

Why Learning Communities?

Why Now?


Are learning communities just another fad or an idea whose time has truly come? The author considers what's going on in higher education research and practice—and in the philosophy informing our thinking—that makes the idea of learning communities resonate so strongly among its advocates.

By K. Patricia Cross

THE STIMULUS for today's high interest in learning communities is coming from many sources, which often have differing motivations that nevertheless complement and reinforce one another. Most people are interested in learning communities because they offer hope of making college a more holistic, integrated learning experience for students. But learning communities can range all the way from loosely structured programs that offer students the opportunity to take a set of courses in common, to heavily structured programs of integrated courses that are team taught by faculty from different disciplines, to a cohort of students who may even

live together in residence halls. Understandably there is thus considerable debate over the definition of *learning communities*. For the purposes of this article I shall simply define them as *groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning*.

Why is there so much interest in learning communities? I think the reasons can be divided into three broad categories: *philosophical* (because learning communities fit into a changing philosophy of knowledge), *research based* (because learning communities fit with what research tells us about learning), and *pragmatic* (because learning communities work).



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A CHANGING PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE

THE MOST RADICAL—and some would say most coherent—concept of learning communities is based in the concept of collaborative learning. The term *collaborative learning* has been captured by its advocates as something of a brand name and has become associated with a distinctive epistemology for learning communities. Kenneth Bruffee, a professor of English at Brooklyn College, bases his advocacy of collaborative learning in the concept of “nonfoundational social construction,” which to my mind is a rather awkward term for the belief that knowledge is socially constructed rather than discovered. “We construct and maintain knowledge,” Bruffee says, “not by examining the world but by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers” (1995, p. 9). Knowledge requires language, and people construct knowledge out of the language available to them in their community. Knowledge, says Bruffee, is “therefore not universal and absolute. It is local and historically changing. We construct it and reconstruct it, time after time, and build it up in layers” (p. 222).

In contrast, the traditional view of knowledge as foundational contends that there is a reality “out there,” a foundation on which all knowledge is built. It is the task of learners to discover the external reality that exists. This might be done in groups, of course, but students would work together cooperatively to find the best or “correct” answer. The argument for group work from the knowledge-as-foundational viewpoint is that two heads (or more) are better than one. So even in this traditional view of knowledge as reality waiting to be discovered, group learning may prove advantageous.

In the nonfoundational view of knowledge, however, a community of learners is not only advantageous, it is also necessary, because people construct knowledge by working together, not just cooperatively but interdependently. The fundamental assumption of *constructivism* is that knowledge is actively built by learners as

they shape and build mental frameworks to make sense of their environments.

As William Whipple argues, the strengths of social construction for learning communities are several. First and foremost, social construction conceives of knowledge not as something that is transferred in an authoritarian structure from teacher to student but rather as something that teachers and students work interdependently to develop. Thus it fosters active learning over passive learning, cooperation over competition, and community over isolation. The passive learning presumably encouraged or at least permitted by lectures, the competition engendered by grades and test scores, and the isolation that exists for large numbers of commuting, part-time students are some of the major criticisms of the pedagogies of our time. A nonfoundational view of knowledge may be one way to correct these faults.

It does not take a whole lot of looking to see how much of the scholarly work on learning today is questioning, in one way or another, our dependence on the authority of the scientific method to discover knowledge. The late Donald Schön, for example, contended that the professions are in the midst of a crisis of confidence and legitimacy because professional knowledge is mismatched to the conditions of practice. Education is a perfect example of the mismatch between research and practice. The problems we have to solve in education are complex and ill-formed. It is nowhere near as simple as we pretend when we talk earnestly about improving learning and assessing learning outcomes. The currently popular distillations of research findings with implications for practice rely largely on what Schön calls “technical rationality,” which he defines as

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“instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” (1983, p. 21). He describes the process this way: “Researchers are supposed to provide the basic and applied science from which to derive techniques for diagnosing and solving the problems of practice. Practitioners are supposed to furnish researchers with problems for study and with tests of the utility of research results. The researcher’s role is distinct from, and usually considered superior to, the role of the practitioner” (p. 26).

This view not only results in the hierarchical model and the separation of research and practice, but it also calls into question the epistemology upon which current education is based: specifically, the discovery of knowledge through a rigorous application of the “scientific method.” Schön puts the dilemma this way:

There is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing “messes” incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern. Shall the practitioner stay on the high, hard ground where he can practice rigorously, as he understands rigor, but where he is constrained to deal with problems of relatively little social importance? Or shall he descend into the swamp where he can engage the most important and challenging problems if he is willing to forsake technical rigor? [1983, p. 42]

Schön recommends that practitioners engage in a search for knowledge by asking themselves what “kinds

of knowing are already embedded in competent practice” (p. 29). Such a search calls for communities of practitioners to generate relevant knowledge about the practice of their profession. Such communities, it seems to me, would include college teachers and college students working collaboratively to learn chemistry or history or political science or any other subject matter that is part of the higher education curriculum. The practice of scholarship, many would say, is embedded in learning communities.

Another strong sign of a radical shift in our view of how knowledge is generated and of its implications for learning is found in work on ethnic minorities and women. Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues sparked a strong strain of sympathetic recognition among women teachers and students when they demonstrated that many women display “ways of knowing” that differ from those of the male model that has dominated academe for so many years. The male model is characterized by “separate knowing”—a way of learning that is impersonal and objective, involving detachment, critical argument, analysis, and other descriptors that we associate with the scientific method. Many women, however, are “connected learners.”

Blythe Clinchy describes a connected learner’s search for knowledge: “She does not ask whether it is right; she asks what it means. When she says, ‘Why do you think that?’ she doesn’t mean, ‘What evidence do you have to back that up?’ She means, ‘What in your experience led you to that position?’” (1994, p. 122). This student’s search for knowledge, argues Clinchy, is best accomplished through connected conversations “in which each person serves as midwife to each other person’s thoughts, and each builds on the other’s ideas” (p. 123). At heart, then, a connected conversation is a learning community at its best, and it is also a reflection of changing ideas about the source of knowledge and learning.

The cutting-edge books about the revolution taking place in business are yet another indication of the pervasiveness of a changing perspective about the origins of knowledge. Peter Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, calls for “a shift of mind—from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something ‘out there’ to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it” (pp. 12–13). Once again, that sounds like a shift from discovering knowledge that lies in reality “out there” to creating knowledge that lies within human interchange.

My point is that this changing view of the nature of knowledge is more than an academic diversion. It is providing an alternative view for some of the most prevalent criticisms of our educational systems—egalitarianism versus hierarchies, collaboration versus competitiveness, and active participation versus passive absorption. The current wave of interest in learning communities is not, I think, just nostalgia for the human touch, or just research about the efficacy of small-group learning, but a fundamental revolution in epistemology.

Having said all of that, I am not about to throw out the baby with the bathwater. What we know through traditional research about learning is quite a bit less than we think we know, but it is still useful as one way of knowing.


WHAT THE RESEARCH ON LEARNING TELLS US

THE RESEARCH ARGUMENTS for engaging students in interactive group learning can be found among three general types of research: empirical

research on learning outcomes, theory-based research on motivation and cognition, and research on intellectual development.

Research on Learning Outcomes. Research on learning outcomes frequently involves huge data banks of correlational studies that investigate which subset of students learned the most in college, and a best guess at what was responsible. The widely distributed *Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* is a synthesis of research findings taken largely from correlational studies (see Chickering and Gamson, 1987, and the March 1987 issue of the *AAHE Bulletin*). One well-publicized conclusion drawn from these principles that is especially relevant to learning communities is that students who have frequent contact with faculty members in and out of class during their college years are more satisfied with their educational experiences, are less likely to drop out, and perceive themselves to have learned more than students who have less faculty contact.

One problem with correlational outcomes research, of course, is that correlation tells us what goes together but not why. It may well be, for example, that self-confident students who are doing well in college are more likely to seek out faculty contacts than students who are not doing well. It may also be that faculty who invite conversations with students are the kind of people who enhance intellectual growth. Were we able to expand this “good practice” to include those faculty and students who are more indifferent, it may be that the findings would be less positive. Nevertheless, despite reservations about research methodologies, there is good, solid correlational evidence that students who are involved with the people and activities of learning communities are significantly more likely than their less involved peers to show growth in intellectual interests and values, and apparently more likely to get more out of their college education.



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A related method of looking at the impact of college on students comes from research comparing subgroups of students who have had different experiences. One of the best-documented studies was done by Vincent Tinto and Pat Russo on the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College, which involves curricular integration. Tinto and Russo found that students in the program reported greater involvement in a range of academic and social activities and greater developmental gains than students in the regular curriculum. Moreover, students in the coordinated program reported more positive views of the college, its activities, and its people, and persisted at a higher rate than students in the standard program. The findings of this carefully conducted study were altogether positive, and especially important because they demonstrated that effective learning communities can be established at urban commuter colleges with high proportions of part-time working students.

A rather different environment was studied by Richard Light, who has led the effort to assess the learning of Harvard undergraduates. He found that freshmen who chose at least one small-enrollment course reported a significantly better educational experience at Harvard than those who did not, but he also found that for larger classes, dividing students into small groups of between four and six students to work on substantive topics had a clear payoff. “The payoff,” he says, “comes in a modest way for student achievement, as measured by test scores. It comes in a far bigger way on measures of students’ involvement in courses, their enthusiasm, and their pursuit of topics to a more advanced level” (p. 70).

This appears to be a generally uniform conclusion of the research—that the most consistent positive findings center around attitudinal and affective change—but it is reasonable to assume that more positive attitudes result in more productive learning.

Developmental Research and Theory. A second large group of research studies includes that conducted by developmental psychologists, who are interested in the personal and intellectual development of students. William Perry is perhaps the developmentalist best known to those of us in higher education. He posits nine positions of intellectual development for college students, but the relevance of his work for learning communities can be presented briefly in a nutshell that highlights the three major levels. College teachers have probably observed these levels in students of all ages.

Perry’s scheme starts with a level he calls *dualism*. Dualists are absolutists; they assume that there is a right answer to every question. They see the world in black and white, right and wrong, true and false. They look to an authority for the answer and have a low tolerance for ambiguity. Critics claim that traditional education encourages this low level of personal and intellectual development in its reward of “right” answers. At the midlevel positions of development, gray areas appear as students begin to discover that this is a relativistic world, that authorities often disagree, and that the views of their fellow students often differ from their own. In an effort to resolve these inevitable discrepancies, students adopt an “everyone has a right to their own opinion” stance. Finally, at the more advanced positions of development, students begin to see that some opinions are better than others and that truth is contextual. They conclude that they must find integrity for themselves by identifying the things that are important and central to their sense of self.

Developmentalists have much in common with social constructionists; both are interactionists, holding that the individual and the environment interact in a continuing dialogue that leads to new organizations of knowledge and new perceptions of experience. Both contend that dialogue and exposure to different points of view help students attain higher levels of intellectual

development. Developmentalists would also support the contention of collaborative learning that the teacher must not be looked to as the person with the right answers; rather, the task of education is to help students think through the conflicts that exist in a relativistic world and reach their own understanding. A student quoted by Vincent Tinto in a 1995 article on learning communities illustrates a high level of development. The student, who is involved in the Coordinated Studies Program at Settle Central Community College, says, “So you are constantly having to think, rethink, and even re-rethink what’s going on in the light of all the feedback you’re getting from all these different points of view; what it does is shape and mold your own point of view to a much finer degree and gives you a much broader base to look from, I think, than you would [get] from just the traditional teacher/pupil situation” (p. 12).

Research on Cognition and Motivation. The third large category of research relevant to learning communities is research on motivation and cognition, frequently conducted by psychologists rather than by educational researchers. This research is often experimental rather than correlational, and it leans on theory rather than on straight empiricism. Take, for example, a simple experiment to try to learn more about how people generate their own understanding. In this experiment, subjects were shown the following sentence: *The window is not closed*. Later they were asked to recall the sentence, given the following options: *The window is open. The window is not open. The window is closed. The window is not closed*. Subjects chose *The window is open* more often than any other incorrect choice, thus preserving the meaning of the sentence, if not the precise wording. If learners have no image of what an unclosed window is, then their only recourse is to memorize the exact wording of the sentence. Most of us have probably witnessed the frantic attempts of students with a hazy grasp of a subject to memorize the wording of new informa-

tion even when they do not understand it—or perhaps worse yet, to write it down word for word in the hope of memorizing it for when they will need it, namely, at exam time. But research shows that meaning is made at the time the sentence is understood, not later in recognition or recall.

Thus, when students negotiate their own understandings by actively working to understand others’ contributions and to fit them into what they already know, they develop a network that is called, in modern learning theory, a *schema*, which is a kind of cognitive map that permits new learning to become understanding by making connections to what the student already knows. Small interactive peer-group learning is more likely than a lecture or a textbook to make the connections that students need to develop a more complex schema, offering more links to accommodate new learning. It also expands the schema to the larger picture that lies beyond individual perspectives.

In a nutshell, the research is positive if not conclusive. Everything we know from these three types of research—learning outcomes, developmental, and cognitive—is supportive of the notion that getting students involved in thinking, questioning, and actively seeking knowledge is a key to effective education. When learning communities do this, they make valuable contributions to education. But not all learning communities accomplish these ends, and I think a broad interpretation of the research would say that it is probably the goal (getting students actively involved) rather than the means (group interaction) that is critically important—although Bruffee and fellow social constructionists would heartily disagree.

PRAGMATIC RATIONALES FOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES

I CAN ILLUSTRATE the pragmatic rationales for learning communities by examples of two mission-

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oriented tasks that may be enhanced by learning communities: training people effectively for the workplace and educating them for good citizenship. Almost every college has these two goals in its mission statement, and it behooves us to see how learning communities might help colleges accomplish these missions.

Training the Future Workforce. In a new book entitled *The Double Helix of Education and the Economy*, Sue Berryman and Thomas Bailey offer an analysis of the three components that prepare students for the workplace. They look at the demands of the workplace, at the structure and organization of schools and colleges, and at knowledge from cognitive science about how students learn. Among their more provocative observations is that the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, misdiagnosed the problem in education. The problem is not so much the deterioration of the quality of education, the solution to which is to invoke higher standards and stiffer academic requirements. Nor is it necessarily that more people need more education—that is, an accumulation of what we have been teaching. It is that students at all levels need a different kind of education—and that, I think, is the challenge of learning communities.

The structure of traditional schools met the demands of the old workplace pretty well. In the old economy, the goal was to reduce unit costs through standardization and mass production. That was best accomplished in a system of slow change, low worker discretion, and high supervision, and by employing large numbers of low-skilled, interchangeable workers. The schools operated within a similar structure—high supervision, high standardization, and interchangeable students.

The problem today is that standardization and high supervision are failing in both education and industry. This is not an era of slow change and predictable futures in the economy. Industry is beset by intense international competition, the demand for more varied and customized products, and faster product cycles—all accom-

panied by increasing instability and uncertainty. Such a system requires workers who can operate independently of supervision in a less well-defined environment.

The title of Berryman and Bailey's book, *The Double Helix*, reflects the authors' conclusion that "the skill requirements of restructured workplaces and optimal ways of organizing learning fit one another." In short, the strands of developing human talent through education and using it productively in the workplace are coming together. Perhaps they are also coming together in learning communities more than they are in most other pedagogies.

Educating for Responsible Citizenship.

Because I believe that service learning is the ultimate learning community and because it has considerable momentum behind it now, I am going to use it to illustrate a reason for the growing interest in learning communities. Service learning is a multifaceted concept. It appeals to people for a variety of reasons. Some people are attracted to Dewey's experiential notions of learning while doing; some like the disciplinary integration that is required in addressing real problems; some regard reflection on experience as critically important to deeper learning; some like the community involvement that is required—not only participation in the college service-learning community, but participation in a wider, nonuniversity community as well; some are attracted by the experience with diversity that students get when they participate in a community that is usually very different from any university community; some like the moral dimension of social responsibility; and some like the affective aspects of compassion and empathy that are presumably developed through service learning. In short, there seem to be so many advantages to service learning that one might well ask, What's not to like?

Service learning does have its critics, but most complaints are on practical rather than on pedagogical grounds: too much time required of faculty to arrange internship or service experiences, the possible exploitation of students to perform services that are not educa-

tional, the swamping of community services with short-term novices, and frankly, the fact that many faculty are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the application of their disciplines to real-life situations.

Although I do not think that one necessarily has to embrace constructionism in order to support learning communities, it is interesting to note that one of the things that stands out in the writings of the advocates of service learning is a growing commitment to the epistemology of constructionism. Goodwin Liu argues that service learning has three pedagogical virtues for transforming a way of knowing into a way of teaching and learning: community, diversity, and engagement. Communities, he says, legitimize knowledge by continually testing claims of truth through discourse; diversity prevents “group orthodoxy through a spectrum of voices whose differing criticisms and interpretations are brought to bear on knowledge claims” (1995, p. 15); and engagement involves learners as active participants in the world rather than as spectators. Conceptually, service learning is compatible with—although, I would contend, not dependent upon—social constructionism.

WHY IS THERE a growing interest in learning communities? I have tried to answer that question by suggesting that learning communities are of high interest now because they are compatible with changing epistemologies about the nature of knowledge, because research generally supports their educational benefits, and because they help institutions of higher education meet their missions of educating students for lives of work and service.

NOTES

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