LEARNING COMMUNITIES

PURPOSE
Learning communities incorporate teachers into a peer-directed process of developing and realizing instructional goals. They foster worthwhile relationships between teachers of various disciplines and allow vision expansion and collaboration. Learning communities allow teachers to own and design their growth in ways that are exciting and productive to them. They provide a non-threatening venue to practice vital collaborative practices such as classroom observation and peer-to-peer instruction.

DESCRIPTION
Just as peer-to-peer teaching and group problem solving are seen as keys to student progress in learning, the same principles should be central to teacher development efforts. Learning communities seek to tap into the expertise of peers on campus to solve teaching concerns. Continuity—both in terms of time and membership—sets learning communities apart from other worthwhile training programs such as book reviews, brown bag training sessions, and in-service meetings. Increased ability to teach and the development of valuable relationships with other teachers are the primary by-products of learning communities. Some typical characteristics of learning communities are:

• **Group size.** Eight to twelve members is recommended.

• **Established structure.** Typically, active collaborative practices are followed. In addition to presentation, opportunities for practice, feedback, and group problem solving are sought. Participants come into the experience expecting to collaborate. They expect to participate in discussions, to visit, and to be visited.

• **Trans-disciplinary.** Learning communities are able to capitalize on the universality of instructional principles. Vision of how to implement instructional goals is expanded as teachers see how goals are achieved in diverse disciplines.

• **Duration.** Optimally, learning communities meet for an extended period of time, up to one year. This affords opportunities for deep relationships to develop and for application and assessment of study topics to occur. Because participants have full teaching loads, meetings usually occur no more than once weekly.

• **Autonomous attention to common goals.** Learning communities provide for great freedom by the participants in determining the content and structure of their experience. However, care is taken by community members to stay focused on accepted instructional goals.

**Learning Community Structure**
Learning communities generally include eight to twelve members who all meet regularly. Between meetings, individual practice, implementation, classroom visits, and preparation occur. Participation in Learning communities is optional. The premise of the experience is that teachers are professionals who want to grow and are capable of directing their growth. Other than encouraging and facilitating the experience, administration has little direct role in specific learning communities. Administrators review the curriculum, the participants, and the community facilitator, and then withdraw from the process to allow teachers to collaborate in an inspiring, non-threatening way.

**Role of the Learning Community Facilitator**
The learning community experience is facilitated by an individual who has the following responsibilities:

1. **Initiate collaboration.** Once community members have been designated, the facilitator orients the community and initiates the planning process for community plans.

2. **Facilitate community meetings.** Facilitators ensure that progress toward learning goals are achieved within the available time while maintaining the participatory nature of the community. The facilitator exercises enough leadership to redirect a distracted group without stifling individuality. He or she promotes a meeting environment that is safe and edifying.

3. **Ensure the success of individual community members.** The facilitator communicates with the community before and after experiences to verify group decisions and to review group experiences.

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Since learning communities are volunteer opportunities that are shouldered by teachers in addition to their full loads, facilitators encourage and assist members who may need to miss some aspect of the community experience.

4. **Promote consensus.** Facilitators serve the vital role of encouraging diverse input and then aiding in synthesizing the contributions into a plan that can be acted upon favorably by the entire group. Facilitators bridge the gap between theoretical discussions and pragmatic decisions.

**EXAMPLES**

Differences can exist between the experiences that might be had by two different learning communities. These differences might be in focus or in structure. Typically, communities will resolve to address an area of instructional concern that interests all community members. Once the focus topic is designated, the group meets to determine how they would like to foster growth toward the goal. If a community were to determine that it desired to help teachers increase in their ability to assess whether their teaching objectives had been achieved, they might follow the plan below:

**SEPTEMBER**

• Meet as a community to plan the structure of the experience. State the goal for the experience. State a planned outcome for experience such as developing a paper to share, revising a learning tool, or running a workshop. Finalize a calendar of meetings and other experiences.

• Prepare for a second meeting where a discussion is held to share ideas on establishing objectives that can be assessed and developing assessments that provide worthwhile information.

• Meet again to share prepared ideas.

**OCTOBER**

• Each teacher applies personalized goals developed from the previous meeting. They seek to practice in their individual classes and invite other participants to visit their class and discuss.

• The community meets to discuss efforts to apply principles learned in September and to share experiences with visiting and being visited.

**NOVEMBER**

• The community meets to participate in a special presentation by a special guest on a specific topic related to assessment.

• Community members share a goal and a plan to implement in their winter classes.

• Community members seek to prepare their classes for the following semester to allow them to practice their focus area for assessment.

**DECEMBER-APRIL**

• Etc.

**TIPS**

• **Develop relationships at the beginning.** Much of the good available through learning communities unfolds only after relationships of trust exist.

• **Keep meetings short.** Limit yourself to an hour or less to keep the meetings productive.

• **Share responsibility.** Seek to diversify assignments and burdens. Allow various members to conduct meetings and fill other leadership roles.

• **Be sensitive to the sacrifices of the community members.** Avoid busy work, and expect conflicts.

**PITFALLS**

• **Settling for relationships without growth.** Developing friendships can be so satisfying that instructional goals can be neglected. Stay disciplined enough to pursue growth goals and deep relationships will be a natural by-product.

**CAMPUS PRACTITIONERS**

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**KEY ARTICLES**


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