

"Parallel Play" or Intentional Integrative Learning? Results from a Two-Year Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities

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Presentation outline

- ❖ Impetus for the National Project: the critical question
- ❖ Project participants: core agreements
- ❖ Fresh understandings: five key findings

National context for this project

- ❖ NSSE report on high-impact practices identifies learning communities as one of the top ten
- ❖ LEAP report on essential learning outcomes identifies integrative learning as one of four

National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities
- brought together learning community practitioners to examine the kind of learning that learning communities make possible

Agreed upon definition of learning communities: *A cohort of students enrolled in two or more classes whose experiences of learning include at least one experience of intentionally-designed integrative learning*

Sampling what we know, and don't know...

A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshman Learning Community Program
-Sue Scrivener, MDRC, 2008

Two key findings:

- ❖ Student cohorts matter in terms of persistence
- ❖ The quality of learning communities varies depending on what happens in the classroom

What kind of learning do learning communities make possible?

"Learning community assessment and research can and should probe more deeply into the nature of learning community interventions, and the nature of their impact on the learning of students, those who serve on teaching teams, and institutions."

Learning Community Research and Assessment: What We Know Now (2003)

-Research team: Kathe Taylor, William S. Moore, Jean MacGregor, Jerry Linblad

Project goal: discover the degree to which learning communities promote interdisciplinary learning

Project design and core agreements

- ❖ Look at student work as way to discuss evidence of learning
- ❖ Use a shared, explicit definition of interdisciplinary understanding as the basis for assessing student work
- ❖ Use a structured protocol to discuss student work in faculty groups on campuses
- ❖ Adopt a participatory research approach in which faculty groups within and across campuses discuss findings

Participating campuses

Two-year:

Broward (FL)
Cerritos (CA)
Chandler-Gilbert (AZ)
Everett (WA)
Garrett (MD)
Holyoke (MA)

Kingsborough (NY)
LaGuardia (NY)
North Seattle (WA)
Skagit Valley (WA)
Yakima Valley (WA)

Four-year:

Clayton State University
College of Charleston
Iowa State University
Kennesaw State University
Sacramento State University

Temple University
University of Kansas
University of Washington-Bothell
Westminster College

First finding: the power of examining student work together using a collaborative protocol

"The protocol prompted faculty to notice and appreciate the work before moving to a critical examination."

- North Seattle Community College

"Grounding the conversation in student work turns attention to long-term, deep learning. This conversation frames assessment in relation to key artifacts and change over time."

- Iowa State University

Looking at student work together: "Getting Acquainted" section of protocol

- ❖ Read the excerpt of student work
- ❖ What do you notice about it?
- ❖ What do you value about it?
- ❖ What questions do you have?

Second finding: clarifying the kind of learning we want students to experience

How would you define "interdisciplinary learning"?

Think for a couple of moments on your own, and then turn and share your thinking with two of your neighbors in this session.

What is interdisciplinary learning?

"Whether we try to take a stance on the stem cell research controversy, to interpret a work of art in a new medium, or to assess the reconstruction of Iraq, a deep understanding of contemporary life requires knowledge and thinking skills that transcend the traditional disciplines. Such understanding demands that we draw on multiple sources of expertise to capture multi-dimensional phenomena, to produce complex explanations, or to solve intricate problems."

From: Veronica Boix Mansilla, "Assessing Student Work at the Disciplinary Crossroads," *Change* 2004, January/February, 14-21

Elements of interdisciplinary understanding

"Interdisciplinary work integrates knowledge and modes of thinking from two or more disciplines. Such work embraces the goal of advancing understanding (e.g. explain phenomena, craft solutions, raise new questions,) in ways that would have not been possible through single disciplinary means."

- Interdisciplinary Studies Project, Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Making a critical distinction while recognizing a fundamental habit of mind

Integrative learning is a fundamental habit of mind; interdisciplinary learning represents a special case.

Integrative Learning

Interdisciplinary Learning

*Third finding:
To do either integrative or interdisciplinary learning you need "disciplinary grounding"*

Knowledge

- focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Methods

- practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards of performance

Purposes

- anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Forms of communication

- demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

- Veronica Boix Mansilla, "Assessing Student Learning at Disciplinary Crossroads," *Change*, 2004

As we design assignments aimed at helping students develop "disciplinary grounding," what exactly are we asking students to:

Know...

Are we introducing students to the ideas that are central for us in our work in this field?

Do...

Are we asking students—even beginning students—to do what we do as experts, scaled at an appropriate level?

For what purposes...

Are we creating possibilities for students' work to be purposeful in the ways that our own work is purposeful?

In what forms?

Are we introducing students to a similar range of forms?

*Fourth finding:
Faculty need to design explicit interdisciplinary/integrative assignments*

In designing integrative or interdisciplinary assignments is the context a compelling contemporary issue?

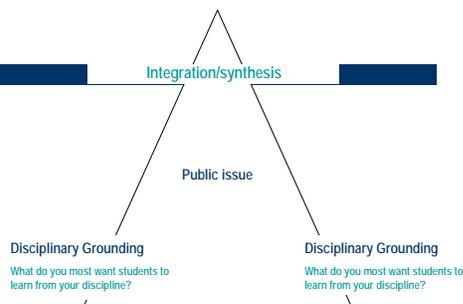
How clear are we about the purpose of the specific task or project?

Are we giving explicit cues about the disciplines or fields of expertise we want students to draw on (ideas, methods, skills) to reach a new understanding?

Are we assessing students' abilities to integrate ideas to achieve an understanding that would otherwise not be possible?

Are we assessing their overall thoughtfulness about doing this work?

Designing Purposeful Integrative Assignments



*Fifth finding:
To develop students' abilities as integrative thinkers, ongoing faculty development based on examining student work is essential*

"Professional development has been the most powerful effect of the project for us. It has helped us...increase the energy within teams, demand a "product" in terms of student work, and enabled us to reflect more carefully on the product."

- La Guardia Community College

Closing reflections from teams...

"In working with colleagues, we have become evangelists for understanding disciplines as the basis for integration. A learning community team should begin by grappling with the types of disciplinary knowledge they would like students to gain..."

- Cerritos Community College

"The team sees the need for and value of both integrative learning and disciplinary grounding. We find that we build both simultaneously. First year students are not experts in engineering design or horticulture knowledge; however, we include disciplinary knowledge in all of our student assignments and offer an opportunity for students to situate disciplinary grounding in integrative learning experiences."

- Iowa State University

"In our view purposeful integration requires both depth and breadth—depth from rootedness within a discipline and breadth from the act of drawing connections across disciplines in order to see the bigger picture. Without disciplinary grounding, true integration cannot be realized."

- Kingsborough Community College

What we learned

- ❖ The value of assessing student work together in terms of shared outcomes
- ❖ The importance of clarifying what we want students to know and be able to do—and inviting them to demonstrate that
- ❖ The need to connect the goals for assignments with larger program and institutional student learning outcomes

For additional information

- ❖ Power Point available on Washington Center website
- ❖ Winter 2009 Special Issue: Journal of Learning Communities Research
- ❖ Washington Center National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities

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