

Dynamic Pedagogy: The Components of Successful First-year Residential Learning Communities and Lessons from Eight Years' Experience at Duquesne University

Dr. Evan Stoddard, Associate Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts:

Every new freshman who comes to Duquesne University's McAnulty College of Liberal Arts participates in one of the College's first-year learning communities. In today's workshop we will identify six important features of Duquesne's learning communities; invite you to consider the relevance of these features for learning communities in other institutions, including your own; and provide us at Duquesne with feedback on how we might improve our learning communities.

My name is Dr. Evan Stoddard. I serve as associate dean of the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts (which I will hereafter call "the College") at Duquesne University, and I have had overall administrative responsibility, under the dean's direction, for the learning communities since I first proposed and began them seven years ago. Michelle Gaffey is a doctoral student in English who, as a graduate teaching assistant, has taught in the learning communities for the last two years and plans to teach in the communities again next year. Amy Wargo is an undergraduate junior majoring in Multimedia Arts who was a student in the ORBIS learning community as a freshman and who this year served as a learning communities aid, supporting faculty and students in a pilot use of electronic portfolios in the PERSONAE learning community.

This academic year, 2007-08, the College organized 8 learning communities, which enrolled a total of 311 first-year students. The largest community had 40 members and the smallest 37. Each community includes three courses in the fall semester, one of which is a skills course in critical thinking and argumentation. The other two fall courses as well as a single course in the spring are discipline-based. Each community also has designated male and female floors in the first-year residence halls, for the approximately 92% of freshmen who live on campus.

The College aims to accomplish four goals through its learning communities:

1. Help first-year students in the College find friends and study companions.

2. Create a sense of identity and unity among students in the College of Liberal Arts.
3. Help students learn to relate topics in different courses.
4. Connect the classroom with the community through service.

In the initial years of the learning communities I built them from scratch each year, recruiting faculty members to teach and then asking them to identify a theme for their community. This ad hoc approach was neither sustainable nor scalable. When we made the decision to extend the learning communities to all freshmen and to make them an integral feature of our undergraduate experience, we established permanent communities, with Latin names that suggest the College's liberal arts heritage and the communities' thematic emphases. The same communities repeat from one year to the next. The communities' themes are broad enough that they can be shaped and adapted each year, depending on the specific interests of those who are teaching in the community. For example, last year PERSONAE, meaning parts, roles, characters, or personalities, concentrated on human rights, while this year it examined the self, while its stated thematic focus in both years was "Consider how individuals and groups shape one another."

With the establishment of permanent communities we made other changes. We named faculty directors of each community and established a standard for the size of the communities (36 students). Faculty directors made the initial recommendations for the courses that would be offered in their community year after year, and they now consult with me about any needed changes in the course offerings, as circumstances change and we gain experience. We shifted primary responsibility to select the faculty members who teach in the communities to department chairs, and we began formal training sessions for faculty members, about which Michelle will say more in a minute. Of the 40 courses taught in the 2007-08 communities, full-time faculty members taught 22, part-time faculty 7, and graduate teaching assistants 11. All meet together in our annual spring Learning Communities Institute to prepare for the coming year.

To encourage full-time faculty members to teach in the communities the provost went on record that he would view successful teaching in the learning communities as a mark of effectiveness in teaching in applications for promotion and tenure, and the dean began to add a small increment to the base salary of every full-time faculty member who taught in a learning community.

To summarize, over the years we have made the learning communities more a part of the regular fabric of the College and have recognized, trained and

rewarded faculty members who participate. Michelle will now explain more about how we have approached this and how we have used the learning communities to focus on “big ideas.”

Ms. Michelle Gaffey, Ph.D. student and graduate teaching assistant, English Department:

Thank you, Dr. Stoddard. As Dr. Stoddard mentioned earlier, I am a graduate teaching fellow at Duquesne University; I am in my second year of coursework in the Graduate English Department, and I focus primarily on 20th Century American Poetry. Although I have always had an interest in teaching, and I strive to be a reflective teacher who engages students with dynamic pedagogies, being at this conference and hearing your presentations has helped me see how I can be more deliberate about the skills I hope students will build upon or acquire. So, thank you all for sharing your work throughout this meeting.

I would like to continue Dr. Stoddard’s discussion of our learning communities at Duquesne University that are organized around a Latin concept or theme and that are directed by an experienced faculty member. In particular, I will discuss *Collaborative Planning* and *Service Learning*, the next two components of our Learning Communities listed on the back of page one of your handout. First, though, I would like to reiterate that Duquesne’s current learning community structure preserves and emphasizes the traditional disciplines and at the same time guides students to integrate the knowledge and methodologies learned in each discipline. We might describe our model as a “cluster of courses” organized around a central concept; therefore, it is crucial that instructors, guided by the faculty director of each learning community, discuss how they will deliberately integrate their course material so students may begin to synthesize the concepts learned in each class.

To facilitate the level of integration hoped for in the Learning Communities, in the spring semester before the start of the upcoming school year, the College of Liberal Arts invites all instructors who will teach in the next year’s learning communities to take part in paid training sessions at a Learning Communities Institute. This Institute serves at least four important functions:

- One, it familiarizes and re-familiarizes all instructors with the *history* behind and the College’s current vision for the Learning Communities;

- Two, the Institute provides a rationale for *why* the College is moving toward a collaborative and integrative model of learning altogether (i.e.: reinvigorate general education, help students transition from high school to college, guide students toward synthesizing seemingly different disciplines, as students to practically consider what academic learning has to do with the world outside the classroom walls);
- Third, the Institute discusses *how* the learning communities can become interdisciplinary, dynamic models for learning in which students begin to bring the various disciplines in conversation with each other to address the “big questions” that stem from the organizing theme of the community;
- Finally, at these instructional meetings, the various learning communities listen to examples of “best practices” of collaborative efforts in the past and then break into groups to discuss how their individual disciplines and courses relate to their community’s theme, and how they can collaboratively design integrative assignments to deepen the students’ understanding and exploration of the theme and the “big questions” that stem from it.

One important way Duquesne’s learning communities achieve integration and *do* interdisciplinarity is through the required service learning component. Since learning communities by their very nature ask us to challenge the boundaries and limits of disciplinarity, it is not a far leap to begin challenging the boundary and limits of the traditional classroom. Thus, service learning at Duquesne connects the classroom to the community through service. But importantly, the students are assessed based on their learning, and for this reason, we work to embed the service learning projects within one or more of the courses within the Community. Thus, the *service* part of service learning becomes an educational experience in which the instructors help students realize that learning and education take place beyond the confines of the classroom walls. In fact, it is perhaps in the community that the *stuff* of textbooks has any real meaning. Thus, service can function as an educational experience in and of itself, or it may help concretize the sometimes abstract discussions that take place in traditional classes. Moreover, service and action help dynamize “general education,” thereby enhancing the critical thinking skills of the University CORE curriculum and helping students make relevant connections between their general classes and their real world experiences. Service learning thus has the potential to intellectualize and theorize action and to encourage students to act upon the ideas they encounter intellectually and theoretically in their classrooms.

To help support instructors in their work coordinating service learning projects, Duquesne’s administration has created an Office of Service Learning (OSL). In

addition, Duquesne's Campus Ministry Center works closely with the Service Learning Office and the UCOR Curriculum team to make sure faculty have the financial, transportation, human, and theoretical resources necessary for a successful service learning experience. In particular, the Office of Service Learning works one-on-one with instructors to develop a service learning course or a project that emphasizes learning and not only volunteerism. Moreover, the university makes available stipends for the instructors planning the service learning, and communities may apply for an additional grant to further support their work, such as by developing brochures to enhance their service. With the increased and increasing financial, human, and logistical support from the University administration, the Liberal Arts School's service learning projects are becoming more relevant to helping students consider local and global issues in a feasible, ethical, and safe manner.

I would like to briefly discuss several specific examples of our best *integrative practices* over the past two years in the learning communities at Duquesne. You will see that many of the integrative assignments and activities stem from or are connected to the service learning portion of the respective learning communities, and all of the communities' assignments demand critical engagement with the contemporary *big questions* that students are already beginning to reflect upon by the time they enter college:

Ratio Learning Community: After reading about and discussing the sociological implications of our current environmental "crisis" in their Sociology and Composition classes, students led a campaign to raise awareness about recycling on campus by composing proposal arguments in their Composition course, which they then presented along with a visual argument, often in the form of power point, to students in other learning communities. In addition, *Ratio* worked with a campus group, Evergreen, and the University's Facilities Management to ensure that recycling procedures were being followed on campus. This community successfully and seamlessly integrated the content of their Sociology course into the Composition course, and the environmental justice theme was further carried into their UCOR math class. But the synthesized and applied knowledge through service learning really helped students begin to address how the big question, "what can we do on our campus to positively impact the environment?" Students quite literally began to see themselves as *agents of change*, and for the first time ever, Duquesne has a functional recycling program. The visible efforts to recycle on campus have stimulated discussion about the need for recyclables, recently culminating in a debate in the campus newspaper about how the Starbucks on campus unethically advertises itself as a company that recycles, when in fact they

do not on campus. Thus, because of *Ratio*'s work last semester, a large part of the student body is continuing the community's conversation and efforts by responsibly demanding that Duquesne and all private institutions on the campus consider the environment in their regular business practices.

Personae Learning Community: Students explored the physiological, psychological, and culturally-constructed "self" in each class, and then for a co-curricular activity, traveled together to the "Bodies Exhibit" in Pittsburgh. They applied their multi-disciplinary perspectives of the *self* that they explored in their Psychology and Interpersonal Communication courses by implementing a campaign on campus to promote organ donation and by reflecting in an integrative paper how they had come to know the "self" throughout the semester. This organ donation campaign and the formal writing assignments, which also included a proposal argument, were embedded within the first-year Composition course. This community in particular succeeded in 1) helping students articulate who they believed they were at the beginning of the semester and then complicating their understanding of the *self* throughout the semester 2) helping students understand their self in relation to others through action 3) helping students learn about the resources in the communities outside Duquesne that can help them explore their greatest question: "Who am I?"