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POINT OF VIEW

Learning Communities Can Be Cohesive and Divisive

By DAVID JAFFEE

Most American colleges and universities now offer special programs for entering freshmen. One of the most common components of that first-year experience is the freshman learning community or group, designed to socialize new college students, integrate them into the campus, and make sure they don't drop out.

The idea of the freshman learning community is based on four factors that researchers have identified as important to student learning and academic success: First, students are likely to develop a deeper understanding of the material when concepts, topics, and debates that are introduced in one course are reintroduced and reinforced in another. Second, students learn better when they can discuss the subject matter of their courses with their peers. Third, students do better when they are actively engaged in their education, solving problems and applying what they have learned. Fourth, students are more satisfied with their education and less likely to drop out when they get to know their professors outside the classroom.

In the typical freshman learning community, 15 to 30 first-year students register for several general-education courses that focus on a common theme. (As an example, last fall I had 27 freshmen in my introductory sociology course, which, together with a course in introductory psychology and another in English composition, made up a program called "Understanding Human Behavior.") Theoretically, the small class size increases the likelihood of active learning, small-group interaction, student participation, and a closer relationship with faculty members, while the thematic focus allows the freshmen to draw connections among the courses. Students involved in our learning communities tend to have slightly higher grade-point averages and are less likely to drop out than their peers.

At my institution, I coordinate courses, recruit faculty members, and serve as an instructor in the learning communities. I firmly believe the program gives freshmen an opportunity to experience a social and learning environment that can be beneficial for their personal development and academic success.

However, as a sociologist, I feel a professional obligation to point out that no plan can fully realize all of its intended objectives and, more to the point, that every program designed to produce some social good has the potential to also produce unanticipated problems. The "law of unintended consequences" is a guiding principle in sociology.

Freshman learning communities are not immune to that sociological law. The communities' single most significant *intended* consequence is the formation of a cohort of peers. The common age and academic inexperience of the students -- that is, their homogeneity coupled with common enrollment in several classes

provide the social glue for their community. Ideally, the peer group facilitates not just social activities but also learning, with students helping one another gain a better understanding of the subject matter they encounter in the community's courses.

The *unintended* consequences manifest themselves in the internal dynamics of the peer group and the relationship between the group and their professors. The very homogeneity and extended association of the students can produce mutually reinforcing attitudes and behaviors more appropriate for high school than for college -- as both faculty members and students themselves have observed. Freshmen in a learning community have less opportunity to interact with older students, who tend to be more mature and often more academically serious. Thus, the communities designed to help students through the transition to college life may inadvertently create conditions that potentially retard the students' academic development.

It is also critical to understand the group dynamics that distinguish learning communities from other freshman and upper-level classes. The key distinction centers on the bonds of friendship, cohesiveness, and unity that characterize the communities. Students are not only the same age; they also spend many hours together in and out of class, and they may even live in the same residence hall.

As a result, students in a peer group engage in a great deal of communication within the group. Although that can help them learn, it also means that misinformation will spread rapidly among them, their attitudes about professors and course material can be hardened through "groupthink," and faculty members -- as the outsiders -- may find it difficult to compete with the students' communication network.

The learning-community peer group has some similarities to a socioeconomic class. Students' intensive communication with one another produces a heightened "class consciousness." Indeed, professors who teach in learning communities frequently detect a more adversarial, us-versus-them attitude among the students -- a kind of class conflict. Students can appear less respectful, chattier, and more disruptive. They may work together to demand reductions in workload or changes in learning objectives. In short, students' behavior may be influenced less by the authority of the faculty than by the social-psychological forces operating within the peer group.

While the students often form a fairly cohesive group vis-à-vis the faculty, within the learning community there may also be cliques or factions. Tensions and hostilities between cliques may spill over into the classroom, and professors are often clueless as to the underlying cause of changes in the classroom climate. During one class session last fall, I noticed that my students were sitting in two separate groups. When I tried to lead a discussion, I felt as if I were mediating between two warring camps. Only later did I discover that an incident unrelated to the class had produced a schism in the learning community.

Much of the difficulty that professors have with learning communities is the result of a lack of experience with other groups of students who spend a great deal of time together. Most college courses attract students who are diverse in age, background, and academic experience and who seldom interact outside the classroom. If those enrolled in a typical course can be called a community, it is a community of strangers. The primary communication flow is from instructor to student, which gives instructors greater control over the class.

But freshmen learning communities have a different social dynamic. Consequently a significant number of faculty members -- even those who have taught freshmen for years -- complain that students in a learning

community are disrespectful, unruly, or immature. More of that behavior may occur when the professor prefers to teach by lecturing.

Faculty members who report a more positive experience with learning communities tend to be less traditional and more flexible in their pedagogical style. That is, they depart from the "sage on the stage" model of lecturing, emphasize students' active learning, encourage extended class discussions, use small-group activities in the classroom, and, perhaps most important, look for opportunities to interact with their students in and out of the classroom.

Establishing interpersonal rapport is especially vital for the success of a learning community. The traditional classroom hierarchy is not likely to work as well with an established peer group of students as will a more casual classroom environment that reduces the social distance between instructors and students.

The effects -- unanticipated as well as planned -- of the peer-group dynamics within learning communities have some obvious implications. First, teaching in a learning community is not for everyone. Administrators should be careful to recruit faculty members whose teaching style will mesh with the community's structure. Second, faculty workshops for new professors should explicitly focus on the distinctive nature of the community, including the phenomenon of the peer group and the interpersonal and pedagogical techniques that prove most effective with its students.

Much of the rhetoric and scholarly literature on freshman learning communities has been couched in the language of theoretical intention rather than practical consequence. That may help attract both students and faculty members to the communities, but it can also produce disappointment when participants feel that they have failed to realize the intended outcomes. Programs for freshmen must confront those difficult issues and prepare faculty members and students for the inevitable problems. If we present the difficulties as teachable moments of critical self-reflection for everyone involved, we can further advance the noble mission of freshman learning communities.

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