

Basic Writers and Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates a basic writing course within a freshman learning Community at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW). Multiple layers of data, both qualitative and quantitative, provide a thick description of what occurred overall in that classroom over the course of one semester. My findings suggest that basic writing classes are more successful within a learning community in terms of student pass rates and increased engagement. Thus, further study of basic writing courses as an integral part of first-year experience programs, especially those that utilize learning communities, should be a priority.

KEYWORDS: active learning strategies, basic writing, collaboration, learning communities

With a continual increase in the percentage of students who go on to college, educators are faced with more and more developmental students challenging us to examine our educational system. Students identified as basic writers at the college level have completed socially approved education requirements that should affirm they are ready to begin the next stage of education. Yet colleges and universities across the country proclaim a percentage of each freshman class underprepared for the work that will be expected of them over the next four years.

At the same time that inadequate academic preparation and achievement have spotlighted basic writers, the national economy and shaky state budgets have spawned legislative demands for greater efficiency, leading university administrators to look for ways to tighten their belts. One way to do this is to eliminate programs. Basic writing programs have been among those under fiscal review. Some critics have questioned monies spent on programs that seem to have limited success, while others question the social impact of eliminating such programs. Thus, we find ourselves at a point of tensions, wedged between the need for an educated society, the need of universities to uphold standards but at the same time educate those whom they admit, and the pressures on and from government to show greater effectiveness (that is, to retain and graduate more students) at lower costs. Such tensions have caused changes in basic writing programs at many universities.

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At Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), we have felt these tensions. IPFW, a comprehensive university serving northeast Indiana, is a commuter campus enrolling approximately 12,000 students in an urban setting. IPFW is an open-admissions institution with approximately one-third of each freshman class testing into basic writing courses. Many of our students are low income and the first generation in their families to attend college, so they are doubly at-risk. As our resources are limited, it is essential that whatever programs we develop are successful. Based on extensive retention studies of our own students, we decided to pilot learning communities. My study, driven by my observations as the assessment coordinator of the two-year pilot program, investigates a basic writing course within a learning community. To understand the context, it is useful to review recent research on developmental courses.

Many critics from academia and beyond claim that developmental classes cause a lowering of academic standards and actually contribute little to student success. Politicians and the media complain that the questionable validity of these programs along with their great costs makes them expendable. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, “once in college, 53 percent of all students must take remedial courses” (*Greater Expectations* viii). A National Center for Education Statistics study showed that in 1995, “81 percent of 4-year public institutions offered at least one remedial class” with 71 percent offering remedial writing courses (iii, 6). Some studies of courses such as basic writing claim that “the more remedial study students need, the lower their prospects of graduating” (*Greater Expectations* viii). Other research points to a different picture. Hunter Boylan and Barbara Bonham completed a study of 150 developmental programs that addresses the issue of standards directly and that of costs indirectly. To study the impact of developmental programs on the institutions in question, Boylan and Bonham examined the cumulative grade point averages, long term retention, and subsequent academic performance of developmental students in regular college courses. For the study, they defined developmental students as “those judged by their institutions as underprepared for college work” (309). They found that “for the most part, the grades of developmental students lagged somewhat behind the grades of other students throughout their academic careers” (309). However, they also found that the retention and graduation rates for developmental students compared favorably with the national rate of 45 percent (309). Recent studies cited by Frank Newman, Director of the Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World¹ during testimony before the U.S. Congress, claim a

51 percent five-year graduation rate.

The aspect of Boylan and Bonham's study that really addresses standards and relates to retention is the ability of developmental students to pass subsequent regular curriculum courses after completing developmental courses. They found that 77.2 percent of developmental math students passed the regular math course at their institutions with a C or better; 83 percent of developmental reading students passed a college social science course with a C or better; and 91.1 percent of developmental writing students passed the regular English course with a C or better (308). These data would seem to provide evidence that a majority of developmental students can meet the standards at their institutions after completing appropriate coursework. This provides indirect evidence that the costs of developmental education are not too high if increasing numbers of students are retained and ultimately graduate.

One of the greatest concerns with retention is the freshman year because it is between the freshman and sophomore years that the largest losses of students are seen. In their article titled "What Works in Student Retention," the American College Testing (ACT) program claims that "over half of all students who leave college do so before their second year" (1). This has been the case at IPFW. That is, our first-year attrition rate has been consistently around 35 percent.

Background on Learning Communities

The Learning Community (LC) movement is one of the most promising approaches to improved retention (Jackson 6; Guskin, Marcy, and Smith 1). The idea of community has a solid foundation of research to support it. Faith Gabelnick et al. describe LCs in the following way:

A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curriculum entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (19)

According to Gabelnick et al., five major types of learning communities exist: 1) linked courses, 2) learning clusters, 3) freshman interest groups, 4) federated Learning Communities, and 5) coordinated studies (19). The National Learning Commons Project website contains the following

description of curricular learning communities which are what the IPFW project utilized: “In higher education, curricular learning communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students.”

Learning communities are centered on the social construction of knowledge. Richard Raymond, when describing his experience teaching in curricular learning communities, says, “we [the LC instructors] knit students together by relying on the social constructionist theory in all three classes” (269). According to Roberta Matthews:

... learning communities are, in many ways, collaborative learning writ large; they link disciplines across boundaries thereby enriching intellectual and learning experiences and, like collaborative learning, help students build bridges between their prior experience and their academic experiences in higher education. (42)

The core principles of learning communities focus on integration of curriculum, active learning, student engagement, and student responsibility, all of which position LCs within social constructionist theories.

Rebecca Mlynarczyk and Marcia Babbitt, speaking of teaching English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students in LCs, say that what intrigues them most, beyond high pass rates and good grades, is “the special classroom atmosphere in these classes” (73). They find that “students are so much more active and engaged in their learning than are students in regular, unlinked ESL courses” (73). Richard Magjuka, Associate Professor at Indiana University’s Kelley School of Business, adds to this point: “at its core, a learning community is both a pedagogical tool and a curricular device designed to build connections among students, faculty and staff who seek to attain shared goals and learning outcomes” (29). Barbara Jackson, Associate Dean of University College at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, says:

Learning communities are such powerful agents in the higher education learning process because they embody some special characteristics. They represent, for example, one of the few opportunities undergraduates especially beginning students have to engage in comprehensive, engaged, deep learning. (7)

A number of schools have taken advantage of the positive attributes of learning communities. La Guardia Community College of the City Univer-

sity of New York is cited by Frank Newman as having increased its graduation rates by creating programs that provide greater academic support. A major focus of LaGuardia’s efforts has been learning communities that are provided for all of LaGuardia’s student population, including developmental students. Positive results are seen in other LC initiatives across the nation, notably on commuter campuses such as Temple University and the University of Texas San Antonio. At Temple University where 14,000 out of 18,000 students are commuters, LCs have proven successful as shown below:

Table 1: Retention and Graduation Rate Differentials at Temple University (1994-1998 cohort)

Retention Rate Differential for LC versus non-LC Students (1994-1998)	5 year Graduation Rate Differential for LC versus non-LC Students (1994 cohort)
+ 5 - 8%	+ 6%

(Source: Levine and Degman).

Likewise, the University of Texas San Antonio, a commuter campus of 18,000 with a large minority population, has shown better retention rates for LC students:

Table 2: Retention Rates for LC versus non-LC students at UTSA for 2000-2001

Retention Rates for LC Students	Retention Rates for non-LC Students
72.27%	63.84%

Average GPAs were also higher for LC than non-LC students (UTSA).

Research generated from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reveals remarkable results. In the presentation “Value Added: Learn-

ing Communities and Student Engagement,” George Kuh, Director of the Center for Postsecondary Research, presented data compiled from 80,479 students (first year and seniors) who indicated that they had participated in learning communities. The data came from 365 different four-year institutions. In the results, Kuh and his research partner, Chun-Mei Zhao, found that lower ability students (defined by SAT/ACT scores and high school grades) were more likely to participate in learning communities. However, they also found that these students had achieved grades comparable to those of their higher ability peers by the end of the semester. In addition, Kuh and Zhao found that these higher jumps for lower ability students persist through their senior year. LC students (both freshmen and seniors) score higher on all measures of student engagement found in the NSSE. Roberta Matthews, author of “Learning Communities: The Art of the Moment, the Work of the Future,” has this to say of Kuh’s work:

We know that learning communities and the values they embody are based on solid research about effective learning. Their impact is reflected, as George Kuh and his associates point out, in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is quickly becoming the gold standard of quality assessment of the undergraduate experience. (41)

Mark Wiley notes that “learning communities have become increasingly popular ways for working with students, especially first-year students, yet there has been little discussion of these structures in the composition literature” (16). With the exception of Mlynarczyk/Babbitt and Raymond cited earlier, I found few studies on composition classes within learning communities and none on basic writing. My study on a basic writing class within a learning community makes a step toward filling the gap in composition studies.

Learning Communities at IPFW

Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) provides a number of academic support services for students including a tutoring center, writing center, math test center as well as technology training and supplemental instruction—peer-led, group tutoring sessions attached to classes with high failure rates. Developmental courses include one basic writing course, two pre-college math courses, and one reading course. In

addition, there is a freshman seminar taught by professional academic advisors (it is available to any incoming freshman but not mandatory). Despite all of this support, IPFW is still faced with a 65 percent retention rate of first-year students that has seen little improvement over the years. IPFW's Office of Academic Affairs asked for a study of factors, including gender, high school rank, cumulative GPA, SAT, or ACT scores, and college placement test results, possibly correlated with retention. This study found that passing ENG W130, the basic writing (BW) course, was the single variable consistently correlated with retention (IPFW Retention Study).

Based on the evidence that passing W130 was linked to retention, the committee reviewing the retention study recommended that we explore the use of learning communities in a pilot project. Due to the natural link between BW and communication, we paired English W130 with COM 114, Fundamentals of Speech Communication as the second class. So that students could receive an extended orientation to campus and exposure to study skills, the one-credit freshman seminar called Freshman Success (IDIS 110), was selected as the third course in the learning community. A natural role for me as the Director of the Center for Academic Support and Advancement was as assessment coordinator.

The LC pilot program at IPFW, offered in 2001, consisted of five cohorts of curricular learning communities. Each community had the same three classes listed above: Com 114, ENG W130, and IDIS 110. Eighteen students were enrolled in each cohort with a total of 90 students in the pilot project (less than 1 percent of the overall freshman population). Advisors were made aware of the learning communities and enrolled students who showed an interest. However, at the end of the summer orientation season, many of the communities had not filled. As a result, many students registered during the last week for the communities because there were no other options. These late enrollees, who make the decision to come to college very late in the process, tend to be our most at-risk students.

The faculty selected to teach in the communities were recommended by their department supervisor or chair and showed an interest in the project. For the first pilot in fall 2001, faculty received a single day-long training session that focused on integrating the learning objectives of the courses and the overall theme of the communities, diversity. The LC faculty teams were encouraged to meet regularly during the semester to coordinate the activities of the class, and all did so. They used their team time to discuss ways to integrate the courses and to explore issues related to individual students.

Because faculty in the first pilot had not met early enough to integrate their courses very effectively, the project director—Dr. Jeanette Clausen, Associate Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs—and I developed a more extensive training for the second pilot in 2002. We asked the faculty to attend several training sessions, beginning in the spring semester. The training again focused on common learning objectives and course integration, and faculty members were again asked to meet regularly during the fall semester. Most of the teams met weekly or biweekly to develop joint projects and to discuss students. As part of the assessment of the LC project, I observed faculty meetings. In the second year of the pilot program, I observed more substantive discussions on course integration and joint learning outcomes. Some of the connections among the courses included English faculty giving students training in library research to be used across all three courses, the freshman seminar instructors teaching test-taking skills before the English and Communication midterms, joint writing assignments developed between Communication and English, and joint co-curricular activities. For one of the joint assignments, the Com 114 teacher assigned a novel that students did a speech on and subsequently wrote about in the basic writing class. For a co-curricular activity, several of the communities engaged in a diversity activity which divided the students into teams. The objective of the game was to gather as many financial resources as possible in a mock city. However, the groups were unaware that they had received disproportionate resources, so that only certain groups could win the game. Students later discussed the simulation in the communication class and wrote about it in the composition class and the freshman seminar.

Several of the faculty for the second year of the pilot had taught in LCs the previous fall. Faculty received stipends for teaching in the LCs in both 2001 and 2002. In the second year of the pilot project, faculty were asked to compile teaching portfolios on their LC classes to help assess the program. Another method of assessment used was observation of classes and instructor meetings, for which I was solely responsible.

Our first pilot learning community project showed outstanding results, especially for the basic writing course. In particular, the D-F and Withdrawal rates for the basic writing courses in the learning communities were lower than expected as can be seen in Table 3:

**Table 3: % D-F-W Rates for BW courses
in Pilot Learning Communities 2001**

BW in 2001 LC Sections	All Sections of BW 1995-2000
18.6%	29 - 45%

In addition, analysis of the fall 2001 sections shows a positive relationship between the learning communities and student success defined as greater numbers of students receiving a C or better in the course and fewer students receiving Ds, Fs, and Ws. Chi-Square analysis of the total grade distribution of the basic writing courses in the learning communities showed the average number of students receiving a C or better was higher in the LC than in the non-LC populations. There were also higher course GPAs in the LCs, and students within the LCs received higher grades in their LC than in their non-LC classes, which may indicate that students are participating more in the learning process in LC classes. The quantitative evidence seems to suggest that the basic writing course functioned better in an LC than outside; however, the population sizes are too small to determine statistical significance.

A Close Look at One Class in the Community

All of this evidence as well as my own observations in the classrooms piqued my interest and led me to conduct an in-depth study of one basic writing course within a learning community in fall 2002. I was guided by two major research questions: What positive outcomes are evident in this basic writing course within the learning community? And, are there aspects of the basic writing course itself that appear to contribute in a positive way to the other courses in the community?

I selected one basic writing course from the five sections designated as part of the learning community project and observed the class for two weeks at the beginning of the semester, two weeks mid-semester, and two weeks at the end of the semester for a total of eighteen observation periods.

The faculty member teaching this course (I will call him Ed) is a tenured instructor. I selected him because he had prior experience teaching in the fall 2001 learning community project and is a thirteen-year veteran of teaching writing at IPFW. He is committed to active learning, student engagement, and diversity.

During the course of my study, I watched students in this class move from a low interest in class activities to a high level of interest and high level of engagement. Early in the semester, students came into class and took their seats saying very little to each other or to Ed. They participated very little and only when prompted. By the end of the semester, students moved into classroom activities with little or no prompting from the instructor. They started coming to class early and staying late (which was common among the learning communities as reported by faculty). In fact, on a number of occasions, the instructor had to literally throw the students out to make room for the next class, which did not come until an hour later. Students also made a point of speaking to everyone in class at the beginning of each session.

Students also became interested in their own and their classmates' learning processes. This was evident in a number of ways. First, if a student was absent (which was rare), every other student knew why and reported the reason to the instructor, or, if they did not know why the student was absent, I would see them on their cell phones tracking down the student to either get him or her to class or to find out the reason for the absence. Students also regularly checked on their peers' progress on assignments. As one student mentioned to me, "If I don't get my work done, I feel as if I have failed all my classmates." In addition, I could see their interest in each other's welfare in the peer review of student writing as they stuck with the reviews even if it meant meeting after class until they were sure their classmates could move on with their drafts. They also engaged in other class-type activities with their classmates outside the classroom: additional peer reviews, study groups, consultations with people outside the class about their own and their classmates' writing. Not only did I hear students talk about these activities, but I also spotted them together in the library and other common study areas on campus.

As the students gained a deeper understanding of the writing process and the course assignments and goals, they became more and more independent as learners and had less need for an "instructor-centered" approach. This shift was reflected in the instructor's teaching as well. At the beginning of the semester, Ed was teaching in what George Hillocks describes as the

presentational (teacher-centered) mode. As the semester progressed, he moved quickly to the environmental mode, with teacher as co-learner with expertise, and then on to the individual mode (Hillocks 247). In this mode, there is a one-to-one level of interaction, like a tutorial. Ed was able to do this because, as he said, “everyone took charge of his or her own paper.” He was able to move about the room, working with individuals on questions related to their writing. “I love that type of interaction,” he said in our final interview.

Throughout my interviews with him, the instructor commented on how this class was different from typical W130 classes. He attributed the difference to the learning community and the relationships that the students built with each other and with their instructors. In one of the interviews, Ed commented:

The fact that they got to know each other was really important. At the beginning of the class, that contributed to the high school atmosphere and behavior, but in the end, it was what led to them having the feeling that “we’re in this together.” The learning community seemed to facilitate the transition from high school to college.

Many instructors in learning communities across the country have commented on the “high school” effect that Ed mentions. In fact, this behavior has been called “hyperbonding” and can cause an LC to deteriorate. However, Ed used effective strategies to prevent the hyperbonding from deteriorating into an unproductive environment. He was very clear about his expectations regarding college-level work and college behavior, discussing and modeling these expectations for his students in class.

Ed analyzed what seemed to be going on in this particular class. The following comments are taken from several different interview sessions:

Social construction of knowledge is possible because of the comfort these students feel with each other. . . . There is commitment to learning. It is important for them to help each other in their groups and to get help. . . . Writing involves a number of higher order thinking skills and examines your own ideas, feelings, and perceptions. I think what makes the communities work is that students have the opportunity to do that [examine ideas]. Other courses, even Communication [one of the other LC courses], don’t have that element; the writing course is central to the learning community.

Clearly, Ed feels strongly about the significance of the writing course as part of the learning community. The engagement that is involved in a writing course promotes the principles of LCs and can lead to significant change among students. A lot went into the process that generated this transformation; it did not happen by chance as is evidenced by the same occurrence in both the fall 2001 and fall 2002 LC projects.

Additional evidence of the effectiveness of this course came from the students themselves through their reflective writing. The content of three reflective pieces I collected indicated that students developed a greater understanding of their writing processes as they focused on concerns such as audience analysis, development, organization, and more. Here are two excerpts from the students' writing:

I really enjoyed writing my paper on the television show "Friends." It was a little hard because at one point in time I didn't know what to write about. That was a big problem for me. I hate when I get writer's block. The way I fixed it was by sitting down and writing everything I know.

I thought that evaluating the movie would be a piece of cake and that it wouldn't take forever to type up the paper and have it all done and finished by the due date, but I was wrong about that. I found out that I needed to watch the movie over and over to first watch for myself, then watch it again to take note about the way the characters are portrayed, then have to watch it again to talk about the special effects that they had done to make the movie better.

These writers are getting in touch with their writing process, which is an important step for basic writers. They are developing a set of strategies that they can draw upon for future writing.

My question about what aspects of the basic writing course contribute in a positive way to the other courses in the community was perhaps the most compelling question for me in this research. To answer this question, I relied on classroom observations and teacher interviews. My classroom observations allowed me to form a picture of the eighteen students in this course as well as a picture of Ed and his pedagogical strategies. By observing Ed's interactions with fellow teachers within his learning community, I was able to get a snapshot of them as well. Because I also observed each of the other fourteen classes involved in the learning community project once, I

did gain some insight into the overall community project. Once again, I will refer to some of the comments made by Ed when considering what elements of this class made it function better as part of a learning community than it would have alone.

It is important to review the pedagogical strategies (collaborative activities of various kinds, modeling, multiple drafts of each assignment, peer reviews, and portfolios) used by the instructor that allowed this environment to develop (an environment that was enhanced by the “community effect” as he noted several times). Much of the class time that I observed was devoted to collaborative activities. In the words of Kenneth Bruffee, “collaborative learning demonstrably helps students learn better—more thoroughly, more deeply, more efficiently—than learning alone” (xii). My observations found the students engaged in almost constant collaborative work. Besides peer reviews, other types of collaborative activities were mock peer review sessions at the beginning of the semester in order to learn that process as well as mock evaluations, arguments, and so on. Thus, for each type of paper the students were to write, Ed allowed them to work out a model for the assignment collaboratively, with the help of activities in their textbook. Besides these modeling activities, Ed also had students do brainstorming activities. Some of these were collaborative as with the topic searches for the evaluative and argumentative papers, but others were individual as with the “I” search for the argumentative assignment—an exploratory model in which students start by writing what they already know about their topics, move on to what they want to discover, search for and document sources, and finally synthesize the information in a researched paper. All the work I saw was collaborative except the “I” search, some journal writing in class, and a work day, where the students worked individually on their papers at their computers. However, even on that work day, most of the students were engaged in informal critiquing, asking questions of the instructor and fellow students and asking for their papers to be read by others.

Ed asked the students to do three peer review sessions for each of the four papers that they completed. Although early in the semester these reviews seemed to focus mainly on surface-level problems, as the semester progressed, the depth of the reviews increased. By the middle of the semester, students were focusing on issues such as audience, organization, development, cohesiveness, and style.

Ed mentioned a number of times that these students did not turn into scholarly writers, but they did learn and participate in the writing process and become more focused on learning. All but one passed the course and a

number of them made significant progress. Two students received As in the course. Ed made the following comments about these two young women, whom he had originally considered weak writers:

These two just really got it. They figured out early on what it would take to get an A, and they went for it. They understood the writing process and used it to their advantage. They asked a lot of questions, participated completely in the peer review process, and really revised.

Another practice Ed used was reflective writing. The students had to complete a large number of writings for their journals, many of which were reflective pieces. The students reflected on significant aspects of their papers, much like what they concentrated on in their peer reviews. The evidence provided through observations, student reflective writing, and teacher interviews indicates that these students did understand and utilize the writing process and did develop their own writing strategies.

Other data support the effectiveness of the basic writing class within a learning community. First, as with the 2001 pilot, the rates of D, F, and W grades for 2002 were lower in the LC sections of W130 than in the non-LC sections and lower than the overall rate for 1995-2000 as seen below:

Table 4: % D-F-W Rates for BW courses in Pilot Learning Communities 2002

2002 LC Sections of W130	2002 Non-LC Sections of W130	All W130 Sections 1995-2000
25%	31%	29 - 45%

In addition, student absenteeism was very low. The instructor had kept his attendance records for all of his thirteen years at IPFW. With one exception, the best attendance rates over time were from the two years of the learning community classes. In a Chi-Square analysis, the difference was significant. Although I only analyzed Ed's sections of English W130, all of the LC instructors reported better attendance rates in their LC classes than

in any of their current or previous stand-alone classes. Faculty reported nearly 100 percent attendance rates. In fact, one instructor commented that attendance like this is “unheard of” in developmental classes at IPFW.

Quantitative data on the pass rates of Ed’s students over time suggests that the learning community sections of the basic writing course are more successful. The highest numbers of students successfully completing the class (passing with a C or better) were obtained in the two semesters that the instructor taught the LC sections of W130.

In addition, the retention rate after one year of students from the observed course is remarkably positive. The observed W130 course had 82 percent of the students enrolled in the following year versus the overall retention rate at IPFW of 65 percent. In addition, the GPAs of these students were strong; the majority were above the 3.0 level. This confirms Kuh and Zhao’s finding that indicates that although LCs attract lower ability students, those students have comparable GPAs to their higher ability peers at the end of the first year.

Finally, course portfolios compiled by the other LC instructors contained positive evidence. These instructors indicated that they saw students being transformed, learning in a different way. In particular, interview excerpts concerning the high quality of the joint project (a paper in W130 and a speech in 114 on the same topics) between a W130 and a COM 114 class indicated that these instructors felt the students had really grasped the learning objectives of this project. The basic writing instructor said:

In the end I would like to say that the joint assignment was the most successful one during the semester, and I would highly recommend similar assignments to be used in the future Freshman Community courses.

This positive response was echoed by the speech instructor:

Students agreed that this was their favorite assignment. Maria and I both agree the final projects were awesome. Personally, I derived more pleasure from this joint assignment than if I had worked on it alone. It was a win/win situation for the students, Maria, and myself. Our students rose to the occasion in their critical thinking and their final grades reflected their commitment to the class and the assignments.

The content of the course, the pedagogical strategies, the modes of instruction, the course goals and learning outcomes all led to a successful semester in the writing lives of these basic writing students. But did these elements function better in a community than if the class had been offered alone? Is there evidence that the elements of the BW course make it a pivotal element of learning communities? Several pieces of evidence suggest an important relationship between the two. First of all, the quantitative evidence indicates that the basic writing (W130) courses within communities were more successful than W130s overall with regard to attendance and success (lower D-F-W rates, which in turn may lead to better retention of students). The qualitative data—Ed’s comments as well as those made by other faculty members teaching in an LC—suggest that all elements of W130 were enhanced by being in the learning community. Ed pointed out on a number of occasions how atypical this particular class was. The following comments gleaned from a number of interview sessions illustrate this:

Attendance is good, better than other W130s. . . . Their papers are coming in on time, much better than typical W130s. All their drafts have been on time except one student who came to one peer review without a draft. Also their participation is excellent. Everyone participates. . . . Students in my honors composition section don’t participate as much, even in small group activities. . . . Everyone [in W130] has completed both papers. Also, they are all still engaged. This is significantly different. . . . The overall quality of peer review is better than typical W130s. . . . I got completed portfolios from everyone. In a regular W130, about one-third will turn in partial or essentially non-portfolios—nothing revised. In this class, everyone turned in a fully revised portfolio. . . . Never saw a W130 where they just got to work. . . . Everyone took charge of his or her own paper.

Since this was Ed’s second year of teaching W130 in a community and his thirteenth year of teaching basic writing at IPFW, I believe his judgment to be sound. In addition, based on my own experience teaching W130 for over fourteen years and observing the learning communities for two years, I believe that the W130 course functions better within a community than alone. Ed, a skilled teacher who is committed to helping students succeed, twice saw his LC basic writing courses achieve very different results than any of his basic writing courses that were not part of a community. Further research with skilled, committed, and supportive teachers is needed, however, to confirm whether the “LC effect” is constant.

What aspects of the basic writing course contribute in a positive way to the rest of the community? All the collaborative activities of the W130 course serve to bond the students further, making their relationships solid for interactions in other classes. In addition, Ed has fostered the students' investment and ownership of their own learning. He clearly values what they do and provides an environment that fosters their transformation into independent learners.

Ed explains that writing “involves a number of higher order thinking skills” and encourages writers to examine their own “ideas, feelings, and perceptions.” Students who acquire these processes and skills benefit in other classes as well. My own observations showed the students moving from shallow peer reviews that required only lower level thinking skills to much more in-depth analyses of each others' works. Furthermore, through observations, I saw the students move from more social to more class-related interactions, which points to the students' movement towards a more mature approach to their education.

A final point that came out during the wind-up session for the LC instructors for the 2002 Learning Community project (a two-hour session held in January 2003) is that instructors noted a greater connection to the university on the part of the LC students. These students were more actively involved with student organizations, academic support opportunities, and student on-campus jobs than students that the same instructors had in non-LC classes. Since research shows that connections to campus are key in retention efforts, this is an important outcome of the communities.

Implications of the Study

What does all this mean? The evidence that I compiled in this study shows on many levels—both cognitive and affective—the positive outcomes of placing a basic writing course within a learning community. Improved attendance, increased participation, improved completion of assigned work, and lower D-F-W rates are all positive outcomes that make the placement of the basic writing course within a Learning Community attractive. The in-depth picture of one section of this course demonstrates the potential of offering it within a learning community. All of the strategies used in this course are typical of those used in other writing courses; however, the bonding among students that took place in the community seemed to enhance the effect of these strategies, leading to positive outcomes.

This research also indicates much about how students learn. The quantitative evidence showed more students receiving grades of C or higher

not only in the basic writing class but in the other classes of the learning community as well. These improved pass rates appeared after the instructors of these courses adopted the pedagogical strategies of the basic writing course, which essentially embrace the sociocultural model of teaching and learning described by Baker, Wilhelm, and Dube. This tells us much about the power of those strategies and that model and the impact of their use on student learning. The outcome of the pilot project has had a significant impact on the planning process for IPFW's current learning communities project, in particular for the training of all LC instructors.

Although I am pleased with the outcomes of this research, I am also aware of the flaws and of the need for additional research. I feel confident that the impact of the basic writing class on the Learning Community (and vice versa) was positive; therefore, we have included it in our current LC project, which I oversee. The shape of my future research will be guided by my hypothesis that placing basic writing courses in the context of a Learning Community enhances the already solid BW pedagogical strategies, with the result that students achieve higher levels of engagement and greater success. The final test, of course, will be to continue examining enrollment data to see how many of these students remain at the university over time and complete their degrees. The statistics on this group of BW students, 82 percent retention after one year, are impressive. We hope to broaden this success for a greater number of students.

My study suggests that placing basic writing courses within learning communities may be a possible response to some of the criticisms leveled against BW courses. My observations also strongly suggest that we need to pay special attention to the kinds of training that LC instructors receive. A need for professional development is clearly evident. First, LC instructors need training in developing goals and learning outcomes for their classes. In the case of basic writing, where the goals and outcomes may be outlined by the department as is the case at IPFW, instructors need to be trained to use strategies that will help their students achieve the expected goals and outcomes. For example, LC instructors need to be able to use active learning strategies and develop effective collaborative activities. In addition, faculty need to be trained in how to effectively integrate the curriculum of the connected courses. Helping instructors to master classroom assessment techniques to determine the effectiveness of these strategies would also be a productive use of training time. Further, student development theories need to be shared with learning community faculty. Since the "affective" domain is such a prominent part of the learning community as evidenced

by the high degree of bonding among students, LC teachers need to understand how the affective aspects may manifest themselves in the classroom. In particular, they need to know how to harness the “community effect” as Ed did in order to have a positive outcome.

Positioning basic writing courses within learning communities may lead not only to positive outcomes like greater student success but also relief of some of the tensions surrounding remediation at the university level. By increasing students’ opportunities to succeed, universities can spotlight these successes rather than being defined by failures, allowing faculty and students alike to focus their attention on learning.

Note

1. The Futures Project was established through the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions at Brown University in 1999 to investigate emerging trends in higher education.

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