At First Site: Lessons from Furman University’s Center for Collaborative Learning and Communication

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Engaged learning is a broad, interdisciplinary concept, yet it has very definite roots. Most scholars point first to early-twentieth-century educational theorist John Dewey, whose work argued against passivity in education—and more broadly, in life—by advocating an active, inquiry-based approach. In contrast to the perspectives of scholars interested in simulated learning, Dewey (1916) held that the most productive learning occurred not when individuals repeated the same response to familiar conditions over and over, but when new conditions emerged and required alternate approaches. This definition of learning was about both the person and the environment, rather than on one or the other; the aim was engaged citizenship, thus democratic lifelong learning. Since Dewey, various thinkers have developed similar visions, these approaches often specialized to technology-based learning or to subject areas, but his work continues to have influence and to be the guiding philosophy of education for many who develop engaged learning programs in the contemporary era.

While different institutions define engaged learning differently at times in terms of program offerings today, it generally includes project-based, problem-solving scenarios in which students face "real world" challenges. Teachers take on roles like guide and co-learner, while students imagine themselves as explorers, and the sort of democratic learning model Dewey imagined persists in this form. Among key components of engaged learning programs are the following:

- Learners take responsibility for their progress, including setting goals and developing assessment standards;
- Learners develop large-scale characteristics, like critical thinking, simultaneously with smaller-scale characteristics;
- Learners find rewards in the learning itself, instead of relying on other motivation or forms of approval; and
- Learners develop an appreciation for collaboration.

Components of engaged learning programs prove often to be termed "authentic," the term teachers and administrators use to refer to "real world" activities, and components also typically span the disciplines, encouraging participants to be broad thinkers, respectful of differences but also able to interact in multiple communities of learners.

The relation of such engaged learning practices to writing across the curriculum (WAC) and communication across the curriculum (CAC) programs should be clear, as it’s been foregrounded for some time. Consider C.W. Griffin’s "Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum: A Report," for instance, published in 1985. She argues that WAC programs
have common features, such as faculty workshops and writing centers, and common values, such as an emphasis on writing to learn. In "Defining Writing Across the Curriculum," Susan McLeod (1987) suggests two models of WAC have been paramount: a cognitive model, which emphasizes writing as thinking, and a rhetorical model, which focuses on examining and adapting to the conditions around any writing situation. Though the McLeod and Griffin articles were published more than fifteen years ago, they still resonate strongly for WAC and CAC programs today. The ideas have been extended, however, by projects like Donna Reiss’, Dickie Selfe’s, and Art Young’s (1998) Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum, which explores the specific influence of electronic media. We have now a much more pluralistic milieu into which to introduce WAC and CAC initiatives; teachers and learners alike have many options. The relation of WAC and CAC to engaged learning builds on the notion of writing to learn, challenging writers to think critically and responsibly about their writing contexts. These writers take on responsibility for their learning via their writing, and they control the bases for their writing experiences, whether integrating specific rhetorical scenes or developing collaborative relationships with other writers.

In this article, I describe the design process associated with one site of engaged learning specifically charged with promoting writing, communication, and technology excellence across the curriculum: Furman University’s Center for Collaborative Learning and Communication (CCLC), which I have steered the past two years. My approach in this article, however, is not a here’s-what-we-did narrative alone; such approaches have been rightly problematized as not offering extra-contextual knowledge of note. Instead, I read the experiences colleagues and I have shared at Furman as a way of identifying and offering to readers a series of key lessons that I believe will be useful for all readers, whether they have the opportunity to design their own interdisciplinary sites of engaged learning associated with WAC, CAC, and other programs or instead to continue to work in and on existing sites.

**CCLC Construction**

Furman University’s interdisciplinary vision of engaged learning ties directly with its development and construction of the CCLC. The impetus for CCLC was a million-dollar grant Furman received from the Christian A. Johnson Foundation to create a Center for Engaged Learning (Furman University, 1996). The five axes of Engaged Learning at Furman, as they have been defined by center director Glen Halva-Neubauer, are active learning, service learning, internships, instructional technology, and undergraduate research. In the grant application, Furman leaders indicated that $250,000 of the monies would be dedicated to a "communications lab," the concept that eventually became CCLC.

With the funds at hand, A.V. Huff, Jr., Vice President of Academic Affairs, appointed a task force to develop the "communications lab." Led by Lynne Shackelford, a professor of English, this group of faculty began thinking together about the sort of space they wanted to design and especially about the sorts of programs they’d like to see enacted. A small cadre of the task force visited communications centers, learning centers, and
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writing centers at a host of universities, from Emory University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to the University of Iowa, and they learned a great deal about both what they would like to do and what they would not like to do. These task force members recommended the non-directive, collaborative pedagogy most often located in writing centers as the way to proceed, and they imagined how it might apply easily to peer consulting practices across the curriculum in support of other practices besides writing, too. They saw and continue to see such opportunities for peer leadership and democratic learning as core engaged learning experiences. Following the visits, Chris Blackwell, a professor of Classics and member of the task force, sketched the first prospective drawing of the center, a rendering that emphasized collaborative spaces and opportunities for peer interaction:

Though the sketch was never intended to be a final version, it offered a strong foundation for future design plans, which almost all reflected aspects of Blackwell’s work, and more it began to put in architectural terms the ideas and initiatives of the task force.

I was hired in the fall of 1999 to steer the CCLC concept forward, and the position I assumed, Assistant Professor and Director of the CCLC, reflected and continues to reflect the creative thinking of the task force. Task force members thought that the director’s position should be tenure-line, but that it should not be associated with a specific department, emphasizing the interdisciplinary nature of the center. More, they believed a small teaching load—two courses per year—would be important to enable the director to spend considerable time with CCLC; teaching for the position, then, was partially defined as conducting in-service training for CCLC peer consultants and workshops across campus. It also was set to include more generally ongoing support for the peer interaction:
consultants as they work democratically and sometimes independently in support of writing, communication, and technology excellence across the curriculum. Working collaboratively with Huff, the task force decided to associate tenure for the director with the Center for Engaged Learning, itself an interdisciplinary entity, and subsequently with its director, Glen Halva-Neubauer, serving more or less as department chair. My tenure and promotion committee at Furman has been defined as the tenured members of the current CCLC steering committee, a group formed from the task force after my hiring, as well as department chairs for those departments in which I teach.

During my first year at Furman, a significant portion of my time was spent collaborating with the steering committee and with various architects and interior designers to develop CCLC, slated for construction during the summer of 2000 and to open the following fall. My challenge was to try to create architecture, both literal and conceptual, for the engaged learning initiative to flourish. This process was difficult, to be honest, as I knew little about literal architecture and design, at least in non-electronic spaces, but it went well. Our first drawing shows the key spaces that continue to operate in CCLC today:
And then our final sketch shows a realignment of them, the logic for which I address later:

We worked in all of our designs to make maximum use of the 3000 square-feet we were fortunate to receive from administration for the CCLC project. We wanted our peer consultants and clients to have maximum flexibility and opportunities for engaged learning, whether in the form of democratic learning collaborations or more independent learning choices.

The "Informal Gathering Areas," "Collaborative Workstations," "Computer Consultation Stations," and "Multimedia Studios" evident in the drawings above compose the spatial core of the Center, and I want briefly to say more about them here as spaces for engaged learning because they each offer unique options and opportunities. First, as the picture below indicates, the Informal Gathering Areas were imagined as spaces wherein consultants and clients could share relaxed conversations about developing and ongoing projects:
Each chair has a tablet arm for notebooks and laptop computers, and both Informal areas correspondingly feature data ports for laptops. We want everyone in CCLC to have the freedom to design, or at least customize, their own engaged learning spaces, hence the flexibility. In the Collaborative Workstations area, individuals and groups can take advantage of L-shaped and round tables to begin developing projects:
The chairs in this area move easily, so clients typically move back and forth between the computers and the round tables. Again we offered flexible spaces to empower consultants and clients alike to take on more responsibility for configuring their own learning. In the next area, termed Computer Consultation Stations, CCLC clients can find two-person workspaces, where they can collaborate on a project or where they can work with a CCLC consultant to learn more about a particular application:

The paneling provides enough privacy that clients can feel comfortable asking any range of questions, from where disks fit into a computer, to how to edit digital audio and video clips into a single presentation. It’s certainly the case that clients don’t always feel comfortable suggesting they do not have enough specific knowledge about a technology to complete their projects, but for those who are willing to take on that challenge and responsibility, we have appropriate spaces and support. Last, we have two Multimedia Studios, one large to include full video production and display capability and the other smaller and more intimate. The following picture shows our production area:
Each of these multimedia spaces has a degree of soundproofing, enabling clients to work without headphones most of the time. As with the other spaces, consultants and clients can configure their own engaged learning environments in these rooms.

In the pictures and discussion above, I specifically did not include our various technologies, as I wanted to indicate the way the spatial design itself promises to influence activity in CCLC. But technology is a core component of what we do as an engaged learning program, so I also want to provide a catalog of our selections for readers:

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<tr>
<th><strong>Hardware in CCLC</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Desktop Computers</strong></td>
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As readers know, technology ages quickly, so we’ll be in a constant state of flux, if we intend to keep current—or at least strive to keep current. I was able to negotiate a replacement-every-three-years commitment with Furman’s director of Computer and Information Services, Richard Nelson, who also serves on the steering committee, so the infrastructure is in place for consistent upgrades. Any needs assessment will be prepared collaboratively, reflecting the spirit of the center.

The hallmark of CCLC is ultimately its undergraduate student peer consultants, who are a strong and motivated cadre of engaged learners. These talented students take on the

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responsibility of being able to help clients across writing, communication, and technology projects; they are required to be general practitioners. While I conduct in-service training sessions and we work collaboratively as a staff to advance of knowledge of various pedagogies and technologies, the core training experience for them is a semester-long, credit-bearing course I designed titled "Teaching One-to-One in Real and Virtual Environments." The course, which is approved as an upper-division course in the English and education majors at Furman, emphasizes teaching as intellectual work and moves students through a series of sites, both real and virtual, where we look at the planning, enactment, assessment, and research of one-to-one pedagogies. Students read three books for the course—Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner’s (2000) Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring, Donna Sewell’s and my (2000) Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work, and Reiss, Selfe, and Young’s (1998) Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum—in addition to a number of electronic materials, and they also participate in teaching simulations and observations. More, the students take on leadership roles in the course; they develop specialties on their own and present them to the class, teaching their peers and me important new knowledge. They also participate in formulating grades for themselves, showcasing the democratic ethos they and I construct for our classroom community throughout the term. Students must be nominated by faculty members to be considered for the course, and I select the enrollees from nominees across the disciplines. I am especially pleased that we have an interdisciplinary group of peer consultants in CCLC, and that exciting reality is a direct result of the class’ having a like interdisciplinary enrollment. Additionally, it is important to note that the course is designed to be freestanding, not solely as a training course for CCLC, and students who enroll are not guaranteed an opportunity to work in CCLC.

Before moving into the lessons section and speaking more specifically about aspects of CCLC architecture, I should indicate that CCLC will be reinvented yet again within the next three to five years and that this time the peer consultants will have an even stronger role than was possible previously, before any version of the center existed. Furman’s library will be undergoing a multi-million dollar renovation and expansion project, and CCLC will move from its current location to a new one on the same floor. The following sketch shows the projected new configuration, with CCLC circled:
This CCLC will be steered by another director, who will continue the work the original task force began and I continued. I have accepted a faculty position at the University of
Lessons

In the process of designing CCLC, Furman colleagues and I learned a host of valuable lessons, many that should prove useful to readers in different institutional engaged learning contexts. I relate four of particular note in this article, and in explaining them, I rely at least in part on the sketches above, asking readers to refer to them at times. These lessons I mean especially valuable for readers invested in WAC or CAC programs. Certainly imagining a different audience might have me articulating different lessons.

Lesson One: Build Pedagogy into the Architecture.

In the current CCLC model, we decided to do more than create space that could be used in multiple ways. Informed by insight from Chris Blackwell, who drew the first sketch of CCLC, as noted above, we wanted to develop architecture that could spatially enhance our pedagogical design. It was our contention at the time—and it was right, in fact, we now know—that specific architecture could make a profound difference on the engaged learning activity that could take place in the space. This architecture needed not to be too prescriptive, however, as we wanted flexibility for our peer consultants to construct their own spaces for collaboration; this approach, we believed then and still believe, is engaged learning at its best.

The current CCLC features a process approach for engaged learning much like the process approach writing studies scholars have developed, but also more general. We imagine that clients can begin their work in the Informal Gathering Areas, chatting with each other about ideas and helping to generate collaboratively the initial shape for whatever project they are developing. With this dialogic foundation, the project teams could then move to the Collaborative Workstations, where they could begin to shape the ideas collaboratively into a project draft. It’s important again to note that these collaborative areas emphasize flexibility; clients take ownership of and responsibility for the collaborative character of their effort. At that point, they may well find that they need to know more about specific technologies, whether software like Microsoft PowerPoint or hardware, and they can move to the Computer Consultation Stations to work with a peer consultant and acquire the knowledge and experience they need to continue with their project. The clients are defining for themselves their own learning objectives. Then, finally, they can use one of the multimedia studios or several of the single-use computer stations to produce their project, thus completing one iteration of the process. Our contention is not, of course, that every client follows this exact process; quite the
contrary, many develop their own processes, teaching us new ways the center can be used. But, having this sort of pedagogy bound into the architecture enables us to have a sound knowledge of the pedagogical capital of each area, and it thus enables us to direct clients to the best possible areas for their work and for us to think carefully about what areas should be used for consultations for various types of projects. In short, we find we gain confidence from the pedagogy in the architecture because we know it supports our work in important ways.

**Lesson Two: Involve Stakeholders Collaboratively Throughout the Design Process.**

While this lesson may seem obvious, it’s surprising, as I’ve learned from various anecdotal accounts, how rare it becomes reality. That is, stakeholders often participate in purely conceptual discussions at the genesis of a project and offer last-minute advice near the project’s completion, but rarely have sustained involvement. Such circumstances are a shame, as stakeholders often have highly valuable contributions to make. As I use the term "stakeholders," I mean it in the broadest possible sense, including students, faculty, staff, colleagues from industry, and more. And I want further to stipulate that these individuals have agency in the design process, as well as responsibility.

As I described earlier in this article, CCLC was born of a multi-year effort from a task force charged with exploring the potential of a "communications lab" as an engaged learning environment for Furman. Yet I didn’t describe the depth of involvement the task force had at all stages and continues to have now as the steering committee. Let me use the example of interior design. When we first starting looking at various palettes, furniture, and carpet, I realized I was in over my head; I knew I wanted the center to have a clean, high-tech feel and to be warm and welcoming all at once, but I had really no idea how to make that happen, and I wasn’t able to understand everything the designers recommended. To my rescue came members of the steering committee, especially chair Lynne Shackelford, whose eye for detail and savvy sense of style shaped much of the center design we have today. Also members of the library staff attended design meetings, looking to think about the colors the renovated library might use and helping us select options that would work well in both the Stage One and Stage Two CCLCs. I want to be clear that I’m talking about more than simply looking at palettes here; Lynne and other colleagues on the committee came to meetings with designers, offered input about various proposals, and more, and these investments of time were added upon their already busy schedules. Perhaps most importantly, their emphasis was on helping me make the most informed decisions I could make, not on advancing their own agendas or usurping my authority to make decisions, and I matched their emphasis on good faith collaboration with my own trust in and valuing of their perspectives. This democratic structure is key for collaboration, as interacting so closely and so often with less trustworthy individuals could only invite conflict.

I’m not sure the design example adequately represents the collaboration that took place, but I hope readers will bear with me for it and imagine the way similar processes informed course and grant proposals I wrote as well. Each time, members of the
committees came through for me generously. And, in the end, even if I’d have taken none of their advice, I still think inviting stakeholders’ collaboration is key to the success of any engaged learning space geared towards work across the curriculum or even in a single discipline. These colleagues felt as though they were intimately involved in all aspects of the center’s design and development—and they were indeed—and that feeling in turn helped them to feel the center was a place in which they have a very active stake, one that promises to stay constant into the future and one that in no small way ensures the survival and success of the center for years to come.

**Lesson Three: Cultivate Strong Relationships with Neighbors.**

Engaged learning initiatives working across the curriculum must find collaborative relationships with neighbors in the institution and in the community. In this statement, I mean "neighbor" to be both literal, as in nearby or proximate, and figurative, referencing those entities that share similar missions. CCLC has enjoyed early success on both accounts, as it has served as a democratizing influence for Furman and beyond.

In the current CCLC, our neighbors include library departments—naturally, since we’re located in the library—and the Office of Marketing and Public Relations. Our collaboration with various library departments has been most often in terms of offering clients the best possible holistic experience, whether library clients or CCLC clients. We’ve held several workshops with library personnel, and each time we’ve emphasized ways we can support each other’s work. If someone comes to CCLC and asks about database searching, for instance, we explain that they may want to venture upstairs to the reference desk to ask one of the librarians for help, just as those librarians refer questions about writing, communication, and technology to us. I would be naïve to suggest such collaboration is always in the democratic spirit Dewey sought, but I do believe the relationship is in good faith and that we all have good intentions. Our other neighbor, the Marketing and Public Relations office, has partnered with us to develop the best possible production options for clients. We did not buy or rent a photocopier or a color printer for CCLC because our neighbor invites clients to use their technology at cost. Likewise, Marketing and Public Relations did not purchase a Macromedia Dreamweaver site license for their student World Wide Web design staff, as the staff regularly works on our machines. Similarly, they did not initially purchase Adobe Premiere for the newfound student television station, instead working on our machines and testing the limits of the software to see if it would be the best investment for them. Here the democratic spirit manifests itself in more tangible ways: We can examine our sign-in and usage statistics to learn how thoroughly we are providing serves for our Marketing and Public Relations colleagues, and they can check their copy and other logs to assess how well they are providing services for those of us on the CCLC team. We enjoy both the democratic potential and the democratic reality of these "neighborly" collaborations and look forward to more in the future.

In the current plans for the Stage Two CCLC, the importance of strong relations becomes even more paramount. As the last of the sketches presented above showed, CCLC will be part of what’s to be termed the "Multimedia Commons." This area will include offices for
Multimedia Services, the Help Desk, and CCLC, and it will offer a wide range of technologies for clients to use in their work. More, the "Commons" will include library instruction classrooms that should feature advanced technologies. In the space between the various neighbors, clients will find group workstations and computer terminals somewhat like those in CCLC, but not exactly. It might be the case, then, that the new arrangement actually helps CCLC staff to best understand its advantages as an engaged learning space too. We’ll see all the more, I predict, how important it is that our hallmark is the student peer consultants, not the space alone, even though the spatial design is key to the center’s operation as well. I also predict that the democratic potential of what is to be the Multimedia Commons will be tested early and often, as everyone attempts to work in the new service "neighborhood."

**Lesson Four: Keep Space Flexible.**

Like the lesson immediately above, this one requires two considerations: one for the current CCLC and one for the one to evolve during the library renovations. In this sense, as I will show, “flexibility” might be understood in multiple ways. If engaged learning spaces are to be democratic and appropriate for diverse teaching and learning styles, then they must have such flexibility. Opportunities for both collaborative and independent learning and enthusiasm for taking on personal responsibility for learning would all suffer in a space too rigid.

In the current center, we have designed our individual areas (the Informal Gathering Areas, Collaborative Workstations, Computer Consultation Stations, and Multimedia Studios) to be as flexible as possible, and the peer consultants and I encourage clients to reinvent the spaces, moving tables and chairs wherever they should be to best support the collaboration occurring. We do not imagine this policy as encouraging a huge restructuring of the center, of course, as we could not reasonably have clients carrying tables from one end of the space to the other. But we do believe this policy enables clients to customize individual areas to their needs, maximizing their degree of comfort in the space and, we hope, maximizing the degree to which the space supports their engaged learning. In the Informal Gathering Areas, for instance, we have all of the chairs on casters, enabling them to be rolled into new positions easily, and seemingly any time a meeting finishes and a group emerges from one of the areas, the chairs are in a new position. And this flexibility is exactly what we were seeking. And it’s not, of course, finally about the chairs themselves; it’s about the control that clients are able to exert on their collaborative and independent learning opportunities.

In order to save costs, we wanted whatever furniture we bought for the Stage One CCLC to be moveable to the Stage Two CCLC, and this pursuit demonstrates a different definition of flexibility. As readers can see from the sketches provided earlier, the Stage Two CCLC will have a different shape, specifically rectangular, than the Stage One CCLC, which is L-shaped. Fortunately we knew this difference would be the case during the furniture purchasing process for the current CCLC, which enabled us to plan carefully and make informed choices. But even if center administrators don’t possess such advanced knowledge, it’s still important to think creatively, as no one knows what the
future may bring, for better or worse. We realize all of our purchases won’t convert perfectly, but because we emphasized paneling and flexible surface and seating areas, we’ll be able to use much of what we bought again in the future. And it’s interesting, ultimately, that while economics really drove us to see flexibility in this way, the lesson also will enable us to offer consistent options to clients across the spaces. We didn’t think of that benefit at the time of our purchase, to be honest, so I think our realization of it now illustrates the way center administrators and various designers, as well as center stakeholders, should think constantly about the shape and character of the spaces they inhabit.

**Conclusion**

While the four lessons in this article cannot, in the end, stand by themselves as the single lessons everyone invested in WAC and CAC initiatives must know, I believe they can serve as guiding principles, helping readers in other contexts begin to think about the complex and diverse array of key issues in designing any interdisciplinary spaces for engaged learning. Too often – and not necessarily anyone’s fault – decisions are made in haste, whether it's when funds become available and must be claimed quickly or when a few minutes are available from the heavy workload 4-4, 5-5, and other academic workloads require, not to mention scholarship and service requirements. So I encourage readers to think about these issues early and often, imagining in their minds plans and strategies for promoting engaged learning across the curriculum in their individual and institutional WAC and CAC contexts. Thinking early and often stretches the design planning timeline, ensuring any future design activity is grounded in the careful consideration of relevant issues and experiences.

Although Dewey’s specific vision of engaged learning as active, informed citizenship may or may not be the most appropriate model for contemporary education, it’s my sense that we can agree that we hope our students will be engaged learners and critical thinkers ready for the challenges they will face in their lifetimes. For teacher-scholars in such educational milieu, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the responsibility does not stop at designing pedagogies and guiding student learning. Instead a broader commitment must be imagined, one actively involved in all stages of the education process, even including and perhaps especially including designing spaces where the education can take place. If WAC, CAC, and other interdisciplinary programs take on a more prominent role in the design of associated teaching and learning spaces, then the result will often be more pedagogically sound environments, spaces with strong educational values and dedicated to the engaged learning of all participants in educational experiences. This future is one to which we should aspire.

**References**

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