and Intended Outcomes

| Course Goal 1: Help student understand what it means to be an engaged citizen in a democracy | Develop a strong sense of belonging to the learning community and to the university as a whole | Develop a repertoire of ways to think about and express ideas, emotions and experiences | Develop the ability to work collaboratively with others | Bring lived experience into the classroom and explore connections between the academic community and the other communities | Strengthen students' feelings of self-efficacy by learning more about themselves as individuals and as members of the community | Develop and transform relationships with those who are both similar and different from themselves |
| Course Goal 2: Analyze systems that shape our understanding of a democratic society, and the myriad ways that citizens, government, and institutions impact, and impacted by, social change | | | | | | |
| Course Goal 3: Be introduced to college-level writing, reading, and thinking so as to create meaningful and effective academic work; working on grammar and editing skills in order to strengthen your ability to revise and progress as a writer | | | | | | |
Appendix IV: A List of the Identified Course Activities, Projects and Events

- In-class large group discussion
- In-class small group discussion
- In-class individual presentation
- In-class presentation of group works
- In-class panel presentation
- Peer review
- Peer critique and workshop
- Journal writing
- Write reaction paper for experiential assignment
- Write reflection paper/journal
- Write up suggestions/advisor for next year’s coming students
- In-class free writing
- Collaborative writing
- Writing conference
- Read outside textbooks/materials
- Small group work/discussion
- Break up students’ regular group and re-organize new groups
- Student group research into specific topics/chapters of the book
- Student group with their own titles, symbols and metaphors
- Impromptu activities that get people up speaking
- Volunteer to be class leaders
- Volunteer to be peer advisors
- Mock Jury Trial
- Experiential Simulation Project
- First Friday Meeting (for the entire LC)
- Take career inventory
- Interview people who are making social impact (according to students perspective)
- Develop portfolio
- Write up principles for their own LC
- One-minute paper—students write about things that they need more help with
- Invite outside presenters (career advisor, study abroad advisor, senior students)
- Service Learning Project
- Take field trip
- Keep notes for field trip and observation
- Visit Art Museum
- Attend on-campus activities (out-of-class)
- Outreach activities (to other student clubs, visiting writing center, visiting Career Center)
- Attending Social Justice Retreat
- Assignment that require students joining a university organization
- Reserve more individual advising time for students to meet with instructor
Appendix V: Commonly seen Learning Community Models in Practice

**Paired or Clustered Courses:**

- The basic approach to learning communities in terms of curricular integration
- Link individually taught courses through cohort
- Courses are logical curricular connected and/or skill areas related

**Team-Taught Programs:**

- Extensive curricular integration and faculty involvement
- Usually tie several courses around a particular theme
- Courses are often time interdisciplinary
- Themes are usually faculty-generated
- Small group discussion sections

**Cohorts in Large Courses (“FIGs”-freshman interest groups):**

- Simplest model in terms of organization and cost
- Works well at large universities
- Students are typically enrolled in one or more large lecture courses
- LC students represent a subset of the total enrollment
- Usually have weekly seminar or smaller writing course, limited to FIG students.