Learning Communities: The Art of the Moment, the Work of the Future

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Abstract

In this article, Roberta Matthews presents a set of lessons for conference participants and readers to take home to their institutions — a "retrospective...as a call to move forwards."

I take part of my title, "The Art of The Moment" from a film by my son (*The Art of the Moment*, Aaron Matthews, ©1999), which explores the improvisations of three artists: a comic, a dancer, and a jazz pianist — their "art of the moment." The film pays tribute to the relationship between improvisation on stage in front of a live audience, and the hard work and self-reflection that stands behind and, indeed, makes possible, any successful improvised event. In a sense, presentations at conferences are improvised, or, at least, spontaneous, moments, especially those that depart from a text and involve their audience, as so many of these sessions have done. The success of synthesizing all that good work, presenting it in a coherent way, and inviting the audience to participate in similar experiences or help move that experience to a new level depends on and reflects good work and good reflection — *metacognition* — as well. In so many of the sessions or activities at this conference, we have been asked to join with the presenters, be they colleagues or students, and to collaborate with them to create a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. In that sense, Lee Knefelkamp and I stand as beacons of individual statement, asserting the power of what we do, framing your multi-faceted and eloquent demonstrations of the power of collaboration and cooperation.

I have set as my task a look backwards, a retrospective on this conference as a call to move forward and take the lessons of the conference home and to apply them. This makes sense for educators since so many of us are shaping our practice to incorporate the not-so-new knowledge from, for example, neuroscience and psychology about how people learn. We know that deep learning as opposed to superficial learning, and learning for transfer and retrieval as opposed to memorizing for the next midterm or final, occurs only if learners actively engage with what they learn and use it; apply it to another problem, situation, text, or experiment And so I will ask you to do that. I hope to inspire you to do that when you return to your home campuses.

I confess to you, however, that advocate though I am of implementing the new knowledge about knowledge, building a speech at the last moment around experiences

at the conference –improvising — did present a strategic problem for an individual who is accustomed to writing speeches well in advance of an event. Particularly for a speech before a large audience, I need to ruminate, write down my ideas, return to them and refine them, add, delete, germinate.

I realized this years ago when I often shared a podium with Patrick Hill, the founder of the Federated Learning Communities at SUNY Stony Brook and a very early and influential founder of the learning community movement. I was at the beginning of my career at LaGuardia Community College at CUNY at that time and Patrick, who honored his working class Irish background, loved the idea of learning communities being discussed from the point of view of an elite college, a flagship of a large university system (his), and the complementary point of view of an open admissions, inner city, community college that was on the other end of a large university system (mine). The first time we spoke together, I arrived at wherever we were going with a speech that had been polished and buffed two weeks before. Early in the evening before the event, after a long day of conversation and travel, Patrick asked me if I would look over his speech, which he was still writing. Of course I agreed, and then asked him when he wanted my feedback. I almost fainted at his reply: "I figure around 4:00 a.m." I graciously demurred, pointing out that by then I would have been sleeping for five hours and anticipated sleeping another two or three before a big day. Different strokes for different folks.

Nevertheless, I think I have risen to the spirit of the occasion, especially since I embrace, as I said, its premise. I will share with you some lessons learned at this conference from the perspective of my career and what I have been privileged to learn as that career rolled out in a community college, a small liberal arts college, a large comprehensive college, a university system, and as part of reaching out to local high schools and in the context of working with the challenges within both private and public systems. I will group my comments around the epigraphs and other quotations from the chapters of the new book *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education* that Barbara Smith, Jean MacGregor, Faith Gabelnick, and I have just completed (2004).

Vital and successful institutions stand out by their ability to maintain direction and a sense of meaning even amid significant shifts in the social landscape... Now, however, as major economic and social change shakes American society, higher education is facing serious tests of its resourcefulness. — William H. Sullivan, *The University as Citizen: Institutional Identity and Social Responsibility* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 3)

We know that learning communities and the values they embody are based on solid research about effective learning. Their impact is reflected, as George Kuh and his associates pointed out, in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is quickly becoming the gold standard of quality assessment of the undergraduate experience. Created as a belated response to the *US News and World Report* rankings

based on criteria that most colleges and universities decry even as they strive to attain them, the NSSE gives us alternate measures that reflect best practices.

Sullivan, in his splendid piece, has bigger fish to fry than convincing us to apply what we know about learning in order to be more effective, but I begin with his statement to underscore the big picture of what is at stake, as I began this talk by referring to the ever-expanding new knowledge about how people learn. We need to do what we do very well in order for us to address the serious tests to our resourcefulness, the major social and economic changes confronting us, which Sullivan explores. Learning communities help us work well and, as your presentations suggest, provide us with the potential structures and approaches to address these larger issues, the complexities of citizenship explored by Lee Knefelkamp, in ways that are particularly meaningful and useful for our students.

Contemporary students are more ethnically and racially diverse, and come from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds than at any time in history. They face more life pressures, and bring with them a greater array of life experiences than our original systems ever imagined. — Mary Marcy, *Diversity, Demographics and Dollars: Challenges for Higher Education* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick, 2004)

Addressing the diversity of our students and the array of life experiences they bring has always been on the table with learning communities, partly because learning communities are, in many ways, collaborative learning writ large; they link disciplines across boundaries thereby enriching intellectual and learning experiences and, like collaborative learning, help students build bridges between their prior experiences and their academic experiences in higher education. Clearly you acknowledge and embrace the diversity of your students. Several sessions have explored how you have risen to the occasion of teaching ethnically and culturally diverse students by using that diversity as the theme to be explored by a learning community. Others have focused on the diversity of learning styles and how they may be used to help students better understand how they make meaning and to develop better strategies to do so. In addition, you have used the learning community structure to reach out strategically to your local communities in a number of ways, creating bridges with local high schools, through federal programs that reach out to under-served populations, or through a variety of service learning initiatives. All of these validate the learning and life experiences of our students and give them the tools to explore and express difference in creative and positive ways.

Preparation for higher learning has not kept pace with access. Less than one-half of students who enter college directly from high school complete even a minimally defined college preparatory program.... Once in college, 53 percent of all students must take remedial courses. — AAC&U, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 175)

One way or another, overtly or covertly, most of us, unless we are one of the (relatively speaking) handful of colleges that are highly competitive and highly selective, must address the fact that many of our incoming students are often not well prepared for college. The research shows and your presentations support the assertion that learning communities have served for many years as the most effective and efficient way to address the multiple skill needs of incoming students. Sessions at this conference have explored how learning communities combine skills courses with each other or skills courses with college content courses; how they intentionally surface and address poor preparation; how they give beginning students the tools to succeed so that access is not a revolving door. The emphasis nationally is clearly focusing on secondary schools as the appropriate place for preparing students for college, and it is here as well that learning communities will play a prominent role. My personal experience with programs in both college and secondary schools has convinced me that national initiatives involving secondary schools in the development of well-prepared college students will founder if they do not take and apply the lessons learned about learning communities from colleges that have successfully and efficiently prepared the under-prepared while they are attending college.

The real question, I suppose, is whether we and our faculty colleagues are willing to consider the possibility that the student's "general education" consists of something more than the content of what is taught and the particular form in which this content is packaged. — Alexander Astin, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 131)

Organizationally and operationally, we have lost sight of the forest. If undergraduate education is to be enhanced, faculty members, joined by academic and student affairs administrators, must devise ways to deliver undergraduate education that are as comprehensive and integrated as the ways students actually learn. — Patrick Terenzini and Ernest Pascarella, *Living with Myths: Undergraduate Education in America* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004)

General education programs and (within or parallel to them) honors programs are another area in which learning communities have contributed significantly to the increase in quality and coherence. Learning communities are a beacon of hope in an area where often students take random or not-so-random collections of courses that too frequently represent the political compromises and turf trade-offs of faculty, departments, divisions, and schools. General education should be thoughtful collections of key courses and key experiences that clearly move students toward achieving the larger, shared, and well-articulated goals and aspirations of particular institutions of higher learning. Within the context of general education, learning communities have played an especially significant role helping colleges and universities move beyond the quotidian to offer opportunities for multi- or inter-disciplinary and connected learning. They provide the venue for cooperation by faculty with colleagues (in, for example, student affairs, the library, or service learning) who are also deeply engaged (if sometimes not acknowledged) in student learning. Many

sessions here presented the startling and exciting results of such experiments in cooperation and colleagueship and have given us concrete examples of the rich learning that results from such associations.

Could we create a learning culture where students and teachers would have a shared expectation that finding out what makes sense and what doesn't is a joint and worthwhile project, essential to taking the next steps in learning? — Lorri Shepard, *The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 219).

My assertions about the success of learning communities in basic skills, general education, and honors programs could only have been made because folks involved with learning communities assess themselves all the time, and disseminate, discuss, and publish their findings. Not all of the assessment is as valid or reliable as it might be, but unlike many of our colleagues, at least we are doing it, and trying to learn from it in order to get better at what we do. Quite often we involve our students in the grand adventure of holding a mirror up to ourselves. A significant number of sessions at this conference either overtly presented assessment results or embedded those results in larger discussions. It is quite possible, although I have no hard data to back it up, that faculty and staff involved in learning communities are more likely than colleagues who teach in more traditional ways to embrace what cognitive science is teaching us about how people learn and to use it to assess the effectiveness of their work. The pedagogies we use, such as inquiry-based learning, and our status as new kid on the block needing to prove ourselves more than others who have been around and accepted for a longer time, have probably contributed to our seeing assessment as an essential tool for improvement and survival.

If change is going to be effective, reformers need to develop a constant information-and-feedback process. — William Tierney, "Overcoming Obstacles to Reform" (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 219).

It is also perhaps an accident of history that the assessment movement and the astonishing growth of learning communities in higher education are occurring virtually simultaneously. Nevertheless, the unintended consequences of this serendipitous synchronicity are wide-ranging and significant. Our successes and our shortcomings in the realm of assessment are those of the assessment movement in general. Assessment and learning communities have enriched and learned from each other in the past and will continue to do so. The large number of sessions exploring assessment in one way or another suggests that the two movements demonstrate the "constant information-and-feedback process" between themselves that we hope faculty and students in learning communities demonstrate with each other and within their institutions. I suspect that none of us as individuals nor our colleges and universities are as effective change agents as we might be through the strategic use of assessment. Nevertheless, our sense of ourselves as reformers seems to have propelled us in the right direction.

This is a fundamental view of the world. It says that when you build a thing you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must also repair the world around it, and within it, so that the larger world at that one place becomes more coherent, and more whole. — Christopher Alexander and Associates, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 67)

In our 1991 book *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines* (Jossey-Bass), we identified and described five models for learning communities, and included enough detail for the descriptions to be useful and useable. Over the years, we have been gratified by the impact of that little book and its contents. However, we were a bit chagrined by the extent to which the models were privileged. We knew from our own experience as presenters at colleges and universities and conferences across the country that there were hundreds of variations on these models, and we quite consciously included that statement on the models in the transparency or slide in our standard presentation packet — the one many of you have seen and might have used yourselves. This time around, and reflecting refinements made years ago, we have reduced the number to three very generic ways of building learning communities, presenting frameworks or rubrics that support creative approaches. At this conference, presentations about living/learning communities and about extending the walls of the classroom in any number of ways suggest the infinite variety and possibilities for developing new learning community approaches that bridge the moats separating disciplines, academic communities from each other, and academic communities from the larger communities that surround them. Learning community practitioners are always in the process of putting together structures that facilitate the making of connections among areas where formerly there were none. Alexander's quote resonates because it asserts how essential it is to shape and build anything, including a learning community, in the context of its goals and its attachments to the world around it. A place becomes more coherent and whole if the people in that place become more coherent and whole, which brings us to our next set of quotations.

Only if the teachers are learners too, and if they are seen to be learners, can they genuinely model deep learning for the apprentice learners in the community. — John Tagg, *The Learning Paradigm College* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 268).

With this quote, we position ourselves at the center of our conference and speak to the motivation of those who presented, those who attended the presentations, and even more so, those who did both. By being here, we model the theme of this conference: "Learning and engagement in learning communities." We cannot underestimate the power of faculty development; the rich conference strand focusing on this essential aspect of change and of implementing learning communities reminds us, once again, that we all need to grow and change in order to thrive. We are modeling good learning for our students and the best kinds of faculty development for our colleagues when we return home, filled with great new ideas and inspired by the actions of others, and transfer what we have learned to improve our own learning communities. Sessions

explored how intentional learning communities create a community of learners among their faculty and use often-accidental associations in creative ways to motivate faculty and enrich student learning. Such learning communities indeed "genuinely model" the deep learning Tagg promotes.

If you are able to achieve anything big in life, it's because you paid attention to the "little" things. — Fred Ross Sr., *Axioms for Organizers* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick, 2004).

If you wait until you have all the time, people, and resources to go ahead, you may never get there because you didn't fill the interval with the action needed to get you there. – Ibid.

I have delivered entire speeches about the pitfalls and ecstatic moments related to the implementation of learning communities. In the course of my career I have helped facilitate the creation and growth of learning communities at a community college where I had grown up with all the key people and knew when to call in my chips; at a small private college which lacked resources but eventually realized that learning communities could help get it where it wanted to go, and at a large public comprehensive college that shares with its counterparts across the country a hesitancy to rock the boat because sheer size makes it that much harder to change 550 full-time faculty than to have an impact on the 55 in a small college. I began, as well, a cross-institutional learning community effort in a large system. Based on my experience, I know that all problems are universal and all solutions are local. The process, the logistics, the barriers, and the anxieties are all out there, and this conference, by enabling us to share experiences, has given us some of the tools to launch a nuanced attack on the well-known inertia and resistance to change that characterizes most of academia, regardless of size, shape, or the particular students served. In his two quotes, Ross acknowledges both the local and the universal, and reminds us to keep our eyes on the prize. That is a good lesson to bring home from a conference. But why are we doing this? Why should we care enough to put in all those extra hours and knock our heads against all those stone walls? Let's circle back to the implications of my first quote from Sullivan citing the major social and economic change shaking American society, and we are led back to the two spiritual fathers of the learning community movement, John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn.

Unless education has some frame of reference it is bound to be aimless, lacking a unifying objective. The necessity for a frame of reference must be admitted. There exists in this country such a unified frame. It is called democracy. — John Dewey, *Experience and Education.*

(T)he United States has ventured to unite both excellence and democracy; whether we can succeed or will break down under the fundamental conflict is not yet known. But we must make a good try at it. We must start by facing the fact that we do not yet have... the educational system required for this task. — Alexander Meiklejohn, *The Experimental College* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 24).

Tom Ehrlich, who has had a particularly distinguished career in higher education and is one of the co-authors of *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*, asks higher education to acknowledge the centrality of its obligation to educate moral and ethical citizens who are committed to changing their communities, their country, and, given the global implications of all of our decisions and actions, changing the world as well to be a better place. The AASC&U has chosen *Educating Citizens* as the beginning text for its national American Democracy Project. More than 170 colleges are participating in this project and several of them are represented in this room. Ehrlich recounts an anecdote about a student's enthusiasm for a service learning experience in a local soup kitchen to suggest the complexity of what we face, should we choose to accept his assignment: We must acknowledge that what we do in the classroom should and will resonate for better or worse way beyond the time and space of a particular course we teach. The student, for whom working in a soup kitchen was a life-changing experience, got carried away by his enthusiasm, and in his final written assessment of the impact of the experience wrote, "I only hope that there are soup kitchens around when my children go to college so they can have the same experience I have had." Not exactly a ringing endorsement for social change or social justice as an outcome of this particular service learning experience! What we do is hard. We need a lot of help from our friends. It is not easy to accomplish all we need and hope to accomplish alone. It is at conferences like this one that we realize we are not alone and that we have colleagues on our home campuses, nearby and far-flung, who stand ready to work with us in the important work we are trying to do. Conferences like this one help us place ourselves in a context that validates the work to which we are committed.

If I care about teaching, I must care not only for my students and my subject, but also for the conditions, inner and outer, that bear on the work students do. Finding a place in the movement for educational reform is one way to exercise that larger caring... An authentic movement is not a play for power — it is teaching and writing writ large. Now the world becomes our classroom, and the potential to teach and learn is found everywhere. — Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick 2004: 333).

In my end is my beginning, the particular and the universal. This year, there are three new books about learning communities being published. As we wrote our book we were gratified by the scope and quality of activity occurring nationally around learning communities and, at the expense of brevity, have tried to give our readers some sense of the richness of what is happening out there as well. These cost-efficient and learning-efficient frameworks for better teaching and learning are everywhere. Some are better planned than others; some better financed, and some better executed, but virtually all have champions who "get it" and who are striving to get it even better. Does this all add up to a learning community movement? Only you, the faculty and administrators richly involved in learning communities, and time will answer that question, but as this conference so clearly demonstrates: "The potential to teach and learn is found everywhere."

May you return to your campuses inspired by what you have learned here and energized to continue to do the good work we all need to do.

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