

LEARNING COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

Development and Implementation

Training:

- **Spring 2006:** The ATD Learning Communities and Active Learning Committee conducted a series of brainstorming workshops with the academic divisions in an effort to identify possible learning communities that could be developed at MECC to enhance student engagement and success
- **July 2006:** Committee sponsored a two-day workshop on developing, teaching in, marketing, and maintaining learning communities.

Coordination:

Faculty training and development of learning community initiatives were coordinated by the chair of one of the AtD committees assigned to research and recommend teaching/learning strategies that could help improve student success and retention at the college, particularly for high risk students. The chair of the AtD Learning Communities and Active Learning committee received 3 hours of released time per semester for this coordination.

Development:

Faculty interested in development of learning communities submitted proposals to the AtD Active Learning and Learning Communities committee. The committee reviewed the proposals and made recommendations to the AtD Core Team.

Faculty whose proposals were approved for Learning Community development were given three hours of released time. Working with the chair of the AtD Learning Communities and Active Learning committee, they developed a structure for the learning community that included integration of lessons, assignments, assessments, outcomes, strategies for success etc. for the courses involved in the learning community, as well as plans for piloting the initiative. The coordinator also worked with appropriate Division Deans and the Enrollment Services office on scheduling and enrollment.

Implementation:

Over the past two years, college faculty developed the following three learning communities:

- “Deviance, Disorder, and Dirtbags: A Study of Crime and Criminals,” a learning community that thematically links ADJ 107 (criminology, a course in the Police Science program), SOC 200 (principles of Sociology), and ENG 111 (College Composition I). One goal of this learning community was to increase the success rate of police science students in a gatekeeper course (ENG 111). We attempted to pilot this LC in the fall semester of 2007; however, the LC was cancelled because of low enrollment. Plans were

made to attempt the pilot again in the fall semester of 2008, but those plans were also cancelled when the lead instructor of the LC took an interim administrative position and was unable to teach ADJ 107 that semester or in the spring term of 2009.

- Two faculty members in the college’s Business and Information Technology division developed and attempted to pilot an LC entitled “HR Law” that would link BUS 205 and LGL 205 in the fall semester of 2007. The LC was cancelled because of low enrollment.
- Two Arts and Sciences faculty piloted History 121/English 111 Learning Community: The Pen and the Sword: Instruments of Change; American History through Writing in the fall semester of 2008. The LC made with an enrollment of 18 students and had limited success. Plans to offer the LC again have been put on hold. The English instructor involved with the pilot was an adjunct instructor who has left the college, and the English department does not have an adequate number of faculty members at this time to devote to this LC.

Learning Community Survey - ENG 111 and HIS 121

The learning community concept developed by your English and History instructors has been created as a part of a college initiative designed to improve the learning process at MECC. We would appreciate your feedback on the effectiveness of this course concept. Please take a few minutes to complete this survey.

<i>8 of 19 responses – 44%</i>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I have enjoyed the use of the learning community.	6	2			
2. The Learning Community has helped me to better get to know my classmates.	3	3	1	1	
3. The Learning Community has helped me to better understand the course material in HIS 121 and ENG 111.	7	1			
4. Going over the history material in the composition essays allowed me to better prepare for tests.	6	1	1		
5. The extra writing assignments have better helped me understand my errors on essays.	3	3			
6. I enjoyed getting work graded for both a content grade and a grammar grade.	5	2		1	
7. I like being able to concentrate on material I had already seen for my essays.	6	2			
8. I feel that the Learning Community was a waste of time.				3	3
9. I feel that the Learning Community is a more effective way to learn than taking the classes separate.	4	2	2		

10. The thing I liked the most about the Learning Community is:

- *Being able to review our material twice by our writing assignments.*
- *Very easygoing atmosphere. These classes made it easier to get my work done.*
- *Two grades for one paper.*
- *I really learned a lot. I got to write about material that I needed to know. The teachers were open to our comments and helped us to prepare for all of the papers we had to write.*
- *I took off some pressure of having separate papers for each class.*
- *It was easier to write essays.*
- *The fact you go over the same material and get two grades for the same assignment.*
- *I'm not a fan of history but having to write about it so much probably helped in the long run.*

11. The thing I liked the least about the Learning Community is:

- *The confusion over when papers were due and where they went.*
- *All the papers, but no one likes to write papers. :)*
- *A little confusing at times.*
- *I thought everything went well.*
- *There wasn't that much focus on English. I think a lot of concepts were missed.*
- *Edited: --Instructor's name—*
- *That the English part only dealt with writing for history and nothing different.*
- *The English information was far ahead of the pace of the history class.*

Additional comments: (use the back of this sheet for any additional comments about group learning that you would like to make).

- *The Learning Community should be extended to other classes as well. The reinforcement from both professors & the encouragement was extremely helpful.*
- *I struggle with English, history helped make it a little more interesting.*
- *I felt like the bulk of the material we learned was in His. The only thing we did in eng was write the papers that the his prof. assigned. Most of the time the eng class was in the library to write. There was no real focus on the English aspect except for about 5 class periods.*
- *I learned a lot from these classes the times were great and I loved not changing rooms. I also enjoyed the learning of the same materials in both classes it helped me better understand the material.*

Start-Up and Continuing Cost for the Intervention

Start-up Costs

Description of Expense	Unit Cost (exact or range)	Total Units	Cost
Stipend and travel for Ashlee Brand of Southwest Texas Community College to train at MECC; travel for MECC personnel to visit Southwest Texas CC; food for training			\$2,263
Faculty release for course development linking ENG 222 with HIS 121	2 faculty members	3 credit hours each	\$3,741
Faculty summer pay for course development linking BUS 205 with LGL 295	2 faculty members	3 credit hours each	\$9,514
Faculty release/summer pay for course development linking ENG 111, SOC 200, and ADJ 107	3 faculty members	3 credit hours each	\$10,264
Total Cost			\$25,782

What we learned while implementing this intervention

- **Cohort Size:** The major obstacle we have faced so far with the use of Learning Communities is attempting LCs in programs that have relatively small cohort sizes. Two of the three LC pilots were cancelled because of low enrollment.
- **Faculty Interest and Investment:** The development of learning communities depends on faculty interest, compounded by the fact that two or more faculty members must be willing to work together on the development of an LC project. The development of LCs also requires a significant investment in time and energy by those faculty members involved in the development. Thus far, AtD has supported all the faculty members on campus who have shown an interest in developing LCs.

Perhaps the best benefit from the use of learning communities is improving student success in typical gatekeeper courses. According to initial research conducted during year 1 of the Lumina Grant, college level and developmental English and math courses comprise the bulk of the gatekeeper courses at the college. Currently, however, both the English and Math departments are stretched thin with a shortage of both full-time and part-time instructors, and many English and math faculty are already involved with other aspects of AtD and/or other grant projects.

Faculty, Administration and Student Conclusions Regarding Outcomes and Faculty and Administration Conclusions Sustainability

Conclusions by HIS 121 Instructor from the HIS121/ENG 111 pilot:

Note: The following is from a memorandum by the history instructor to the learning communities coordinator. In addition to his assessment in the following four paragraphs, the instructor made suggestions about improvements to scheduling the learning community.

Overall, it seemed that the HIS 121/ENG 111 Learning Community was a successful experiment. There were several positives to the course structure, and there were also several shortcomings that were revealed as the course went forward.

In the development of the Learning Community, the main drawback was the inclusion of an adjunct faculty member. This to some degree limited the planning phase and was the root cause of the confusion that the students experienced in the beginning of the course. Essentially, the courses were not fully linked together as perhaps they should have been. The idea behind this Learning Community was to take two required first year courses in Arts and Sciences, and link them together through the content of the History course. Essentially, the majority of the essays, research paper and other writing assignments for English 111 would be derived from the material in the History 121 course.

As the Learning Community began, the first problem that emerged was confusion over what the paper assignments were, when they were due, and to whom they should be turned in. There were several assignments that were only for one course and not the other, and the due dates occasionally did not match the material in the course schedule,

mostly due to the difficulty in History classes of staying on schedule with the syllabus. Eventually most of these issues were worked out satisfactorily with the disbursement of a new revised turn in sheet. On the faculty survey administered for the class, the question asking “student responsibilities identified” was the lowest total of the 14 questions.

Overall, I enjoyed the Learning Community, as it offered great flexibility in the calendar, and the students were able to use the composition assignments as a way to further their understanding of history. Anecdotally, this seemed to be their impression as well. While statistically the outcomes were not significantly different to students who did participate in the Learning Community, they did exhibit a higher level of day to day engagement with the material.

Conclusions by the AtD Learning Communities Coordinator:

Student Engagement with the LC: Student comments on the history instructor’s faculty evaluation of the class involved in the LC seem to indicate that the students enjoyed taking the LC.

LC Development and Coordination: The confusions indicated in the history instructor’s comments above suggest that tight coordination is necessary between the instructors involved in an LC. I do not believe that these difficulties preclude using adjunct instructors in learning communities. However, when adjunct instructors are used, they must be willing to devote the time to the necessary planning and coordination.

Student Success: Although the assessment data from the pilot of the HIS 121/ENG 111 pilot does not indicate improvement in student success and retention in the target gatekeeper course, this should not be seen as a sign of failure. It is impractical to expect significant improvements based on a one-semester pilot. Moreover, neither of the two faculty members involved in the pilot had ever taught in a learning community before, and as with any new initiative, there will be a learning curve. As the history instructor’s comments above suggest, he is eager to try again and has learned much from the experience. Should we be able to run this learning community again in the future, we may see better student success over time, especially if we can enlist an English instructor who has either experience with learning communities or who is eager to give them a try.

Sustainability: Given the difficulties we had with “making” learning communities in some of the smaller college programs or cross-program learning communities that involve one class from a relatively small program, the use of learning communities at a college of our size may not be the most effective use of our resources unless we restrict their use to the larger programs, such as the college transfer program in Arts and Sciences. Since the development of learning communities requires considerable time and effort on the part of faculty, the college must be willing and able to provide released time for faculty for LC development as well as training opportunities. Finally, learning communities require careful coordination with appropriate Division Deans, Enrollment Services, and teaching faculty as well as marketing to ensure adequate enrollment. Any extensive use of learning communities at the college would likely require the use of a part-time or full-time coordinator.

