

Building Connections, Building Communities: Strategies for Integrating Music and Literature in an Undergraduate Learning Community

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Abstract: This article explains the strategies that were used to create a closely integrated, paired-course learning community in the fall of 2001 and presents focus-group assessment data from the combined courses. Five specific strategies were used to create a high degree of connection between the World Literature course and the Music Appreciation course that formed the learning community: 1) Exploring the formal connections between literature and music; 2) Organizing the class by movements in intellectual history common to both disciplines; 3) Focusing on musical works inspired by works of literature; 4) Selecting music and literature from identical non-Western regions; and 5) Combining course web supplements for both courses into a single, “super site” web page. Approximately half of the students in the English class and one third of the students in the Music class were direct participants who were part of the learning-community cohort. The rest of the students were indirect participants enrolled in one class but not the other. In focus groups held at the end of the semester with both groups of students in the English class, the direct participants reported a strong feeling that the information presented in the two classes was more connected, more integrated, and more relevant than information presented in a stand-alone class. Surprisingly, however, the indirect participants in the learning community reported similar feelings, which strongly suggests that the benefits of these integration strategies are not limited to those who participate directly in the course clusters or linked courses.

Introduction:

This article explains specific strategies used to create a closely integrated, paired-course learning community combining Music Appreciation with World Literature. Focus-group assessment data from the combined courses is presented. One of the most interesting findings shows that students not directly involved in the learning community (students only enrolled in one class or the other, or “indirect participants”) reported similar feelings as the direct participants. Namely, that the information presented was more connected, more integrated, and more relevant than information presented in a stand-alone class.

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I. Literature Review

Though the term *learning community* has been applied to a number of different approaches to community-based education at all levels (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999), in higher education, it has increasingly come to be associated with curricular strategies that “purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students” (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990, p. 5). Before 1990, only a handful of colleges and universities in the United States offered undergraduate courses specifically designed as learning communities (Smith, 1993). These initial experiments, however, have become influential models for educators responding to many of the structural trends in higher education that have decreased students’ ability to integrate the perspectives of different disciplines and to form peer groups into which knowledge can be processed and applied.

Critiques of higher education in the 1980s and early 1990s often argued that disciplines had become too provincial, students too isolated, and faculty too complacent for colleges and universities to provide the kind of genuine intellectual community that had once been an important part of the higher education experience (Boyer, 1987; Levine, 1993; Study Group, 1984). Early proponents of learning communities saw the model as a way to integrate knowledge across a wide variety of academic disciplines and to establish the communal foundations needed to make abstract knowledge meaningful for students. Learning communities were also seen as a way to reinvigorate faculty by promoting collaboration among a wide variety of disciplines (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Hill 1985; Smith, 1991). For the bottom line, learning communities offered increased student retention, increased customer satisfaction, increased faculty productivity, and, most importantly, a more integrated and higher quality educational environment for everybody involved in the learning process.

Most of the research collected from learning communities in recent years supports the claims of its early advocates. Minkler’s (2000) interviews and analyses of evaluation data revealed a strong preference for learning community courses among both students and faculty at community colleges in Idaho and Washington. Gardner (2001), Bean and Shevawn (2001), and Johnson (2000) have all demonstrated a strong correlation between participation in learning communities and retention of college freshmen. A study by Zheng, Saunders, Shelly, and Whalen (2002) found participation in a learning community to be one of the primary indicators of academic success for freshmen living in residence halls. Walker (2001) found that involvement in freshman learning clusters at UCLA increased, not only the quality of students performance in a class, but also their overall social and academic integration at the university. And several recent studies (Baker and Pernerantz, 2000; Thompson, 1998; Tinto and Love, 1995) showed a strong tendency of students enrolled in learning communities to earn higher grades and be more satisfied with their overall college experience than students who take only stand-alone courses.

The research also shows that faculty members, as well as students, benefit from the cross-disciplinary collaboration that the learning community model fosters. By bringing faculty members from different disciplines into the same classrooms, learning communities often lead faculty to reexamine both their own disciplines and their own teaching strategies, leading to a general innovation of the curriculum (Stark and Lattuca, 1997). Benefits are especially evident

for mid-career faculty who have fallen into a comfortable routine in their classroom teaching and who tend to be invigorated by the interactive, collaborative pedagogical strategies that the learning community model encourages (Durrington and Bacon, 1999). Learning communities have also been shown to “encourage faculty members to share knowledge with one another,” “broade[n] faculty members’ knowledge about pedagogy” and “increase collegial trust” (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999, p. 57).

II. Strategies for Building an English-Music Learning Community

The learning community in the present study took place in the Fall of 2001 in a comprehensive, four-year public college in the Mid-Atlantic Region. The community consisted of two linked general studies courses, Survey of World Literature II and Introduction to Music. Though the learning community model had been in use in the College Honors Program for nearly 10 years, this was one of the first two learning communities offered to the general undergraduate population. Two different professors taught the English and Music portions of the course separately, but great care was taken to ensure that course content was tightly linked. Both professors attended each other’s classes and were free to comment on material presented in order to help enhance instruction. In addition, both professors modified their basic departmental syllabi to achieve a high level of content integration. Five specific strategies were employed to link material from the two courses together. What follows is a description of each of these five strategies with examples, where appropriate, of class presentations resulting from each strategy.

A. Exploring the Formal Connections Between Literature and Music

The initial weeks of each class covered the fundamentals of both music and literature, with a special emphasis on concepts shared by the two disciplines such as meter, theme, rhythm, motif, and form. In the music portion of the community, students learned the basics of music notation. They were taught to identify the meters of songs such as “Home on the Range” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb” through exercises involving singing and clapping. Students were subsequently taught to notate music in a given meter at a very basic level via the use of correct musical note shapes and time signatures. Finally, students practiced identifying meters while listening to classical and popular music examples.

In the beginning of the music class, students were taught to listen for primary and secondary themes or melodies in classical music excerpts. They were asked to discern whether or not themes were repeated or varied at different points in the course of a piece. Students were then asked to notate or map these themes or main musical ideas by using letters of the alphabet. For example, a piece with a three-part formal structure may be notated as follows: “A” (primary thematic idea), “B” (secondary thematic idea), “A’ ” (primary thematic idea returns but is slightly varied as far as rhythm, mode or timbre). Subsequently, every piece studied in the course included a discussion of meter and formal structure.

In the literature portion of the learning community, the instructor spent the first two weeks of the class exploring what makes literature, and especially poetry, “musical.” Students were encouraged to take the basic principles of rhythm that they learned in their music class and use these principles to scan selected poems and identify basic meters (iambic, trochaic, spondaic, anapestic, and dactylic) and simple rhyme schemes in poetry. Longer prose works were read with special attention to the kinds of thematic repetitions and symbolic motifs that also characterize musical composition. Most of the literature studied during these early weeks of the course was

selected for its “musicality” rather than for its chronological relationship to the remainder of the course.


B. Organizing the Class by Movements in Intellectual History Common to Both Disciplines

Both classes in the learning community were largely organized according to intellectual movements common to music and literature, as well as to other disciplines such as visual art, history, philosophy, and political science. In most class lectures, visual art was also employed to supplement discussions of these various movements. Not only did this prove to be a highly effective teaching tool, it allowed students to perceive the kinds of strong connections between the two disciplines that, while usually obvious to instructors, are often missed in a less integrated general- education core.


For example, the class sessions in both courses devoted to “Impressionism” began with displays and descriptions of visual art from the impressionist period. The professors explained that in impressionistic visual art there is a strong reliance on the effect of light, color, blurring and brilliance. In essence, the brush strokes suggest an image and the viewer’s mind must piece the image together into a concrete picture. It was emphasized that this movement, prominent in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, extended not only to visual artists but to musicians and writers as well. In the music portion of the community, students were shown ways in which one could musically create the same effect of color and suggestion found in the visual art. For example, use of irregular phrases and parallel chordal motion, avoidance of traditional harmonic progressions, suppression of the leading tone and coloristic choice of instruments are stable traits of impressionistic music. A brief description of the lives of musical impressionists such as Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel and Lili Boulanger was followed by an analysis of musical excerpts containing several of the specific musical traits listed above.

In the literature portion of the community, students studied the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and Rainer Maria Rilke and a brief selection from Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. The instructor extrapolated from visual and musical impressionism several key characteristics from the intellectual movement in general, such as the use of strong emotional associations, a resistance to traditional connections, and a formal incompleteness that invites the auditor to complete connections only suggested by the artist. During the course of the discussion, students were shown a single PowerPoint slide (below) containing an impressionist painting (Monet’s “Rough Sea,”), an impressionist poem (Rilke’s “Song of the Sea”), and an impressionist musical composition (Debussy’s “Dialogue of the Wind and Sea” from *Le Mer*). Students were asked to interpret each work in light of the other two and to draw specific conclusions about the phenomenon of impressionism from their collective impression of the three works. These conclusions became the framework for studying work by other impressionists.

Figure 1: Impressionism Power Point Slide



“Rough Sea,” by Claude Monet



Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea, by Claude Debussy

Song of the Sea
by Rainer Maria Rilke

*Blowing from beyond the ages,
sea-wind of the night:
you answer no one's call;
if someone is keeping watch,
he must figure out how
to survive your might.*

*Timeless sea wind
whose waves sculpt ancient rocks,
you are purest space
sweeping in from far away...*

*Oh how a verdant fig tree
high up in the moonlight
feels your force.*

Translated by Rachel Ritterbusch and
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In all, seven Western intellectual movements were used to organize the majority of the lectures and discussions for both courses in the learning community:

Classicism	Impressionism
Romanticism	Expressionism
Nationalism	Minimalism
Realism	

When these movements were discussed, they were discussed on exactly the same days in both classes, with both instructors participating in both discussions. All visual materials generated for these discussions were converted to PowerPoint format and loaded onto the learning community web site where students could view and download them at their convenience.

C. Focusing on Musical Works Inspired by Works of Literature

Two major works in each class were specifically selected for study because of their connection to a work in the other discipline. Students studied the paired works simultaneously, with frequent references to both work in both classes. With these pairings, the instructors hoped to connect the two courses more concretely than they had on either the formal or the thematic level. Near the midpoint of the semester, Charles Gounod's opera *Faust* was paired with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust*, the source upon which it was based. Students viewed portions of the opera on VHS in class and listened to other musical examples based on Goethe's work, including Hector Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* and Franz Peter Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*. In addition to reinforcing the story, the discussion of Gounod's music in particular allowed the instructor to incorporate additional lecture material focused on characteristics of French lyric opera.

Later in the semester, students spent a week studying Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* as an important example of nationalism in literature. After reading the story in the literature portion of the community, students were introduced to Edvard Grieg's music, originally composed as twenty-three movements of incidental music to accompany Ibsen's stage play. Although the play was initially unsuccessful, the music became one of Grieg's most famous works. In the late nineteenth century, eight movements from the original score were extracted and fully orchestrated. These movements were later separated into two orchestral suites, both of which are widely performed today. The use of *Peer Gynt* was a very effective way to link course material. Students often remarked how well the music helped them to easily and vividly imagine various scenes from the play studied in the literature class.

D. Selecting Music and Literature from Identical Non-Western Regions

India and Africa were selected for an in-depth analysis of both non-Western music and literature. In the music portion of the community, students examined general characteristics of classical Indian music and sub-Saharan African music. These characteristics were further applied via the analysis of various musical examples. The differences between Western and non-Western musical systems was largely emphasized. For example, the students were shown that concepts focused on at the beginning of the semester, such as meter, form, and even pitch could be approached in very different ways depending on the musical culture. Socio-political factors were also incorporated. One example used was the music of Zimbabwean artist, Thomas Mapfumo, who wrote several songs protesting the white domination of his country in the 1960's and 1970's. Mapfumo's music was paired with Chinua Achebe's postcolonial novel, *Things Fall Apart*, a realistic narrative, heavily influenced by European Modernism, about a pre-colonial *Igbo* civilization in present-day Nigeria encountering, for the first time, the forces of European colonialism. From these discussions, students were able to see clearly how formal and ideological concerns can be connected in many different kinds of artistic production.

E. Combining Course Web Pages for Both Courses into a Single, "Super Site" Web Page

Research has consistently shown that the use of computer technology as a classroom supplement has the potential to significantly increase the sense of community among students enrolled in traditional learning communities (Dial-Driver & Sesso, 2000; Lally & Barrett, 1999; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). In order to foster this sense of community in the English-Music community, an extensive course web site was created with the popular course management system, Web CT. All lecture notes for the two classes were posted to the web site, as were the PowerPoint presentations containing visual art that were used almost daily in the class discussions. Also included were links to research-grade Internet sources relevant to both classes that students could use to supplement material from class and homework assignments. Another important element of the web site was the discussion board, which has been shown to be an effective tool for creating communities in cyberspace (Caverly & MacDonald, 2002). Each week, students were required to provide two posts containing questions or comments based on that week's lecture material, readings, or listening examples. Discussion posts often continued discussions begun in normal class sessions, and they were also used by instructors to generate discussion on new topics or readings.

The most important function of the learning-community web site was to help students create a single, unified learning experience out of the two distinct courses that made up the community. Early in the semester, students learned to go to this single site for notes, study aids,

visual aids, and handouts from both courses. Instructors also worked to structure the electronic bulletin board as a single discussion about the connected aspects of the two courses rather than as a series of separate discussions about the two separate classes. With the exception of a few small administrative matters unique to each course, no effort was made to separate elements of the bulletin board into “music” and “literature” components. It was simply the Learning Community Web Site.

III. Results of Student Focus Groups

Because of lower-than-expected enrollments in the learning community classes, both the English and the Music class were opened to students not enrolled in the learning community. A core cohort of 13 students enrolled in both the Music and the English classes. An additional 12 students enrolled only in the English class, and an additional 20 students enrolled only in the Music class, for total class sizes of 25 and 32, respectively. The blending of learning-community and non-learning-community students into one half of a closely integrated, cross-disciplinary setting provided a unique opportunity to study the effects of the learning community model on students who did not participate in it directly but who were exposed to it indirectly through the connection strategies that both teachers employed. To assess the effect of the learning community on both direct and indirect participants, two focus groups were conducted during the final month of the semester, one among students enrolled in both learning community classes and one among students enrolled only in the English class. Focus groups were used because students were already filling out standard evaluation forms, and the instructors wanted to generate assessment data that was not connected to normal instructional evaluation so as to measure as accurately as possible the effect of the learning community portion of the course. A total of 20 students participated in the two focus groups, nine in the LC group and 11 in the non-LC group. The gender composition of the two groups differed dramatically. The LC group was composed entirely of women (100%) and 91% of non-LC participants were men (10 men, 1 woman). In addition, the number of years attending college differed between the two groups. LC participants were in their first or second year of college, and non-LC participants were in their fourth year.

The focus group facilitator used open-ended questions to elicit the thoughts and feelings of the participants. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and that names would not be identified with any comments. The students sat in a circle and the atmosphere was informal. Snacks were provided. The facilitator analyzed the data and identified the common themes after the completion of the focus groups. Students were asked to participate in the focus group during the normally scheduled class period for the English component of the learning community. The LC and the non-LC groups were separated. While one group participated in a focus group session, the other group attended class. After the first focus group finished, the LC group and the non-LC groups switched. Students who were absent from class on the day scheduled for the focus groups did not participate in the focus groups.

The focus group discussions focused on four general themes: interest and enthusiasm, depth of learning, connections, and technology use. Each theme is described in the following paragraphs.

A. Interest and Enthusiasm

Focus group participants in both the LC and non-LC expressed interest and enthusiasm over the course material. Participants in the LC were animated and lavish with their praise, making statements such as the following:

“Best classes I’ve taken.”

“[The LC] are my favorite classes.”

“LC makes you interested and excited.”

“[I] wish there were more LC classes.”

“All general education courses should be Learning Communities.”

When asked if there were any disadvantages to being in the Learning Community, LC participants felt that mixing LC and non-LC students together was a problem. They believed that the LC students had more drive and wanted to learn. The participants stated that non-LC students were not interested in the class, frequently came to class late or skipped, and were disruptive during class. They wondered if the non-LC students understood the content. They also felt that non-LC students missed a major component of the course content because they did not attend the music course. The LC group strongly felt that it should be mandatory to enroll in both linked-courses. As one participant said, *“It should be all LC or none.”* Students unanimously expressed interest and enthusiasm in the Learning Community. They strongly endorsed expanding the Learning Communities at the College.

B. Depth of Learning

Participants were asked about their understanding of the course material. Both LC and non-LC participants strongly felt that they have a “deeper” understanding of the material. Not only did respondents state they learned more, but they also thought they would retain the material. Two participants summed-up the groups’ feelings,

“I’ve learned more than in any other course.”

“It comes alive to you.”

The non-LC participants related how they were able to comprehend the material. One participant stated, *“I couldn’t understand what the author was talking about. Finally I got it.”* Another student became excited describing an author that he could relate to, stating, *“He [author] talked to me. [He] wrote about my life.”* Focus Group participants viewed learning as greatly enhanced by the Learning Communities. This viewpoint was reported by both LC and non-LC members. In fact, one unexpected finding of the focus group was that students in the LC felt that they learned about disciplines besides the two linked courses. They stated that they also learned about History and Visual Arts. In addition, both the LC and the non-LC participants stated that they learned about themselves.

C. Connections between Courses

Participants were asked specifically if the Learning Communities impacted their feelings of connection between the two courses. The participants expressed their belief that the connections between the two courses were strong. They expressed the value of relating course material to current events. The participants explained that cultural beliefs, norms and values were compared between the literature and our current times. The following quotes highlight these connections:

“In a normal class, you just take notes. In this class, you remember material because you relate it to current life.”

“It makes students read when we relate it to current events, such as women’s roles.”

“There should be more joint classes. The material comes together.”

Participants earnestly affirmed their understanding of the influence music and literature have on each other. They said it took a few weeks for them to learn the basics of music, but then it all came together. As mentioned above, they also felt they learned more about history and art. The following paragraph represents the group’s discussion:

“I felt I knew the author. I listened to the music he listened to and I saw the art he saw. We talked about what was happening historically. As I came to understand the perspective he was writing from, I came to understand him. This helped me understand myself and relate what he was writing about to what’s happening in our time.”

Significantly, the non-LC participants also saw a strong connection between English and music. The participants became very excited and animated when they described the Halloween class. They stated, *“It was eerie. The art (The Scream) together with the instructor’s sound effects, the music, and the literature were something else.”*

These positive findings about the connections between English and music were in spite of non-LC participants frequently stating that they were not aware of the learning communities. Overall, focus group participants expressed an immense appreciation for the connection between the disciplines, even when they were not direct participants in both halves of the learning community.

D. Course Technology

Focus group participants were asked about the technological components used in the courses. Participants were unanimously positive about the PowerPoint presentations, web discussions (WebCT Bulletin Board), and the notes/handouts. The non-LC participants viewed the Internet supplements as helpful. Both LC and non-LC participants appreciated the PowerPoint presentations. They liked seeing the art and hearing the music from the time period. They said, *“This helped the author’s personality come alive.”* They also felt that the use of this technology greatly enhanced their interest and enthusiasm in the course. The non-LC group summarized their thoughts as follows: *“The PowerPoint was great. [We] liked the music and pictures. [It] gets me more into class, especially the time-period.”*

Participants were also positive about the web discussions. The LC participants liked being able to express their opinions. They stated that the web discussions especially helped the quiet students who don’t like to speak out in class. The non-LC participants felt that the web discussions allowed them to ask questions and express their feelings without having to be concerned about criticism. However, the non-LC participants stated that it was easy to get behind in posting on the web discussions. As one student pointed out, *“It’s easy for it to get away from you.”* In this regard, the LC and non-LC participants viewed the web discussions differently. The LC participants saw the discussions as a fun and easy way to earn extra credit for exceeding the mandatory postings per week. The non-LC participants found that their grade was lowered because they did not keep up with mandatory requirements, even though they enjoyed reading and responding to the discussions.

All participants viewed the on-line notes and handouts as beneficial. Participants made the following statements:

“The notes on line allow us to participate in class instead of taking notes.”

“The notes allow me to know the ‘points’ ahead of time.”

“It’s a win/win situation for us.”

The non-LC participants said the Internet supplements were helpful for research. One participant stated, *“It was good when reading complicated stuff that I didn’t get.”*

The use of technology enhanced participants’ interest and learning of the course material. Participants specifically valued the power point presentations, WebCT Bulletin Board, and on-line notes/handouts.

IV. Conclusions

As other research has suggested, the direct participants in the learning community expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the linked courses and with the learning community model in general. More specifically, our focus-group assessment shows that the students responded very positively to the ways in which the course content was linked. In other words, our selected integration strategies were highly successful. The classroom performance of our students conforms to the findings of other researchers. The grade point average of the students in the learning-community cohort was 2.85 in the English class and 3.08 in the Music class, whereas students not in the learning-community cohort averaged 1.78 and 2.50, respectively, in the same classes. Similarly, of a total of six withdrawals in the two classes (four in Music and two in English) none came from students in the learning-community cohort. The learning-community students felt that the linked courses provided a more coherent, integrated, and dynamic approach to undergraduate, general education than that found in stand-alone classes. Furthermore, because the cross-disciplinary approach to intellectual history (a major part of our course integration strategy) used in the linked courses required the instructors to include materials from disciplines other than music and literature, specifically, history and art, students reported making connections to academic disciplines beyond those represented in the learning community.

One of the most significant and interesting findings of the focus group assessment, however, was that the indirect participants in the learning community (students who were not co-enrolled in the linked classes, but who were exposed to the course-integration strategies discussed in this article) reported receiving many of the same advantages that students enrolled in both classes received, even though they were not aware of the fact that the class was structured differently than any other. Whereas the instructors initially feared that students not in the learning community cohort would feel left out, alienated, and confused, the focus group assessment reveals exactly the reverse: these students reported making connections across disciplines and integrating knowledge from other fields. They also responded well to the instructors’ obvious enthusiasm for the courses—an enthusiasm brought on, in no small measure, by the excitement of teaching familiar things in fresh, innovative ways. Furthermore, it was found that the technology integration strategy developed for use in the learning community (a course web page, a threaded discussion board, and a series of multimedia PowerPoint presentations) benefited both learning-community and non-learning-community students equally, and, though the bulletin board was less popular with non-learning-community students, it did have the desired effect of bringing them into the community in substantial ways. Hence, the responses of both the direct and the indirect participants in the learning community suggest that there are even more advantages to a tightly integrated learning-community model than those normally articulated by its proponents. Additional research into different categories of “indirect participants” in learning communities is clearly warranted.

Learning communities clearly have a profound influence on faculty as well. By invigorating faculty members and challenging them to become less isolated in their own disciplines and more collaborative in their pedagogy, learning communities create connections that can extend well beyond the classroom setting and influence the culture of an entire institution. Once faculty collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines and reevaluate their teaching styles, it is likely that they will bring a stronger cross-disciplinary focus to the other classes they teach and that they will be more likely to try to make connections with other disciplines even when they are not teaching in an institutionally created learning community.

No single approach to learning communities or course integration, of course, will work for every institution or even for any two instructors; part of the intellectual stretching required in these kinds of courses comes when faculty members design specific, individual strategies for connecting their disciplines into a single learning experience. And, as this kind of joint course development occurs, a tightly integrated learning community model has the ability to begin important conversations within academic institutions at every level. Building such communities builds greater connections between students, faculty and academic disciplines, all of which are much needed and long overdue at the college level.

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