

Assessment of Innovative Efforts: Lessons from the Learning Community Movement

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The interest that's brought the three of us together has been that strand of innovative work known as learning communities, particularly the assessment of learning communities. Our remarks here will be framed, however, not only in the context of issues associated with learning-community assessment but also as lessons for the assessment of any innovative work.

We will begin with a brief overview of curricular learning communities to give you a sense of the water in which all of us swim. We will then report briefly on research on the state of learning-community assessment. We will follow that with some ways to frame assessment efforts that are particularly appropriate to innovative work. We will conclude with a few stories about learning-communities assessment and some lessons learned from them.

What is a Learning Community?

The phrase "learning communities" is used in many contexts today, including virtual learning communities, learning communities in residence life programs,

and individual classrooms as learning communities. We will use this term here to represent curricular approaches that are linking classes, often around interdisciplinary themes, and enrolling common groups of students for a quarter, a semester, or in some cases even a year. We see such learning communities as a very intentional restructuring of time, space and student life.

There are multiple purposes for learning communities, and that's why they're a powerful kind of venue. The fundamental aim of learning communities is to deepen learning, create a deeper sense of connection among ideas and curricular issues, and create a deeper sense of community. More specifically, learning communities aim to promote the higher level of student engagement and success that comes from deeper intellectual interaction. They aim to foster the complex thinking skills that come from frequently looking at abstruse ideas in an interdisciplinary context. They also aim to foster a social as well as intellectual community. Finally, learning communities increase faculty vitality and enhance their repertoires of teaching practices.

Learning communities put courses that are usually enrolled in and taught separately into larger, more coherent programs of study. This is not a new idea. We can find examples of these kinds of linkages going back to the 1920s under a variety of names. In the last 15 years, however, interest in expanding these kinds of programs has grown. In an interesting intersection, it's in those same 15 years that assessment has emerged on our campuses and become a priority.

Because learning communities are developed at all kinds of institutions with all kinds of curricular configurations, it's almost impossible to create or present a typology that includes all learning communities. But we can visualize a generalized set of types on a continuum from simple to complex curricular linkages, from minimal faculty coordination of the curriculum to a fully coordinated, team-taught program.

In its simplest form, a learning community may be composed of a small group of students that travels together to uncoordinated, stand-alone classes that also enroll other students. The student group then meets in an additional, integrated seminar to discuss a concept addressed across the classes. For example, the students might take courses in history, film, and American literature, and the seminar might discuss what the American character is.

The next step on the hierarchy is a linkage of two courses or perhaps a cluster of three. Developmental students might, for example, take an intermediate algebra course linked to a pre-college chemistry course. In one school, this is preparatory to entering and passing college chemistry. The algebra and chemistry teachers work together to build basic principles in chemistry and integrate that with algebraic thinking.

An example from the top of the hierarchy would be the fully team-taught Ecological Systems cluster at Puget Sound. It includes coursework in terrestrial and marine ecology, history of the Northwest, and a math course in statistics and modeling.

These examples show that learning communities have enormous variability in structure and content and in their degree of curricular coordination and co-curricular connections. They also have enormous variability in their pedagogies. In any given learning community, you might see intensive writing and peer editing, cooperative or collaborative learning, the use of technology, service learning, and many kinds of integrative assignments and projects. As with many other innovative efforts, learning communities involve a simultaneous change in both curriculum and pedagogy and often very different expectations of student work. They're complex innovations and complex interventions. Just tweaking a course a bit does not create a learning community; both the curriculum and pedagogy must be rethought.

Lessons from Assessments of Learning Communities

Like many innovations that are ambitious and labor- and resource-intensive, learning communities often find themselves immediately in the spotlight of scrutiny and pressed to prove themselves very quickly. Program innovators are therefore not only inventing new curricula and exploring new pedagogies but often taking on evaluation responsibility as well. Our colleague Faith Gablenick calls this the poet-critic tension in innovation. We ask faculty to invent, experiment, improve, and tweak in new space. At the same time, we ask them to be critics, very quickly evaluating their work to prove its efficacy. Almost all learning community programs developed

over the past fifteen years have been bootstrap, grassroots endeavors that have bubbled up among inventive, pioneering folks who are pressed simultaneously to justify, evaluate, and prove. It's been messy but exciting.

In a review of Evergreen's compilation of 70 assessment studies of learning communities, we found some promising results.

1. Learning community students generally fare better academically, socially, and personally than those in control groups. This is especially true for at-risk students, underrepresented students, and students who generally make Cs and Ds—very good news.
2. Learning community students' learning goes deeper, is more integrated, and is more complex than that of students in control groups.
3. Learning community faculty make significant gains in personal, social, and professional development.
4. The integration of academic and social life gives both faculty and students a sense of community.
5. Faculty and students both develop sensitivity to and respect for other points of view, other cultures, and other people.

Our review also reveals gaps in what we know. First, we know little about commuters, transfers, alumni, and administrators. We also need more information on under-represented students, on faculty and student transitions in and out of learning communities, and on what brings about intended and unintended results.

Second, over half the studies examined the most integrated type of learning community, generally called "coordinated studies." We need more research on the less integrated types of learning communities.

Third, we need more carefully planned studies that portray the spectrum with what we call disinterested subjectivity.

Fourth, researchers and evaluators need opportunities to learn or re-learn qualitative and quantitative techniques. They also need time and space to do that work well. These are especially important in this era of performance-based funding. Sustained, rigorous, qualitative and quantitative assessment will contribute meaningfully to the growth and viability of innovations such as the learning community movement.

Planning an Assessment of an Innovative Programs: Asking the Right Questions

Let's now use what we have learned about assessing learning communities to consider how to think about the assessment of such innovations. Unfortunately, when you're planning a program, how you will assess it is often one of the very last questions you ask yourself. But it shouldn't be your first question, either; a range of other questions often dictates what you end up doing and so should be considered first.

The first question you must ask when planning an assessment of an innovative effort is what mode you are in. Are you using assessment to improve the learning community? Or are you proving the value of the learning community in order to validate and/or institutionalize it? Those two modes give rise to very different ways of thinking about assessment.

Second, what are the goals of the innovation? What are the specific goals that it intends to achieve? These will tell you what outcome measures to focus on.

Third, who are the audiences with whom you intend to share the data and

with whom you must hold a conversation about the evidence? If, for example, your mode is to prove and validate the learning community, you need to ask yourself whose support and participation you hope to gain. Faculty? Administrators? The president? State and foundation agencies? Other students or potential students?

Fourth, what data do you want to collect, and what methods do you want to use to collect those data? If, for example, you intend to prove to potential students that the learning community is worth enrolling in, you would need qualitative information such as student quotes. If, however, you need to prove the learning community's value to an administrator who is concerned about student retention gains, you'll need some numbers.

Finally, what are the strategies you will use to share the data? You know the old saw: data not used are data not worth collecting. You must plan now how the data will be shared, with which audiences, and in which mode, because that will determine how you assess the program.

Only after you've answered these questions can you design the assessment of an innovative program.

The Seattle Central Community College Experience

Three examples highlight the different ways we have learned to do assessments for different purposes. In 1985, Seattle Central Community College began experimenting with team-taught, interdisciplinary coordinated study programs, and the immediate feedback was very positive. The faculty teaching in the programs were excited. A few administrators were very much onboard and supportive. Students seemed stimulated and pleased. There was some impressive data about rates of course completion and re-enrollment.

So all went well, in some ways. But the faculty teaching in the program wanted to convince themselves and their colleagues of the real texture of the program. Was it just a feel-good experience, or was it something substantive, of real value to students in their lives and their learning?

So the faculty were looking for something more than the standard end-of-course, fill-in-the-bubble evaluations, which seemed unable to capture the complexity of what the faculty felt was happening in the classroom. They were also looking for a simple way to obtain information on students' perceptions of their learning community experience without intruding on student or faculty time and without disrupting the learning community's curricular focus or ethos.

The strategy the faculty struck upon was self-reflection. They asked students to write formal essays reflecting on their learning, not so much evaluating the program or the faculty but rather reflecting on themselves as learners, describing their experience and identifying benefits and challenges. In a blind study, volunteer faculty readers analyzed the essays to discern patterns and themes.

The results were quite positive. The readers found that students very much valued the learning community experience in just the ways that faculty hoped they would. There was a genuine resonance between teachers' goals for the learning community and students' identification of those goals.

The more important and lasting results, however, weren't anticipated, a true lesson in evaluating innovative work. Students, on their own, without any prompting, regularly mentioned the very general education outcomes that the college had already identified as central to a degree. And the essays led to intense discussions among the faculty on the

language students used to talk about their experience, discussions that led to additional changes and improvements in the learning community program.

So the self-reflection exercise gave students a valuable experience and gave faculty a unique window on that experience. Within a year, all learning community teams began to use student self-reflection essays systematically. The essays have become a permanent fixture in all learning community teaching at this college.

A very modest effort to prove the efficacy of the program unwittingly became an enriched form of learning community pedagogy. A small, inexpensive, grass-roots assessment effort had a very high degree of payoff—many unexpected results.

The Spokane Files Community College Experience

Spokane Files Community College had a well-established, well-regarded ten-year-old learning community program with campus support. A sudden, complete turnover of senior administrators, a restructuring, a new focus on outcomes assessment, and an upcoming accreditation brought forth the occasion to do a major yearlong study—a highly qualitative one—to address these constituencies and needs.

A team of eight learning community faculty from disciplines across the college were trained in qualitative methodology. Using small, mobile research teams, they interviewed positive, typical, and negative students, faculty, and administrators. They administered questionnaires to learning community students and a control population in three types of classes over three consecutive quarters. They poured over student class journals. The institutional research office collected some quantitative data for them.

The results affirmed the quality of the program and its significant contributions to the college. They identified weaknesses and gaps and made plans to address them. As an added benefit, the team experienced a research process that mirrors the inclusive collaborative and conversational style of the learning community classroom. The study's outcomes re-educated everyone about an innovation that many had come to take for granted.

Creating Powerful Assessments Through Multiple Methods

Multiple methods make for a more powerful assessment, one that not only helps document and explain the impact of a program but also allows you to discover other goals, perhaps unintended, that might have more impact on the program than expected beforehand. So our third example is from a national study that studied several collaborative learning communities across the nation. We collected quantitative survey information from program students and a matched comparison sample, plus qualitative evidence, including interviews, observations, focus groups, and ethnographic research.

We learned that quantitative evidence is often very important in demonstrating impact. Our survey instrument, a variant of George Kuh's College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ), measured the amount of activity that students and faculty invest in the learning community, in the comparison groups, in course work, and in library work. It also assessed faculty and student engagement in writing and their perceptions of gain.

Across the board, students in learning communities invested significantly more "time on task." The engagement clearly activated their involvement.

We also measured student perceptions of the environment, classes, other students, faculty, administrators, campus climate, and their own involvement. Again, across the board, students in learning communities perceived the environment more positively, themselves as more involved, and even administrators as nicer. (So if you're an administrator, try learning communities!)

We also examined pass rates in developmental courses and continuation or persistence. For each measure, there were significant differences favoring students in learning communities. This held true both for developmental education students and for other students.

While these quantitative data document the effects of learning communities, they don't tell us why these effects occur. This is where qualitative studies help; they indicate the underlying dynamics that help explain what's happening. For instance, our qualitative findings showed that students find support through the activities that emerge from the collaborative exercises of the learning community. One student said, "The learning community was like a raft running the rapids of my life." She was a person with two children, two jobs, and no partner in the house. The support she found in a learning community was critical to explaining how she managed to continue.

Some other quotations from our qualitative studies document how engagement leads to involvement in learning. "The more I talk to other people about the class stuff, the homework, the tests, the more I'm actually learning." "[I'm learning more,] not only about other people, but also about the subject because my brain is getting more [and] because I'm getting more involved with other students in the class." These quotations help explain why social engagement leads to learning gains.

One student adds, "I'm getting more involved with the class, even after class." For many students, the class becomes a peer group whose activities emerge from and expand beyond the classroom. George Kuh has a wonderful expression: a "seamless learning environment." We found that learning communities and collaborative pedagogies create seamless learning environments, expanding from the classroom out.

In learning communities, students learn to interact with people of different races, sizes, colors, everything. As a result, not only do they learn more, they learn better. It isn't just spending more time with others—it's the value students place on this powerful, diverse environment of learning from others. This is what students value most about a learning community.

We didn't expect to uncover the findings demonstrated by these quotations. As this example demonstrates, multiple methods, and qualitative methods in particular, allow you to not only explain but discover things you may not have thought of beforehand.

Thoughts to Reflect On

Two of these stories are examples of internal assessment work that were grassroots in nature and had positive impacts within their colleges in terms of communicating results. They contrast with our third story, which stems from a major national research project using multiple methods to study a variety of institutions. All three stories make clear that the struggles to make an innovative program work and to prove that it works must happen side by side.

There are several important lessons from the information we've shared.

First, if any kind of innovative work is to expand and become more robust, we need to get much more serious about building both the practice and the assessment of that work.

Second, if you're not clear on the goals of an assessment and the audiences to which that assessment will be directed, it's hard to do the assessment well. So your first task is to ask yourself why, with whom and for what purpose you are assessing, and then proceed.

Third, gathering data isn't as important as using it strategically and

communicating it to both receptive and not-so-receptive audiences.

Finally, assessment work is never done. We can't assume that once an innovation is in place, our work is complete and our innovation will continue to be fully understood. Senior administrators come and go, events occur, and change happens, so the need to re-educate and re-develop will emerge. That means hard work, but that hard work brings forth the opportunity to learn. ●



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