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Learning Communities and Librarians at Arizona State University

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Abstract

In the Fall Semester of 2003, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) at Arizona State University, for the first time, offered freshmen the opportunity to participate in a Learning Community. Although there are several types of learning communities, the CLAS Learning Communities at ASU utilize a fully integrated model and each community is based on a theme integrating several disciplines that examine the theme from different perspectives. One such theme, "Human Disease and Society," integrates English, Biology, and Philosophy. Courses in English, Political Science, History, and Religion are the foundation for the theme "War, Culture and Memory." A librarian is associated with each community in order to facilitate the learning goal, common to all of the communities, of student development of Information Literacy Skills. As members of the instructional team, the librarians participate in the planning of community assignments and activities to seamlessly integrate information literacy skills into the curriculum. They also develop and deliver information literacy instruction and assistance both in person and electronically as appropriate to each learning community. One of the resources developed for the learning communities is a faculty-librarian collectively-authored webpage on information literacy at the beginning level with goals, exercises, assignments, and assessments. In addition to instruction, librarians also participate in the out of class activities of the learning community and attend student presentations and collaborative grading sessions. The program has grown from three communities in 2003 to seven in 2005-2006 as well as expanding to the sophomore level. This presentation gives an overview of learning communities and the development of the CLAS learning community faculty-librarian collaboration at Arizona State University, including examples of specific activities and experiences related to and within the communities.

Keywords: librarians, learning communities.

1 Introduction

Arizona State University, a major metropolitan research university, is a rich learning environment with abundant opportunities for students in many areas of study. A first year student could easily become overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the offerings and choices as well as the

disconnect between the variety of courses. Students seeking a community of fellow students in courses that are integrated across disciplines and taught by teachers who know each student can choose from several learning communities offered by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. A day in the life of a typical learning community student might include attending a Bioethics class filled with other learning community students and participating in small group discussions with other learning community students in this class; racing across campus to the large introductory Biology class where the 65 learning community students are mixed in among the other 325; heading to Manzanita Hall to have lunch with the lead faculty from her learning community; working at a part time job off campus; logging on to the discussion board to respond to this week's case study discussion; and working on the second draft of her research paper, to be peer reviewed the following day.

2 Overview of Learning Communities

The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education describes learning communities as follows: "In higher education, curricular learning communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. A variety of approaches are used to build these learning communities, with all intended to restructure the students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines" [27]. Three educators are consistently cited as developing the foundation of the philosophy, concepts and experiences upon which learning communities are built: John Dewey, an educator concerned with the "student-centered learning and active learning" [13], Alexander Meiklejohn, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, and Joseph Tussman, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley [11,20,22,24]. The origins of the structure of the curriculum in learning communities are traced to Alexander Meiklejohn's "Experimental College" [17] at the University of Wisconsin, 1927-1933. Meiklejohn was concerned with the evolving structure in higher education that separated the disciplines into individual units and areas. To counter this fragmentation, he developed a curriculum based upon integration: "The demand for integration is the demand that throughout a scheme of instruction there shall run a single and dominating "scheme of reference." It means that,

logically considered, the course of study shall have unity, shall hang together from beginning to end. There shall not be a series of disconnected readings or separate topics whose relations are left undetermined” [18]. Another pioneer, Joseph Tussman, is credited with building on Meiklejohn’s work in the development of a learning community (1965-1969) at the University of California at Berkley [11,26]. With the establishment of the Evergreen State College (1970) in the state of Washington, learning communities as a curricular structure further developed, grew and became a model for many subsequent programs at numerous universities [13]. In the monograph, *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Student, Faculty, and Disciplines*, the authors draw on the experiences of many involved with learning communities to present the “process of conceiving, implementing, teaching, and reflecting on learning communities” [10]. Authors continue to address the strategies and steps in developing and strengthening learning communities [14,23]. Creating a learning community involves partnerships with many other constituents on campus, such as residence life, admissions, orientation staff, academic advisors and student affairs [23,27]. Librarians may also be included [15,16,27]. Focusing on the role of academic librarians, Pederson discusses information literacy and presents examples of the incorporation of information literacy and the activities of librarians in learning communities in a number of institutions [21]. In addition to a librarian, the learning communities at Arizona State University also include a “peer mentor” as a member of the instructional team. Peer mentors are students who have participated in a learning community or are recommended by faculty in relevant subject areas. The role and activities of the peer mentors are described in the Faculty Handbook [4].

2.1 Types of Learning Communities

Currently, the structure can be thought of as three general types as described by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education [27].

The first, “Student Cohorts/Integrative Seminar” involves a small group of students enrolled “in larger classes that faculty do not coordinate. In this instance, intellectual connections and community-building often take place in an additional integrative seminar” [27].

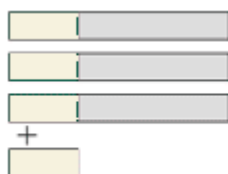


Figure 1: Student Cohorts/Integrative Seminar [27]

The second structure is “Linked Courses/Course Clusters” in which “two or more classes linked thematically or by content which a cohort of students takes together. In this instance, the faculty do plan the program collaboratively” [27].

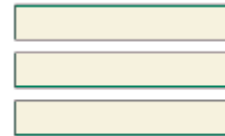


Figure 2: Linked Courses/Course Clusters [27]

The third type, “Coordinated Study,” is the most fully integrated and “may involve coursework that faculty members team teach. The course work is embedded in an integrated program of study” [27].



Figure 3: Coordinated Study [27]

Expanded descriptions of the variety of learning communities offered by a number of research universities are presented in the monograph *Learning Communities in Research Universities* [19]. MacGregor and others incorporate graphics to present an excellent overview of learning communities including the basis, structure, participants, pedagogy, examples, relation to the larger campus community, and implementation [16].

3 Learning Communities at Arizona State University

In 2003, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) implemented the vision of Dean David Young to engage students in integrated, transdisciplinary learning by offering three learning communities, each with a theme that integrated learning from all of the courses [3,4]. This experience fulfills some of the general education requirements, prepares students for studies in their major, and creates a foundation for lifelong learning. As described by the Divisional Dean for Undergraduate Programs: “This program offers students a feeling of community in a large institution as well as multiple opportunities for academic engagement. Students take three to four general studies courses from faculty who work together to design and teach each learning community as an integrated whole. Unique to this program is the integration of information across disciplines, as material discussed by a

history professor is expanded upon by a biology professor and then becomes the focus of a writing assignment done in English" [1]. It is particularly notable that for a Research 1 University, having truly integrated classes is unique. Other large universities tend to offer clustered courses, but not fully integrated (D. Bivona & K. Frost personal communication). The Faculty Handbook describes the learning communities at ASU, the goals common to all of the learning communities, as well as tools for planning and implementing a learning community. The overall goals are "Integration of knowledge," "Transition to college level learning," and "Build connections between and among students and the instructional teams" [4] and guidelines provide faculty with assistance in developing proposals for new learning communities [7,8]. More specific goals address information literacy skills, writing, the development of student oral presentation skills, "extra 'time on task'" through integration, and to "extend learning beyond the walls of the classroom in the form of field trips, peer mentoring, tutoring, and a living-learning component" [4]. Because faculty development is an important component of the development of successful learning communities, workshops for faculty, librarians and peer mentors are designed to facilitate the creation of an integrated syllabus including the incorporation of the information technology and information literacy component into the curriculum. A web page, developed by the Information Technology Steering Committee of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, provides suggestions and resources for learning outcomes, activities, assignments and assessments in information literacy [6]. The faculty of the learning communities plan the syllabus as a team and work to truly integrate the courses using the "coordinated study" model as in Fig. 3. A number of activities facilitate this integration. The writing project integrates content from all three courses. These writing projects may be graded by faculty in each of the disciplines, and librarians may have input on the quality and appropriateness of the information sources used. Other methods of integration include an integrative seminar and online discussion boards. The number of communities offered and the number of students served has grown to seven communities, including one at the sophomore level offered for 2005-2006 [2]. It is anticipated that over 600 students will participate during 2006-2007 (D. Bivona & K. Frost personal communication).

To incorporate a "Living/Learning" experience into the communities during the first year, space was reserved on one floor of a dormitory so that students could experience a "living/learning" community by also living in close proximity with other learning community students. Although residential students were dispersed in subsequent years, a new residence hall, Hassayampa Academic Village, opening in the fall of 2006 with 240 spaces reserved in a separate wing for CLAS learning community students and former learning community members as Resident Assistants, affords a wonderful opportunity for students desiring a living/learning community experience [5]. In addition to the current model of fully

integrated communities, a new type of learning community, "Tier 2," is being developed using linked courses and an integrative seminar. Using a large general education course as the "anchor" course, a second general education course will be linked via a common theme. The faculty then team teach the seminar which integrates learning across both courses. Adding the Tier 2 communities will enable up to a total of 1000 students to participate in a learning community experience each year (D. Bivona, personal communication).

In addition to the integration of the learning experience, students and the instruction teams in the learning communities participate in activities and experiences to promote the connections within the group. Examples of these include field trips (for example: Mayo Clinic, Naturopathic Medical College, or Biodesign Institute), faculty lunches, movie nights, guest speakers, and special events (such as a Bioethics conference and peer mentor organized debates) (D. Bivona & K. Frost personal communication).

4 Role of the librarian

Librarians have been included as members of the teaching team since the beginning of the program. Their role in the learning community and in information literacy in particular is described in the faculty handbook: "The learning community librarian serves as a liaison for information literacy development...the librarian should be included in the planning process and be welcome to attend all instructional team meetings during facilitation of the learning community." The librarians develop workshops and activities related to specific assignments which should be included in the syllabus to "emphasize that information literacy and the librarian's role are integral to the learning community experience." In addition, "The librarian should also be included as an 'instructor' on the learning community Blackboard site in order to utilize the communication and resource tools, particularly in regard to uploading and linking library resource materials. Students can then interact with the librarian through Blackboard as questions arise during their research process" [4].

Many students in the learning communities have commented on the value of their interaction with the librarians and the library. In the words of one student who is now a peer mentor: "Librarians have made such a large difference within the learning communities. They not only are librarians, they are resources, mentors, and friends. It is beneficial to have librarians within the LC because they are able to link students to information and sources that they do not know about before. They train students to be successful throughout their college experience. My college experience would have been more difficult without the information that I have been given by the librarians. I have learned how to find resources, find my way around the library and internet, and properly create citations. I know that whenever I am between a rock and a

hard place, I can always find a helping hand within the library." (S. Holland, personal communication)

5 "Human Disease and Society" Learning Community: A Librarian's Experience

The role of the librarian in the Human Disease and Society Learning Community evolved over the three years of its existence. As part of the planning team from the start, the librarian took on a role of an observer initially, as the roles of the instruction team were defined. As the members of the team became familiar with one another, and with their strengths, the role expanded and the Librarian became more comfortable with her position as the "expert" on information literacy and research resources.

Initially the approach to integrating information literacy learning outcomes was not too different than a standard course. In Year One the instruction in this area was confined to two sessions early in the fall semester (one in English and one in Biology). While specific information literacy learning outcomes had been identified, the instruction was very much traditional library bibliographic instruction, led by the Librarian or other instructor. To support this instruction, and to make it easier for students to use the desired resources, the Librarian created a customized web page for the HDS Learning Community, and linked it from the Blackboard site. The final research papers and presentations, however, fell quite a bit short in meeting the goal of the students demonstrating mastery of seeking, finding and synthesizing appropriate quality information sources. Further, they didn't consistently use the citation style introduced by both the English instructors and the Librarian.

With feedback from the Learning Community instruction team, the Librarian collaborated with the English instructors for the subsequent years to approach the information literacy components of the learning community differently. The "library days" were spread out throughout the semester, and concepts were built upon slowly. These sessions were also restructured to emphasize more active learning and increased group work. These changes were incorporated not only because active learning would be more effective but also to specifically reinforce the goal of "extra time on task" for the learning communities as a whole.

To further imbed the Librarian into the learning community, she utilized as many of the technological tools as possible. She posted answers to student questions in the Blackboard discussion board area, and emailed students from Blackboard to remind them of the availability of research assistance when the deadline for the integrative research paper was near. This resulted in over 50 individual research consultations in a three week period (compared to two in Year One). This year marked the first time the Librarian was invited to participate in the group grading meeting: all 65 student papers were graded by at least three teaching faculty and the Librarian

was invited to give feedback on the students' use of information resources. In this process the Librarian was also able to identify and document a case of plagiarism that none of the other members of the instruction team caught.

Year Three brought more fine tuning to the role of the Librarian and the integration of information literacy into the curriculum. First, she volunteered her experience in organizing information to create the course's Blackboard site. Both the students and instructors in Year Two had found the site to be confusing, and disorganized. By creating the site, the Librarian also was able to control how the library resources were incorporated into the curriculum. During the information literacy instruction sessions, the active learning exercises were expanded upon, and group learning also became the norm. These sessions again were spread out throughout the semester, with four total provided in the fall semester. There was more emphasis on instructing students not only how to cite sources properly (they were all introduced to RefWorks, a bibliographic management tool subscribe by ASU) but also on why correct citation is important. Inadvertent and deliberate plagiarism was discussed, and students were provided clear information on the consequences of plagiarism in any form. Unlike the previous years, there were no documented cases of plagiarism in the student integrated research papers. The overall quality of the research papers, including use of appropriate information sources, was much higher in Year Three than in either previous years.

6 Conclusions

Librarians have been included as members of the instructional teams for the learning communities of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences beginning with the very first communities. Many students and faculty have expressed appreciation for the work that the librarians do to facilitate student success. As the number of students in learning communities grows, the librarians will continue to be creative to meet the challenge of incorporating information literacy into these new communities.

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