

Learning Communities: A structured approach to student integration

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Abstract: *Structured learning communities are one response to the new demographic of students that pour into the post-compulsory education sector. The learning community, using collaborative learning strategies allows students to have a voice, to feel safe articulating fears and ideas and to learn collectively, critically and in consultation with tutors who are there to facilitate, challenge and guide students to take an active role in constructing knowledge. Furthermore, the learning community concept sits comfortably alongside the notion of whakawhanaungatanga¹ and offers the opportunity to create a learning space that embraces Maori culture and other minority cultures. This paper explores and evaluates the success of Maori² and Pasifika³ learning communities established in a bridging programme within a polytechnic environment. The implications extend much wider into the tertiary environment than for simply the most 'at risk'.*

Keywords: *learning community, collaborative learning strategies, culture*

Introduction

A common response to the huge diversity of students streaming into tertiary institutes in the last thirty years has been to take a remedial approach and offer support services in an attempt to prop students up to help them pass their courses. Such a response, while not without merit, assumes that everyone learns the same way and the 'sage on the stage' style of teaching is suitable for all. The deficit model, which has predominated, has ensured that teaching departments in tertiary institutions have reassured themselves that the problems of failure and attrition were not with them but rather with the students who were lacking the necessary skills (Malnarich, 2003). However this deficit model has been challenged in that it focuses on what is supposedly missing rather than on what the students have to offer. New approaches need to be found to ensure that institutions are getting 'more bang for their buck' or rather, better learning and success and retention of non-traditional students.

What is a learning community?

The first learning community was established in 1927 on the principle that education is a 'social enterprise' (Minkler, 2002). More recently, research has shown what early advocates suspected: students who participate in learning communities are more likely to be retained, will feel they have learned more and gain better grades (Tinto, 1997). Cross, in her review of the current enthusiasm for learning communities, claims that the goals of learning communities are not always achieved in reality, however she concludes that reasons for their proliferation are '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)' (Cross, 1998, p. 4).

In essence learning communities involve actively scheduling classes so that a group of students are studying together across classes. While learning communities can be structured differently what they share in common is that the students learn together and get to know each other. Ideally classes are linked across the curriculum allowing integration across subjects. Different models include first-year interest groups, linked or paired classes, team-taught or cluster groupings and many other forms that have been adapted to different circumstances (Tinto, 1998). Together students share the trials and tribulations of getting to grips with the tertiary environment and collectively support each other to success. It could be said the learning community formalizes and structures study groups.

Creating learning communities based on culture could provide the benefits of learning communities for minority cultures who have traditionally felt isolated and often undervalued in the mono-cultural environment of most tertiary settings (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). While Maori and Pasifika are increasingly choosing to participate in tertiary education, the rates of participation and success show inequities. Deficit models to explain Maori underachievement need to be rejected in favour of looking at the power and structures which have existed within tertiary institutions. Learning communities offer an alternative structure that validates what is known about culture, that is:

Culture counts: classrooms are places where learners can bring 'who they are' to the learning interactions in complete safety, and their knowledges (including languages and language patterns) are 'acceptable' and 'legitimate' (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p.163).

Space needs to be created where minority voices are dominant.

In the New Zealand setting the idea of creating Maori and Pasifika learning communities raises concerns that Maori are getting something special, not on offer to all students. Jones reported that dividing a university course into groups on the basis of ethnicity was 'uniformly welcomed by the Maori and Pacific Islands students on the course, but rejected by the angry Pakeha' (Jones, 2001a, p. 279). Jones posits that fundamental to western thought is the belief that everything is knowable. That some forms of knowing can never be reached is an anathema. This confrontation with the unknowable is what makes many in the dominant culture resist being taught in different ways, while allowing a setting for alternate pedagogies (not accessible to them) to operate raises similar feelings of disquiet.

Some commentators view learning communities as the opportunity for different cultures to come together to share their different viewpoints (Malnarich, 2003). However, the call to learn about each other is usually called for by those from the majority culture to those whose voices have not normally been heard. Some have argued that this call to 'hear' the voices of minority cultures could even be a further attempt to 'open up their territory' to exploitation (Jones, 2001b). Knowledge about the dominant culture is not usually something minority groups call for, having being forced to familiarize themselves for social and economic survival.

Significant, is that the retention rates for Te Wananga o Aotearoa programmes, a Maori medium tertiary institute, are higher than for other tertiary institutions (Ministry of Education, 2002/3, p.73). Maori are choosing to study in a Maori medium and are staying on at greater numbers than ever before. To feel comfortable and valued in other mainstream tertiary organisations, space has to be created where kaupapa⁴ Maori is the norm.

For Pasifika students also, the tertiary institution can appear culturally strange and unfamiliar. A key informant to a recent report on Pacific Education stated that students commented:

It's that sense of, it's daunting enough being in a huge institute like this and being a Pacifica student, and then going into a classroom in which you have to go in day in and day out for the rest of your course, and finding that you are the only brown person in there (Anae, Anderson, Benseman, & Coxon, 2002, p. 68).

A learning community based on culture could provide a 'comfort zone', through which Pasifika students can learn about the new tertiary environment (Anae et al. 2002, p. 87).

Students who access bridging programmes are often those viewed most 'at risk', non-traditional, first-generation and minority students. Most come to the course with large reserves of prior knowledge and experiences having effectively learned in a variety of other contexts with a range of techniques and attitudes towards their learning. The challenge for the bridging educator is to bring out these stores of knowledge, which can then be applied to the academic setting. Interactive collaborative learning encourages new voices to be heard and their ways of knowing and knowledge validated. Collaborative learning is a concept at the heart of learning communities.

All learners need an environment in which they feel culturally safe, surrounded by like minds, in order to make sense and meaning from their learning. Research shows that the more students are integrated, socially and academically, into a tertiary environment, the more likely they are to stay and learn well (Tinto, 1998). Learning communities offer the potential for this to occur and should initially be targeted at those who are most at risk of not succeeding.

The programme

The foundation education programme at Unitec New Zealand (Certificate in Foundation Studies: Whitinga – CFS:W) bridges students into diploma and degree programmes at the institution. Providing a range of level one to three courses, the core course taught is called Tertiary Studies and introduces students to the skills needed to be successful in level four and five programmes on campus and in the wider community. The types of skills built on are reading, researching, listening, transactional writing, presentation and critical thinking. A student coming in at level 2 would generally require a year on the programme. Students come from a range of backgrounds with a huge mix of learning experiences. A large number of these students are first-generation students and many have had a poor experience of formal education.

Method

From a belief that certificate wasn't doing enough to retain Maori and Pasifika students it was proposed to form 'learning communities' by grouping Maori students in the level 2 Tertiary Studies courses together and Pasifika students in the level 2 Tertiary Studies courses together. The groups would be taught by staff with a good understanding of the pedagogy of the different cultures and communities. Students were asked at their placement interview if they wanted to be part of the Maori or Pasifika learning community which operate on an opt-in basis.

This project aimed to evaluate whether the learning experience was enhanced for the participants of these 'learning communities' and whether the communities work to improve student networking and retention. As this is the first time the learning communities have been run the research was necessarily preliminary.

An action research model was deemed most appropriate as this research was grounded in a real life, real time, teaching context. This paper records reflections at the conclusion of one spiral with the expectation that experiences from this semester will inform plans to be made for the learning communities next year. The research paradigm adopted is coined illuminative evaluation. Illuminative evaluation employs flexible methodology recognizing the 'learning milieu' as the meeting point of complex and ever-changing social, cultural institutional and psychological factors, which impact upon any given class or course at a given time. Consequently any innovative practice, in this instance learning communities, will not only impact upon the learning milieu but be impacted by it (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). The research methodology employed needed to sit within a kaupapa Maori framework. Thus, drawing on the model developed by Bishop and Glynn (1999) the research and interpretations were developed collaboratively and results were shared with relevant stakeholders within the institute.

Using a video-taped recording, open-ended semi-structured group interviews were decided upon as the best method for collecting information from the students as to how they felt about the learning communities. It was decided that in order to get the most honest responses the Maori members of staff would conduct the interview with the Maori learning community and the Pasifika members of staff would conduct the interview with the Pasifika learning community. The interviewers were in essence part of the research in that they were the tutors of the learning community. This involvement is acknowledged as necessarily shaping the stories that were collected. In addition to the videotaped interviews, a journal was kept and informal on-going dialogue was held with the tutors overseeing the learning communities, who were part of the research team.

Findings

For this first trial 12 of the 18 members of the Maori learning community identified as Maori. In the Pasifika learning community, all but one student identified themselves as Pasifika. No student opted out of the learning communities and some Pakeha opted into the Maori learning community, although this may have been for the convenience of when the classes were scheduled.

The tutors who led the learning communities felt positive about the experience. The tutor who facilitated the Pasifika learning community was excited by the retention and noted that attendance in that class had been outstanding in comparison to other classes. The interviews were an opportunity for the students to speak for themselves about how they felt about being part of the learning community. Although the interviews were guided by open questions the staff facilitating them tried to be flexible and to let the students speak. Themes that emerged from the videotaped interviews did come from the questions although students had a lot more to say on some issues than others. The three dominant themes to emerge were the way the tutor related to the rest of the learning community, the ways the tutor taught and the way the students related to each other.

The connection the students had with their tutors was a common theme. Within the Pasifika learning community one student made the comment that the tutor 'steps down to our level'. Another said the tutor was 'humble – doesn't look down on us'. Notions of the tutor as being on a different level are brought with the students to the learning community and the different style of interaction is clearly noticed and appreciated. Other comments about the tutor included that they were 'honest', 'understanding' and 'we get along with him'. The students in the Maori learning community clearly felt linked to their tutor also. This group made comments like the tutor was 'more on a one to one level' and 'easy to get along with' and that she had 'time' and that she 'makes us laugh' and 'makes it fun'.

Other techniques which the tutors used were 'heaps of group work' and 'she gives us incentives to do stuff – all the boring stuff has to be made interesting'. One student also reported that 'at the start of the

course he did ice-breaking sessions which made us get to know each other better and like, that made us more confident to be with each other – especially for me, and like um after that we weren't afraid to put your hand up to speak'. The theme that the students had most to say about was the bonds and links that had formed within the learning communities. For the Maori learning community, the staff member who warmed the group up to the discussion introduced the notion of the learning communities as being about whakawhanaungatanga. She asked of the students what they knew about Whakawhanaungatanga. The establishment of class kaupapa or guidelines was integral. She wrote

For others bonding at the beginning of the course helped, having shared lunches, team work and checking in on each other if someone was away. It was their responsibility to make sure no one was left out no matter what nationality you were. (A. McManus, personal communication, October 5, 2004).

The students in this group stated that they all supported each other by 'making sure people turn up to classes' and 'making sure we're all up to date with our work' and 'if they're having trouble with work they can come and see us'. Other students said that they 'tried to work out disagreements' by having meetings to 'sort it out'. Texting each other has become a common method of communication between students and clearly, within the learning community, it is used as a method to account for where each member is. Other comments include:

We're real whanau⁵ orientated this class, we work real tight this class you know compared to all our other subjects this class I've noticed is real tight.

I'm not really liking my other classes cause it's not so you whanau orientated – like you're just an individual; but in here you're all one, you know with everyone else and in my other classes I don't... I just don't like being with people that I don't know.

The Pasifika learning community also felt the bonds were strong between the students. One student stated 'we get along together, we're good mates. More than a community of learners, it's everything'. Another stated that they 'feel like you're part of a family' and another that it was 'really good having that comfort zone in the class'. Another student put it this way;

I didn't think I could handle on the first two weeks, I actually said to myself maybe I'm in the wrong place but then the more help I got from people around me and asking questions from these girls and some of the guys and all the group so... I think it's a good idea from you guys being tutors to put us Pacific people together cause we're not shy to ask each other if we've got something we're not sure of.

Another student explained:

Being in Tertiary Studies like with the other Pacific Islanders it makes it easier your confidence much more easier because I um I personally think that Islanders kind of go with the flow with things and I think that being together and studying together it makes it easier because you can understand like you don't have to laugh if it's not funny, things like that, little things like if you're combined with other ethnic groups it kinds of make it harder cause you don't know if they're going to take it as a joke or not.

One young man stated:

Um I've been on a few courses before I came to this one and um this is like the first course I've been with like heaps of Pacific Islanders and the other courses that I've been at I've tend to like just go away from it, drop out, start wagging a lot but since I've been here I feel more comfortable and yeah I guess its helped me stay on course.

From listening to the voices of the students clearly they felt a sense of community which was tied to their learning.

Conclusions

Setting up learning communities is not without its challenges and the experiences thus far in Foundation Studies reflect what other institutions have found. It is important that the setting up of learning communities happens slowly and that adequate time and energy is given to discussions to ensure that departments are clear about the benefits and goals of learning communities. Experiences from the National Learning Communities Dissemination Project in the United States point to the importance of leadership and a 'shared vision' in order for learning communities to develop effectively (Six lessons, 2000). Furthermore, it is important that if the project is to be a success it must be supported, and driven, by a team that includes all relevant stakeholders (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Boylan (2002) considers training to be essential to the successful implementation of learning communities. Having readings available and in-house workshops can help build a team vision for change. It is important that a move to learning communities be driven by the knowledge that well managed learning communities can benefit all students, especially those at risk. Learning communities can be structured around many different models and the initial trial is just one manifestation. Listening to the voices of the students, especially those in the Pasifika learning community, it is clear that connectedness to a class can have something to do with cultural fit.

One review of the research concluded that the 'single most important factor influencing retention is the quality of faculty/staff contacts' (Miller & Gerlach, 1997). Listening to the voices of the students it is clear that the role of the tutor is of primary importance to how the learning community operates. Central to the success of staff is their professional development. Studies have shown that the development and training of staff is integral to the success of bridging education, being linked to retention and performance of students (Boylan, 2002).

Collaborative learning is at the heart of learning communities and encouraging staff to collaborate and to incorporate collaborative learning among students is important to the success of any community of learners. Furthermore, to operate effectively, classes organized around the concept of collaborative learning need to be cognizant of the fact that groups do not spontaneously form and that they move through stages of development. Learning how to learn may also need to be taught to students who are used to a more passive style of receiving information. Tutors can use techniques to establish guidelines (as referred to in the Maori learning community) and break down barriers of shyness by using icebreakers early on (as students mentioned in the Pasifika learning community). It is important that an environment is created where students feel able to take risks with their learning and where all contributions are treated with respect (Malnarich, 2003).

Finally, listening to the voices of the students, it is apparent that the sense of community or whakawhanaungatanga enhanced the learning experience for the students who participated in those classes. Having supportive peers, who cared if they turned up, helped the students through difficult assignments and provided opportunities for social connection within the learning environment. These

voices confirm what the research indicates about students own feelings; that being part of the learning community enhanced their learning (Tinto, 1997; Malnarich, 2003). Anecdotal evidence suggests retention and learning has been improved and further research is required to confirm this and add weight to the overseas research which shows that learning communities improve students' academic success, retention rates and enjoyment of learning (Boylan, 2002).

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Notes

- ¹ Whakawhanaungatanga: a term that can simply mean 'establishing relationships' (Bishop, 1996).
- ² Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand. In 1840 Maori chiefs signed a Treaty with representatives of the British Crown which is considered the founding document of the nation. The Maori and English texts of the Treaty differ and therefore the intent is still debated. After the Treaty was signed the British assumed sovereignty of New Zealand. In 2001, 1 in 7 people identified as Maori.
- ³ Pasifika is the term given to the people who migrate from the Pacific Islands. It is also inclusive of those who descend from migrants from the Pacific. Currently Samoans make up half of all the Pasifika peoples in New Zealand, however there are also substantial groups of Niueans, Tongans, Cook Island Maori, Tokeloaan and Fijians and Fiji Indians. In 2001, 1 out of every 16 people in New Zealand was of Pacific Island descent.
- ⁴ Kaupapa Maori: living a way of life that is informed by, and actively promotes Maori culture, in practice and philosophically.
- ⁵ Whanau: family

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