Developing Classroom Learning Communities:
Scholarship of Teaching Research Project

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Introduction

The learning community approach in higher education was initiated over 20 years ago in Washington State as an experiment in institutional reform. According to Barbara Leigh Smith (1993), an early advocate, “effective learning environments result from the complex interplay of many factors. The overall setting in which students learn makes all the difference, and the settings, like the learner, are increasingly diverse and challenging” (p. 32). Nowhere is this more apparent than here at SJSU. The rich diversity of our students, the hectic lives they lead and the competing demands on their time, and the university’s history as a commuter campus pose unique challenges for developing communities that are focused on fostering student learning.

While recognizing the possibilities and challenges of creating learning communities at the institutional or campus-wide level, we chose to focus our research project on the classroom context. Specifically, we investigated the teaching methods and instructional practices used by SJSU faculty to create classroom learning communities (CLCs).

This project was propelled by our belief that learning is enhanced when it occurs within classroom learning communities. The research we conducted suggested that higher level thinking in almost any discipline is significantly enhanced by truly hands-on work in which students can demonstrate and test their learning. Faculty have found that the lessons students learn from each other and from being active learners register at a deeper and more accessible level than those they hear only in lecture format. This approach allows learning to take hold and for students to understand how to use the knowledge and skills they are developing. Faculty have found that it is often critical that students recognize both the importance of connecting to their learning communities and how to do that, specifically because learning is typically more complex and complete as a shared activity and because learning is almost always applied in group contexts in the real-world (in their post-graduation lives). We discovered a number of different techniques that faculty employ in building learning communities in their classrooms. The effectiveness of these techniques is determined most by the underlying approach of the faculty member. A key ingredient that faculty who do this work share is an ethic of caring for the students and, in particular, a desire to help students realize their own intellectual possibilities.

One of the essential findings of our research is that faculty believe that the CLC approach can benefit students of color, at-risk students, and marginalized students by providing a safe and
inclusive space for them to express their interests and feel connected to the course content and the learning process. Many of these students have not experienced this in their school lives before coming to SJSU. The challenge in creating this opportunity for students is to build an inclusive learning environment that respects, acknowledges, and encourages the essential and unique contributions of students with different cultural/intellectual experiences, learning styles, and linguistic, cognitive, and social skills and talents.

Finally, an important finding is that the CLC approach to teaching can positively impact the instructor, making for a richer and more enjoyable teaching experience.

**Purposes of the Research**

- To identify what SJSU faculty currently do to create classroom learning communities;
- To identify the successes and challenges in implementing learning communities;
- To promote the development of learning communities at SJSU, as an important factor in enhancing student achievement, and
- To identify the resources available to assist faculty in creating learning communities (with consideration of the diverse needs faculty have in distinct disciplines and the diverse needs of our different communities of students).

**Research Questions**

1. Why do SJSU faculty develop learning communities in their classes?
   What do faculty at SJSU currently do to create learning communities in their classrooms?
2. In the opinion of the faculty member, how effective are these practices?
3. How do faculty assess the effectiveness of these practices?
4. What resources are available, or should be available to help faculty develop learning communities in their classes?

**Method**

**Conceptual Definition of CLCs**

Within the context of this study, we defined "classroom learning communities" as those learning environments that foster:

- an appreciation of the value of student differences (culture, language, gender, expertise, age, etc.) in promoting classroom learning;
- a willingness of students to take intellectual risks within the learning environment;
- a shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999); and
- a connectedness among students that leads to a common identity and a sense of belonging.

**Data Collection**
The method for the study consisted of in-depth, face to face interviews with a sample of faculty members on campus who have a proven track record in creating classroom learning communities.

- Utilizing a purposive sampling method, we identified a list of faculty on campus who are known to have achieved some level of success in creating CLCs. The list was generated by faculty on campus through referrals and recommendations.
- From the initial list, 20 faculty members were selected to be interviewed.
- Each of us conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with approximately five faculty members using the following interview protocol:
  1) Why is creating a learning community important to your classes/teaching?
  2) What do you do to create learning communities?
     *Follow-up questions:* What has really worked well? What has not? What have you had to change/develop? Are there specific needs or constraints that you face in your discipline or classes that require unique approaches? How do you deal with that? Are there specific groups of students in your classes that require unique approaches? How do you deal with that?
  3) What is the impact of these practices and learning communities on students? What is the impact of these practices and learning communities on you?
  4) How do you know that these teaching practices are effective?
     *Follow-Up Questions:* Do you formally assess these teaching practices? How? Do you informally assess these teaching practices? How? Do you think your work creating learning communities affects your SOTES? How?
  5) What resources have helped you develop these learning communities? What other resources would you like to have?

- Interviews were recorded, in some cases with written notes and other cases with a tape recorder. Written transcriptions of the interviews were compiled.
- We used thematic analyses to analyze and interpret the data.

**Results and Analysis**

**Category 1: Beliefs and Pedagogical Assumptions about the Teaching/Learning Process that Underlie the Development of Classroom Learning Communities**

The three themes that make up this category establish a fundamental framework or foundation that make CLCs possible. This point is critical because the instructional methods, activities and techniques that faculty use to create CLC will be successful only to the extent that they are framed within a broader set of pedagogical assumptions.

**A. Learning is Strengthened When Approached as a Social Activity**

- Students learn as much from each other as the instructor; collectively students bring more knowledge to the classroom than the teacher can. This emphasizes the need for horizontal forms of communication in the classroom.
- The instructor assumes the role of facilitator, not just the knowledge expert.
Learning occurs when instructors assist students in assuming an active learning stance, as opposed to a passive orientation where the faculty simply imparts information and the student receives it.

B. Students Are Connected to Course Content
- Instructors assist students in connecting course content to their own lived circumstances, experiences, and post-graduation interests.
- The instructor models for students the types of professional dispositions that they are trying to teach. Quote: “I am modeling the behaviors that I want them to adopt.”

C. Learning Involves Risk and Requires a Safe and Supportive Environment
- Instructors help create a safe and comfortable classroom environment for students to “tell their stories,” to take intellectual risks, and to effectively manage their differences.
- Instructors help create a learning environment that enables students to assume some ownership in the learning process; students need to have a sense of control and they need to take responsibility for their learning, as individuals and as a group.

Category 2: Practical Application and Instructional Methods

The three themes that comprise this category describe how the pedagogical framework outlined above is actually applied in concrete learning situations. The themes are loosely organized in chronological order, beginning with methods that help establish CLCs and ending with methods that enable students to evaluate their own learning. As noted earlier, these methods will be successful in creating CLCs to the extent that they are enacted by instructors and students within the broader pedagogical framework.

A. Personal Knowledge: Students Are Connected to Each Other and the Instructor
- Introduction activities that allow the students and instructor to get to know each other as individuals—as unique people, including knowing the students by name.
- Instructional practices and activities that enable students and faculty to interact and learn from each other outside of the classroom context.

B. Decentering the Faculty: Methods that Encourage Students to Learn From Each Other
- Develop assignments so that students will have the opportunity to work together, such as small group activities. These activities require group interaction and collaboration to be successful, as opposed to simply adding together the contributions of individual group members.
- Use methods, strategies, and assignments that prompt student engagement and participation, such as question-asking techniques that stimulate class interaction and discussion.
- Use methods, strategies, and assignments that encourage students to talk to each other, not just the instructor.

C. Self and Peer Assessment: Students Are Involved in Evaluating Their Learning
Activities that enable students to develop class assignments and the criteria on which they will be evaluated.

Peer evaluation exercises; for example, having students read and edit each others’ drafts of papers.

Collecting student feedback throughout the semester, not just at the end. And having students evaluate different dimensions of the course, such as their own and their peer’s level of preparation.

Category 3: Challenges

Classroom learning communities need concentrated periods of time to develop; the way classes are currently scheduled does not always permit this.

Smaller class size helps enable classroom learning communities, larger classes do not.

Faculty workload and time demands in other areas of faculty life work against the development of CLCs.

Physical space and arrangement, including the types of desks, can help or hinder. Given the condition of most of the physical structures on campus, they mostly hinder.

Students have busy lives and their work schedules create challenges for creating community, even at the classroom level.

Based on their previous educational experiences, students often come to the classroom with the expectation that they will adopt a passive learning stance. They expect the method of instruction to be lecture, and they equate learning with acquiring information.

Some students are not invested in their classes and their own learning; for example, they take a GE class mainly to get credit and complete a requirement, not to learn or to broaden their understanding of the world.

To be successful, the CLC approach needs to be embedded deeply within a class, forming the underpinning of the pedagogical framework (see category 1 above). When the approach is included as an “add on,” there is less student buy in and more student resistance.

Category 4: Resources and Needs

Faculty who are involved in their own learning communities, such as the Teacher Scholar program, provides impetus for creating classroom learning communities. Resources should help support faculty learning communities. This reenergizes faculty and gives them opportunities to develop and change their instructional practices.

Resources are needed for faculty to attend conferences and teaching workshops, and for acquiring teaching-related materials, including on campus forums and discussion groups.

Discipline specific resources for teaching content-specific subject matter should be made available.

Physical spaces and the arrangement of classrooms need to be upgraded.

Category 5: Assessment and Student Learning
- Have students help design the evaluation questions and otherwise be involved in designing the activities and instruments used to assess their learning, including the development of the learning objectives.
- It is difficult to assess the teaching practices that foster community building and community learning through standard quantitative measures. Quote: “My job is to plant seeds that do not germinate at the same time.”
- Use different types of class evaluations, including open ended questionnaires.
- Assessment is continual; conducted at multiple points in time, and not just at the end of the semester.
- Develop innovative types of assessment that foster and reflect “deep” learning as opposed to satisfying superficial criteria.

References


