

Marcos Cicerone, September 2, 2008

As part of the ongoing assessment of learning communities, the LinC program conducts a series of focus groups with participation of students from both pre-collegiate levels and general education level learning communities. Feedback from these sessions reveals several major common themes:

- a) a tangible sense of community, social interaction, interdependence and teamwork
- b) improved quality of learning
- c) development of self-confidence and strengthened academic and personal skills
- d) application of learning to personal life.

Students' initial reaction to being part of a learning community is a very strong sense of feeling connected to classmates and to their teachers. They report making new friends, becoming involved with other students and feeling welcomed, supported and encouraged by their peers.

“Being in a new country I didn’t know what to do with school...,I like the idea of making new friends [and] you get to know people really easily”

For many students the learning community is their first experience of college and they point out that they are the first and only ones in their family and peer group to continue their education beyond high school. They arrive somewhat fearful and insecure and for these students especially the strong sense of community becomes a major factor in their successful transition to college.

“Getting to know other people especially since we are first quarter students is really good...it help the transition to college...I feel more like I fit in.”

Not surprisingly, students comment that the collaborative pedagogy and group work has a significant impact on their approach to learning. Students report spending more time on task, working together outside of class, and participating actively in other group situations.

“...students are very involved with students...after class we send emails to each other and stuff like that. And we talk outside of class and like I care about how they’re doing and [they] care about how I’m doing”

“what I learned..is that you have to get out there and you have to talk to people and form working groups, study groups...It’s more fun to learn with others”

They are also keenly aware of the value of cooperation and group learning.

“I like the aspect of working together with other groups and sharing information and getting projects done together....community means that you’re part of something and your fellow students aren’t working against you. They’re not competing, they’re there to help you.

“In a community...you’re helping others and others are helping you...you need to work together to finish our projects. And doing that perhaps we need to believe in each other and trust each other and contribute to the work, so nobody can be lazy”

In addition to an awareness and appreciation of the social context of learning, students perceive an improvement in the quality of their learning. Students report that they are more inquisitive, more open to multiple perceptions and interpretations of an issue, and more likely to question their own assumptions as well as those others, including the teacher.

“Everybody really participates and puts something in. And the community I think it kind of helped me open my mind to everyone’s perceptions and ideas and see what works and what doesn’t...I became more open to other people’s opinions...I would say being in the learning community makes me more open to new things.”

“[we] get in there and ask questions and we would like question everything that we learned or what we understood”

As a result of this process, students have identified a difference in the nature of their learning, mentioning synergy of ideas, connections, active engagement and a deeper understanding of the material.

“One of the things I noticed is that you really do get into a deep grasp with the subject to the point where you can actually use it...when you are through with the class you will not only be able to fill in the blanks, you will be able to think about it. Conversations outside of the class of school...are deeper and more intellectual.”

Students repeatedly comment about the effect of their learning community experience on themselves outside the classroom. For many students, their experience has provided an opportunity for great personal growth, for exploring options and discovering their own voice.

“I’m learning how to, like, come at things that I have faced in life on a common daily basis. I’m approaching them in a new angle and examining them [from] different perspectives...I knew I was going to be a more critical thinker. I’m now even thinking about becoming a vegetarian. It has nothing to do with what we are doing [in class].

“[The learning community] has made me more outspoken. I’m that introvert that doesn’t talk very much to other people. It kind of has brought me out of that little shell. It’s helped me with my children in their study habits ...[and] it’s taught me how to study..[and] get more things done outside of school[and] be more assertive.”

“I’m just getting more assertive and trying to tackle many personal issues and just opening up to new experiences.”

“Because there were so many different discussions, I got to refine my ability to actually have people listen. Because there is arguing a point and thee is arguing a point in a way that another person will be open to listen...I phrase things so they would not go behind their ideology shield and they would actually listen to the points I was trying to get across. I think that’s helped me—just to be able to refine being able to reach people. “

“We are the loud mouths from our class, [but] I did see a lot of the quieter people come up with an opinion and form their own opinions in a way that I’m sure that they had not before.”

In a similar vein, students enthusiastically explain in great detail how they now apply their learning community experience to their personal life outside of class, whether in politics, community work, the environment, business or interpersonal relationships.

“I talk about philosophy with my friends and I try to apply it more in today’s life...I can apply what I’ve learning in philosophy like asking them questions about why they believe what they believe. Sort of relate it back to what I learned”.

“I’ve actually found a couple of different ways of applying this information. I use a version of [our speech outline format] for writing letters to people now because I am a third owner in property and we rent it out to tenants...I write letters in a problem/solution format...so it’s changed that aspect of communication...and interactions with some of the people around me as well. I feel like I’ve benefited from it.”

“I actually tried it [active listing and paraphrasing] on my 16 year old...[and] she responded so well. And using it on her and you learn about people –what their pattern is...how they get out of situations... .now I understand whey they do what they do and work around that...Those “I” messages...it’s all about communicating how you feel and that it’s OK you feel that way.”

“Group work makes you more understanding and accepting to other people’s opinions who really don’t agree with you. So when you get away from school in your work life, you’ll of course disagree with other people in your career and it makes you more capable to accept others’ opinions. And that’s a very healthy thing.”