The Transformative Power of a Learning Community

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Abstract: *Recently, higher education has focused on "learning communities." This study examines a process in which students create expectations for their community of learners. The expectations provide the basis for assessment of students and the program. Across three cohorts, common themes arise. The major themes from students' expectations of faculty are that faculty should be organized, use a variety of teaching methods, and provide mentoring. Students primarily want their peers to participate actively and constructively in class, have academic honesty, and contribute to class in a civil, respectful manner. Study findings indicate that students are empowered in finding their collective voice and holding each other accountable for classroom community. Using the transformative power of a learning community to improve both student classroom behaviors and faculty teaching appears to be a promising practice.*

Keywords: Learning communities, assessment, program improvement

Excellence in education is a goal of social work educators (BPD, 2005; CSWE, 2005) and understanding ways in which social work programs can provide students with the strongest learning experience is an ongoing challenge. Evidence indicates that student engagement affects learning outcomes (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005). In determining how to engage students, teachers must consider the culture within a classroom and how to promote learning within it.

Concurrent with the focus on student engagement, social work faculty are called upon to utilize more assessment in their work, in part due to accreditation standards (CSWE, 2001). The current study presents a process that addresses the issues of engagement and assessment. In this process, students brainstormed expectations for faculty, their peers, and themselves for the academic year. The group process engendered consensus among faculty and students about mutual expectations for participation in a community of learners. These expectations were writ-

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ten in the form of an agreement between faculty and students. At the end of the academic year, an assessment tool was used to understand students' perceptions of how well the expectations in the community of learners' agreement were met. Findings indicate there are core elements that are important aspects of a learning community and that students are able to discern whether or not these objectives are being met.

One focus of this paper is to describe the process of creating a community of learners. Another focus is to identify core elements that students value in their learning communities, and, finally, to posit how faculty can use students' self- and program assessments in a way that will transform a classroom into a true learning community. It may be that the learning community develop an assessment process that is described here, which can be useful to other faculty who are hoping to collaborate with students, and build community in the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the learning community has been promoted in recent years. In a national survey on college student engagement, Kuh (2002) found that educational effectiveness was enhanced when students were part of a learning community. College classrooms are a social environment, and students' cognitive understanding and personal construction of knowledge depend on relations with others (Fung, 2004; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Faculty who create a safe environment for a learning community in the classroom help students take risks and collaborate authentically (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Research illustrates the importance of students' perception that they are members of a community in order to collaborate and learn (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2002; Wegerif, 1998).

Barab and Duffy (2000) describe *community* as providing members with shared goals and culture, a shared feeling of being part of a greater whole, the ability to negotiate meaning, and the ability to reproduce the community through new members (p. 37). Mutual support among students or "communities of learners," (Pringle, 2002) has long been considered beneficial in social work education (Randolph & Krause, 2002; Wulff, Nyquist, & Abbott, 1987). In a qualitative study, Wegerif (1998) found that students' sense of community affected their success in the course. Understanding what is meant by *community* can be challenging, as researchers do not always provide a definition of community in their work (Jones, 1995; Gunawardena, 1995; Reid, 1995; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Swan, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Community has been described as shared experiences in which both individual and group needs are met, either linked to a place and time but also transcending place and time (Brueggemann, 2002). Rovai (2002) describes community as a group of individuals interacting and connecting with each other either through formal or informal organizations. The presence of experienced community members provides the learning context for new members as they enter. Teachers can engage students in a process of mutually negotiating the norms and values of the learning community (Pringle, 2002).

Empowering students to establish the criteria for designing and assessing their learning community has its theoretical foundation in constructivism. The per-

spective supported by constructivism states that the instructor is a facilitator and the learner is an active constructor in knowledge creation (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, the recently popular concept of the "guide on the side" encourages increased interaction among students, with the teacher providing consultation as needed (Huang, 2002; King, 1993).

Students are almost always given the opportunity to assess their faculty on formative and summative evaluations, based on pre-determined criteria. Self-assessment by students, while used in social work education, appears to be based on standard measurement tools, such as might be used for students to assess their skills in the field (University of St. Francis, 2005). While both forms of assessment produce valuable information, they do not contribute to empowering the student to become the "maker of history" (Freire, 1998, p. 55). If one agrees with Freire that teaching does not consist simply of the teacher's planting knowledge in the student's garden, one may be interested in learning from students what are their criteria for assessing their learning community. Yet, there is less written in the social work education literature about the method of students' establishing their own criteria and evaluating both faculty and themselves on the basis of these criteria. Further, having students self-assess is a skill they may have to do professionally, since giving and receiving feedback is a vital part of social work practice (Meldrum, 2002). The study presents the results of a community-building exercise in which three cohorts of students create the assessment standards and later use the standards to assess faculty and their peers. At issue is finding the answers to two research questions:

1) What do students value from faculty and peers in their learning community?
2) How can faculty use students' self- and program assessments to increase student learning?

METHOD OF CONSTRUCTING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

In three consecutive years, faculty from a small Midwestern BSW program invited students to participate in setting their expectations for faculty, their peers, and themselves, during the August incoming student orientation. Faculty explained that the students would create expectations for a community of learners and that these expectations would become the basis for evaluating both the faculty and students during the junior and senior academic years.

The process involved dividing the students into small groups, each with a faculty member participating. The faculty invited the students to think about what types of learning experiences and environment would make for a successful semester. The small groups were asked to brainstorm and record the expectations they hold for themselves, their peers, and their faculty. Additionally, the students were asked to think about how both the faculty and students could assist in creating a strong learning environment. Issues, such as civility, being prepared for class, academic honesty, group work issues, attendance, and participation were also discussed in the process. The following are some examples of prompts used by faculty in the discussion:

- Describe what makes an ideal learning experience for you.
- What is a pet peeve that you have in the classroom?
- What is something you really find helpful for your learning?
- What is it like for you when ____ (people come late to class, most of the students have not done the reading for the day, etc.)?
- How do you want conflict or disagreements handled?
- What boundaries do you want?

After about 20 minutes of discussion, the small groups returned to the whole-group format. Each student group shared what they had written and all the ideas were compiled on newsprint. Then, the faculty led a process to combine similar ideas and group differing concepts, ending with a group consensus. The final agreed upon list of expectations for faculty, students, and group work was re-distributed and re-visited during the academic year. At the end of each semester, the faculty provided the students with a survey tool based on the community of learners' stated expectations, using a Likert scale for responses. Examples of survey items are:

- Faculty will:
  - Use life experience, real-life examples.
  - Use a variety of teaching styles—with activities, lectures, and discussions.
  - Be flexible with due dates if students, in general, are having problems.
- Students will:
  - Participate/interact in class.
  - Be supportive, rather than competitive.
  - Respect others' diverse opinions.

METHOD OF EVALUATING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Participants

The students were invited to evaluate their learning community in their junior year. Overall, 62 of 68 students in three cohorts completed the survey, for a response rate of 91%. Demographic information is provided on the 68 majors overall, since collecting demographic data on the surveys in such a small program could have led to the identification of individual students. As may be expected for social work majors, very few in the potential response pool were men, 6% (5 of 68). Sixteen percent of the total pool were students of color (African American, Hispanic American, and Arab American).

Procedure

At the end of the spring semester, students from the graduating classes of 2005, 2006, and 2007 filled out the survey in one of their social work classes. The survey was developed by putting the expectations the students had developed in orientation into a series of Likert scale items. On the survey, the students were asked to evaluate how well full-time faculty met their expectations, and how well their

peers' and their own behaviors' met their own expectations. The response options ranged from 1 to 5, with the following instructions:

1 = nearly none of the time

2 = some of the time

3 = not sure or doesn't apply

4 = much of the time

5 = nearly all of the time

Among the three cohorts, there was variation in the number of expectations for students and faculty. The first cohort had 19 items for faculty and 16 for students, the second had 15 items for faculty and 20 for students, and the third had 11 expectations for faculty and 22 for students. The survey was administered by a staff member, rather than the professor of the class, in accordance with the university's Institutional Review Board requirements. Participation was voluntary. The survey response rate for the first year cohort was 82% (N=18), for the second year was 95% (N=20), and for the third year was 96% (N=24).

RESULTS

This study compares the results from the survey administered at the end of the junior year for all three cohorts. In order to compare the results, commonalities were found among the three surveys. From the three cohorts, five similar items were selected for faculty (see Table 1) and eight similar items were selected for students (see Table 2). The 13-item scale was examined for reliability with a Cronbach's alpha obtained of .83, indicating that the scale has a good degree of internal consistency. Table 1 presents the means for students' expectations of faculty, and Table 2 presents the means for students' expectations of themselves and their peers. Further analysis of the differences among cohorts on the common items was done through ordinary least squares (OLS) regression testing (not shown here). Items that were found to be statistically significantly different, by cohort, are starred.

Table 1 provides the expectations for faculty listed from lowest to highest in terms of the grand mean of the students' scoring in all three cohorts. Being prepared and being on time ranked highest, and using a variety of teaching styles and providing clear directions ranked lowest. However, all but one rating was at 4.0 (much of the time) or above. Interestingly, students' ratings of faculty improved overall by the time of the third cohort. The third cohort rated faculty statistically significantly higher in three of the five items (although note that, for the "be prepared for class" item, the second cohort's ratings were tied with the third cohort's).

The students' expectations of themselves in Table 2 are listed from lowest to highest, from the grand mean for each item. Participating in class discussion and academic honesty ranked highest, and being on time and using time wisely during group meetings ranked lowest. Interestingly, students' ratings of themselves were lower, overall, than their ratings of faculty. Whereas .07% of students' ratings of faculty were below 4.0, 29% of students' ratings of themselves were below 4.0.

Table 1: *Means for Common Items for the Assessment of Faculty*

Students' Expectations	Means Cohort 1 (N=18, 82% response rate)	Means Cohort 2 (N=20, 95% response rate)	Means Cohort 3 (N=24, 96% response rate)	Highest Rating
Use a variety of teaching styles, diverse media and approaches	3.8	4.6	4.7	Cohort 3*
Provide clear direction on assignments	4.2	4.2	4.8	Cohort 3*
Provide professional, positive guidance when asked	4.6	4.8	4.5	Cohort 2
Be prepared for class	4.6	4.9	4.9	Cohorts 2 and 3*
Be on time	4.8	4.9	5.0	Cohort 3

Note: N for all three cohorts is 62, with an overall response rate of 91%
**The differences among cohorts are statistically significant, at a level of* $p<.05$*, two-tailed test*

However, most of the low ratings were in the first cohort. Students' ratings of themselves improved overall by the time of the third cohort. With the exception of "be on time," all the statistically significant improvements were found in the third cohort's ratings.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study show that students had fairly consistent expectations for their learning community, from one cohort to the next. It is noteworthy that students in three cohorts reproduced 13 nearly identical expectations for their community of learners. Perhaps the teachers present in the group exercise acted as experienced community members, providing a bridge from one year to another (Pringle, 2002). It could also be that by their junior year in college, students are socialized to expect similar behaviors from both their faculty and peers in the classroom. Such similar socialization could account for the considerable overlap in expectations. Perhaps other unknown factors are operating. However, the consistency in three cohorts of BSW students does lend value to the Community of Learners process as a way to discover what students hope to find in the class-

Table 2: *Means for Common Items for the Assessment of Students*

Students' Expectations	Means Cohort 1 (N=18, 82% response rate)	Means Cohort 2 (N=20, 95% response rate)	Means Cohort 3 (N=24, 96% response rate)	Highest Rating
Be on time	3.1	4.0	3.8	Cohort 2*
Use time wisely during group meetings	3.6	3.6	4.4	Cohort 3*
Engage in constructive discussion	3.8	3.4	4.8	Cohort 3*
Come to class prepared, with readings done, so you can contribute in class	3.1	4.3	4.5	Cohort 3*
Listen to all ideas	4.1	4.5	4.4	Cohort 2
Respect others' diverse opinions	4.0	4.5	4.8	Cohort 3*
Participate in class discussion	4.1	4.2	4.8	Cohort 3*
Have academic honesty (avoid plagiarism)	4.3	4.7	5.0	Cohort 3*

Note: N for all three cohorts is 62, with an overall response rate of 91%
**The differences among cohorts are statistically significant, at a level of* $p<.05$*, two-tailed test*

room. The common items listed in Tables 1 and 2 help to provide information to answer the research question, "What do students value from faculty and peers in their learning community?"

The answer to what students value can also be found by examining the meta themes. Regarding what students value in faculty, several clear themes are present. The theme that had the most expectations was *faculty organization* (referring to providing clear direction on assignments, being prepared for class, and being

on time). The other two themes were *good teaching* (using a variety of teaching styles and media) and mentoring (providing professional guidance when asked). Examining the meta themes of what students value in their peers, one sees that *student responsibilities* and *community civility* emerge. The meta theme of *student responsibilities* has the most expectations, which are to participate in class discussion, engage in constructive discussion, come to class prepared, be on time, use time wisely during group meetings, and have academic honesty. The meta theme of *community civility* entails respecting others' diverse opinions and listening to all ideas.

It may be of interest to note a meta theme was found in two, but not all three cohorts—that of *establishing a respectful classroom environment*. It is difficult to speculate why the third cohort did not include this theme, with possible explanations ranging from an oversight to the feeling that the process they were engaged in already demonstrated an atmosphere of respect.

Another issue to consider in examining student expectations is that faculty might not wish to embrace all expectations held by students. Another meta theme seen in two of the three cohorts was that of *faculty providing a high amount of student support*. For example, students expected faculty to be flexible on due dates if the class was having trouble, to keep in mind that students have other classes, to not overwork students "intentionally," and to provide review sheets for the examinations. It is improbable that very many faculty aspire to overwork students "intentionally," instead, perceiving that the amount of work assigned is necessary to meet the learning objectives. However, the expectation of providing review sheets for examinations may be one that some faculty resist. In short, not all expectations that students have for faculty, or for each other, should be assumed to be adopted by every member of the community.

The second research question, "How can faculty use students' self- and program assessments to increase student learning?" is perhaps more difficult to answer. In the program studied, improvement was found in many of the expectations at a statistically significant level. Over the three years of the study, faculty had been aware of student expectations and had worked on improving aspects of teaching and socialization of social work majors. Faculty discussed issues, such as student tardiness and academic honesty, and worked to educate students for improvement. Discussions with individual professors revealed that they had worked on the following items in response to the students' expectations:

- Using e-mail to communicate with all students between classes to let them know the professor is prepared and to help students prepare.
- Creating review sheets for examinations.
- Discussing the student-generated Community of Learners expectations during midcourse and final course reviews, to remind students of what they set as expectations and to provide feedback.
- Creating PowerPoint outlines for class, to aid in organization.
- Using diverse learning experiences, adding more group discussion, exercises, and videos to the class period.

In addition, when students clearly violate expectations of faculty and peers, the program director conducts a student review. The purpose of the review is to provide feedback, develop an action plan that supports student success, and closely monitor the student's efforts.

It is possible that use of the learning community helped to transform both faculty and student behavior. Such a macro-level intervention would be appropriate in social work education. Through this process, faculty can continually work to examine students' assessments of their expectations, for example, their low ranking overall of their peers' using time wisely during group meetings. Faculty can discuss strategies to address identified issues in student-faculty meetings and implement changes as part of a formative evaluation process. Thus, having student-generated criteria for assessing faculty and students provides programs with information that is both germane to the program and authentic in its relevance (Freire, 1998).

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this process is that the survey asked students to rate themselves and their classmates, making it unclear in the analysis whether a student is rating him/herself or peers. Another complex issue has to do with students' ratings of faculty. Faculty are rated as a group, which raises questions as to whether some students have one professor in mind or are thinking of the program as a whole.

A third issue is that of the possible meaning of changes from year to year. For example, the second and third cohorts rated faculty as using variety in teaching much more than the first cohort. Only those faculty can know whether the change could be due to their working to improve their teaching styles or if it is simply due to a less critical group of students. If it is due to faculty improvement, that information is worth knowing for future semesters. Finally, the fact that this is a case study of a single BSW program limits its transferability to other settings, but further use of the model in social work education would provide an example of enacting and modeling core social work principles, such as empowerment, client-centered focus, and community development.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Future research could shed more light on this topic. For example, having student groups work independently of faculty involvement for several years, then examining overlap among group expectations, might yield interesting results. The use of this method by other social work programs would also expand the knowledge base concerning the efficacy of student-led expectations. It would also be useful to link students' evaluations of themselves and faculty to a student learning measure to see if there is a correlation. The Baccalaureate Education Assessment Project (BEAP) or a field evaluation might be a good student learning measure.

Using the transformative power of a learning community to create excellent classroom learning appears to be a promising practice to improve both student classroom behaviors and faculty teaching. Faculty can learn what students' value in their learning communities from examining students' expectations. Students' assessments of their community of learners agreement can help faculty deter-

mine what expectations were met in a way that is not always reflected in course evaluations. This has good potential for enhancing the teaching and learning process. Documentation of such program evaluation would be useful for accreditation. Engagement and support in a community of learners contributes to positive teaching and learning. Studies have shown that engagement and support in a community of learners is beneficial, providing a safe environment for learning and collaboration (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2002; Randolph & Krause, 2002; Wegerif, 1998; Wulff, Nyquist, & Abbott, 1987). It is a potentially useful method to learn the best ways to assess and transform the learning community. Assessment is not just a method of evaluating; it also helps us learn and improve (Battersby, 1999). In addition, collaborating with students through a process of setting and evaluating their educational expectations may model the type of social work practice we would like them to engage in with clients. Social work educators often assert the importance of teaching social work majors to collaborate with consumers in goal development and the change process (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001; Sheyett & Diehl, 2004). Practicing what we teach may prove to provide better outcomes for students and consumers, alike. Collaborating with students for self-assessment may help them learn skills they will need as professionals, as giving and receiving feedback is an important professional skill (Meldrum, 2002).

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