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Joining “Us”; Creating and Maintaining a Discipline-based Learning Community

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Joining “Us”; Creating and Maintaining a Discipline-based Learning Community

Abstract

The article describes the development of a disciplinary living/learning community in political science; the authors, two faculty members, started the community in the fall of 2012. The faculty leaders describe the various practices used to integrate political science courses in two subfields: American politics and international politics. In particular, the authors consider how, over the past five semesters, they have adapted their teaching practices to provide members of the LLC with a more holistic understanding of political processes, methods, and outcomes. They argue that their model would be applicable to a wide array of disciplines.

Keywords

Political Science, First Year Students, Engaged Learning

Introduction

In the Fall of 2012, the faculty in the Political Science program at Florida Southern College launched the "Politics and Law" Living Learning/Community (LLC). This LLC, featuring paired courses and shared living arrangements, was part of a pilot program at the College, aimed at improving the retention of first year students.

When our learning community began, it focused on paired courses and co-curricular activities. By the end of year three, however, we developed a more ambitious agenda, using the LLC to promote integrative learning within our discipline in order to bridge the gap between national and international politics. In this article, we provide a year-by-year description of the evolution of our LLC to illustrate how constant reassessment and adaptation of our practices resulted in a successful learning community that promotes both integrative learning and student engagement in campus life.

We argue that our experience is instructive in two respects. First, it illustrates the value of integrating courses within a discipline to provide students with a sense of continuity among the classes in their major. Second, our willingness to adapt and change the structure and content of our LLC demonstrates the value of a try-and-see approach to creating a learning community.

Creating a Learning Community Inside a Discipline

Political Science scholars have long recognized the interplay between domestic and international politics. Famously, in a 1988 article, Robert Putnam described international diplomacy, as a two-level game that required a leader to bargain with the leaders of other countries while simultaneously contending with powerful domestic actors his own country, including legislators and interest groups. As Putnam (1998) notes, to secure a favorable policy outcome, political leaders must simultaneously play on both the national and international game boards (p. 433-435).

Although there is a considerable body of scholarship that focuses on the manner in which national politics impacts international politics, at the undergraduate level, there generally remains a rigid distinction between courses in American politics and courses in international politics. As a small program with two faculty members (one specializing in American Politics and one specializing in International Politics), we sought to bridge the divide in our subfields and create a learning community within the department to integrate our respective subfields. Overall, by our third year, our goal was to highlight the interplay between the domestic level and international level of politics, ultimately giving

students a more holistic understanding of political processes, methods, and outcomes.

The idea of creating a disciplinary learning community within a major is well established in other fields, such as psychology (Grills, Fingerhut, Thadani, & Machon, 2012; Zrull, Rocheleau, Smith, & Bergman, 2012). There is, however, no existing literature detailing the formation of a disciplinary learning community in political science. Although several faculty members have published works describing their involvement with learning communities in political science, the experiences of these individuals were not applicable to teaching practices used at our college. Specifically, these works discuss techniques for integrating a large introductory lecture class with smaller seminar style class so that students could engage in discussion and complete group projects (Huerta, 2004; Sanders, 2000). Since we already use discussions, group work, and other engaged learning techniques extensively in small classes, we faced a different challenge; namely, we needed to consider how to develop activities and assignments that would connect our subfields in a meaningful way. In the next section, we chronicle our efforts to implement this goal.

Beginnings and Year One: 2012-2013

Our emphasis in Political Science on applied and direct engagement (in the classroom and out) coincided with a complete turnover of the Political Science faculty after a series of retirements. The new regime in the department quickly moved to implement a series of major changes during 2010-2011: first year students were informally assigned upper-college mentors in the first year; Pi Sigma Alpha (the Political Science Honorary), College Republicans, College Democrats, and Pi Alpha Delta (the Law Honorary) were all founded or re-colonized; and a student lounge was provided by the administration to house organization meetings and informal gatherings. In short, the department took material steps to become a model of engaged learning. Our work in this direction was boosted by the new provost, who had been involved in learning community-style models in the past and saw an opportunity to develop one or more at our institution.

The 2011-2012 academic year also marked the first year of major curriculum revisions in the department that took shape as an intention to integrate the broader concepts in the discipline. This intention was driven by two major factors: the theoretical notions that students should make these connections in order to carry forward the central paradigms of Political Science from course to course and that outside connections should be explicitly made to link Political Science to other fields and practices. The endpoint assessment mechanism for the new curriculum was a requirement for comprehensive exams—initially linked to a senior seminar course—that would measure the degree to which students carried

the concepts forward.

In retrospect, we tried to do too much in the first year by implementing all aspects of the wider concept in one program: this would be a community in which students would live together, take two classes per semester together for the first year, and attend both departmental and learning community co-curricular activities. The linked courses were composed of three departmental requirement courses. In the first semester we enrolled students in the American government course, and in the second semester we enrolled students in the course on the judiciary (Law and the Courts) as well as in an experimental class on human rights. In the fall, LLC students also took a communications department course designed to improve their public speaking skills. Overall, the learning community took the form of an embedded cohort. As described by Zrulle, et al. (2012), this type of learning community “makes use of existing course sections and places a group of LC students within one or more courses.” Notably, the linked courses are not limited to LC participants, and “LC students are enrolled in courses with non-LC students” (p. 20.)

Assessment at the Conclusion of Year One

At this stage, our assessment was purely informal and took place in the context of reapplying to lead the learning community during the next academic year. After conversations with participating students and reflections on our own courses, we came to several conclusions. First, the co-curricular activities were essentially overkill since social and disciplinary engagement was fostered through already-extant programs and organizations common to all students in the major, including political advocacy clubs and team activities like Model United Nations and Model Senate. Community among first year students, including the LLC members, was being built in these organizations rather than during LLC movie nights and field trips. By the end of the year, we discovered that participation in the LLC’s activities had declined. Further, course scheduling—which included other courses typically undertaken by first year students—left almost no flexibility for student exploration into other academic areas.

Year Two: 2013-2014

Based on our experience during our pilot year, we elected to make several changes to the LLC. First, we decided that, in the spring and the fall semester, both paired courses would be taught in the Political Science department. This was a major theoretical target shift: we had discerned from assessment mechanisms at the end point that students were not always completing integrative leaps necessary to connect the disparate sub-fields in the discipline itself. Specifically, in the fall semester, LLC participants would be co-enrolled in American Political System and in Introduction to International Relations. In the spring semester, the students

would again be enrolled in Law and the Courts class, but this time, instead of a course on human rights, they would also take a course titled National and International Political Economy. These changes also addressed the issue of over-control of student schedules, allowed greater freedom of course selection, and were more attuned to individual preference while maintaining a strong foundation in work required for the discipline.

All four of these courses are foundational courses in the major, and all are suitable for first-year students. In addition, three of the four classes contain the “Social World” student learning outcome; we hoped that participation in the learning community would help students make the connection between social interactions at the national and international levels. Finally, almost all of the co-curricular activities (field trips, special meetings, and the like) were stripped from the program in favor of more organic socialization of students in the LLC into existing departmental activities.

These curricular changes reflected a shifting understanding of how the LLC served our pedagogical goals. We wanted students to see the LLC less as a club with fieldtrips and extra meetings and instead have them view it as a primarily academic experience. Moreover, by pairing an American politics course with an international politics course in each semester, we aimed to have students explore the nexus between national and international politics, broadening their understanding of what it means to study political science. For the majors in the LLC, this would provide a firm foundation for independent research in upper-level courses.

We added an additional assignment to the fall courses for all students, regardless of LLC status, which required them to complete a set of 10 event cards that documented their participation in a variety of athletic, academic, and social events on campus. This helped promote our goal of integrating the students into the broader campus community.

Finally, we changed the residence side of the program; for the second year of the LLC, we requested that former members of the LLC serve as the resident advisors for the LLC floors. We hoped that these RAs could provide a veteran’s perspective on the coursework and also encourage their residents to become involved in clubs and campus activities.

Assessment at the Conclusion on the Second Year:

By the end of our second year, we believed we had made significant improvements to our LLC, encouraging students to see the connection between different political science classes. Moreover, student participants gave positive feedback about the Resident Advisors, noting that the RAs fostered community and also provided helpful advice on course work. At this stage, our assessment remained largely informal, based on conversations with participating students and

assessment of our individual course material. We did identify several challenges that needed to be addressed in planning for the LLC's third year. Most basically, we debated the impact of an LLC in which more than half the students were non-LLC members. We were also unclear about whether students were actually making the links between different levels of analysis and making the conceptual leap between material covered in each class, even though they were earning high grades.

A far more substantive reassessment of our LLC resulted from faculty professional development opportunities. In the spring semester, we participated in an on-campus professional development initiative titled "Leveraging Learning Communities," a workshop led by the Arts and Sciences Dean. In addition, in the summer of 2014, two of our faculty were part of a team selected to participate in the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at Evergreen State College.

Cumulatively, these opportunities prompted a systematic reassessment of the goals of our LLC. Initially, we saw the LLC as a natural outgrowth of the political science program, offering another way students could be engaged in campus life. By the third year, however, we decided that instead of simply enrolling students in paired courses, we would modify the content of each of the paired courses in order as to make the links between American politics and international politics explicit.

Year Three: 2014-2015

Although much of the structure of the LLC remained the same in our third year, the content of the courses shifted. In this section, we detail the use of integrative assignments and sequenced course content. For the fall semester, we kept LLC students enrolled in the same two paired courses as the previous year—American Political Systems and Introduction to International Relations. In this iteration, we were more deliberate about our learning goals. For instance, in the fall we examined bargaining as a central concept in political science. As famously described by political scientist Harold Lasswell (2011), the study of politics is an examination of "who gets what, when, how." In order to emphasize the way that domestic politics shapes the bargaining behavior of the U.S. on the international stage, we crafted an integrative assignment that asked students to negotiate a hypothetical free trade agreement that entailed both national and international aspect of such an agreement. The international negotiations took place in the Introduction to International Politics class where the students represented various decision-makers from five countries: the United States, China, Mexico, Canada, and Russia. To prepare for the 3-class negotiating session, the students were required to complete a short position paper. In addition, the students who were members of the LLC and were enrolled in both classes were assigned to represent

United States or Canadian decision-makers; both of these countries feature political systems in which the public, interest groups, and legislators have a voice in governmental policy.

The students in the American Political System class had studied the formation and activities of interest groups in American politics during the previous unit. For the integrative component of this course, the students applied their knowledge of interest group behavior to the issue of free trade by representing influential domestic actors, including the CEO of a discount retailer, a lobbyist for the auto industry, and a representative of the oil industry. The students in this class offered the students in the Introduction to International Politics class feedback about how they believed the provisions of the proposed free trade treaty would harm or benefit their industry. Ultimately, the students in the International Politics used this feedback to develop a treaty that had sufficient support of the domestic actors in all five countries. (See the appendix for the assignment prompt.)

A reflection assignment that the students completed after the simulation demonstrated that the activity had effectively illustrated to them the difficulty of bargaining at two different levels. Even more crucially, the students discovered that the system of government determined the ease of international bargaining. For example, one student representing the United States wrote of the domestic negotiations: “We were constantly having heated debates over the points in the treaty, particularly the issues of tariffs and labor rights.” In contrast, a student who represented the one-party government of China noted, “As the leader of China, I did not have to deal with opposition leaders, or business or union leaders ... it was easy for me to make agreements with all needed groups in order to bring my philosophy of the free trade agreement to the international level.”

Subsequently, in the spring semester, we paired the Law and the Courts course with a new class titled International Courts. Because this was a new course, expressly developed to be part of the learning community, the instructors were able to ensure significant overlap in course content, allowing students to explore the differences between the domestic and international legal environments. In this semester, our goal was to examine the notion of legitimacy and authority, key concepts in political science.

As such, the courses addressed numerous domestic and international court systems, examining their history and practice. Law and The Courts was modified to explore additional judicial systems beyond the American model including the German, British and French courts, although the US courts remained at the center of the discussion. In the International Courts class, students studied various international tribunals and standing courts, including the Nuremberg Tribunals, the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court. Using their knowledge of domestic judicial systems, the students in the LLC considered

the circumstances under which a court enjoys legitimacy among the people subject to its jurisdiction; then the students examined why some courts, such as the Nuremberg Tribunal and the International Criminal Court, caused so much controversy.

To promote integrative learning, each class had several assignments that examined court systems in a comparative context. Specifically, in International Courts, students participated in two formal debates, one that considered whether or not the United States should join the International Criminal Court and a second that examined whether or not national and international law prohibited the indefinite containment of suspected terrorists. In these debates, students considered the factors that could make an international court legitimate and compared this with the innate legitimacy possessed by domestic courts, which are nested in national political systems. In the Law and the Courts Class, state courts were compared across many dimensions, for instance, selection methods (and their ties to critical theoretical characteristics such as John Locke's "unbiased adjudicator") and decision-making rules (and their ties to items such as John Rawls's "veil of ignorance"). These basic dimensions were carried over to a discussion of inquisitorial systems of adjudication, such as the French Judges of Instruction, as well as other means of decision-making, such as English Common Law.

At the conclusion of the semester, we conducted a cross-class debate on religion in education, for which students reenacted the 1925 Scopes Monkey trial. The LLC students were responsible for acting as the parties in the case, while the non-LLC students acted as panel of judges and asked legal questions of the litigants. We assessed students on their ability to engage with the issues of legitimacy and authority raised by that case.

Assessment at the Conclusion of Year Three

Our model has changed to suit the learning outcomes to which we aspire. The 4th year plan is based in part on an assessment that the 3rd year model was not altogether well served by the introductory American Political Systems course. There were two basic reasons for this, one practical the other more theory-based. First, many students avoided the introductory political systems course through prior fulfillment, either Advanced Placement or dual enrollment at another college while still in high school. In addition, this course was weak in theory; it tended to be a simple "institutions" class¹ while the introductory International Relations course had more vision, a problem that we addressed by replacing American Political Systems with an Introduction to Political Science course. We did this

¹ Traditional "institutions" classes in American government focus almost solely on the mechanical operations of the executive, legislature, bureaucracy, and judiciary. Aside from a very basic coverage of the Constitution, they rarely move beyond a superficial theory element.

with the intent of weaving the theories of political science into examples drawn from international relations in the paired course. Because all majors are required to enroll in both courses in their first semester, integrating the courses in almost all respects (not simply through joint assignments), essentially turns all joint enrollees into de facto LLC members in their first semester.

Conclusions

As this history of the Politics and Law LLC illustrates, our learning community has evolved during its existence. In retrospect, we began with the “what” rather than the “why”; we decided we wanted to host an LLC without fully defining how the community would promote our teaching goals. After much formal and informal assessment, we have been able to make our LLC’s goals explicit and measurable, specifying learning outcomes for each semester’s coursework.

Our experience so far illustrates two points. First, although learning communities are typically conceived of as interdisciplinary endeavors, we believe a disciplinary learning community can provide meaningful integrative learning. Second, our approach to creating an LLC would be easily adaptable to a variety of disciplines in which students take coursework in one or more subfields. When designing our Learning Community, we found several practices that would be helpful to other faculty. Most basically, we recognized that undergraduate students can be deeply engaged in disciplinary subfields that share concepts and questions without being plunged into the specializations that distinguish graduate level work. Identifying these shared concepts is the key to linking the course material. In our case, in the first semester, this involved the idea of explaining political outcomes by examining the bargaining process and the relative power of the players. Subsequently, in the spring, we focused on the notion of legitimate authority, something of concern to scholars of both American politics and international politics.

Our experience also illustrates that faculty leading this type of learning community should be flexible and adaptive. Our LLC was essentially experimental, and in each year, we made alterations to the structure and content of the learning community based on student feedback and our own perceptions of the success of the LLC. For us, this is still an ongoing process, as we plan to increase the number of integrative assignments used each semester, ideally having a bi-weekly cross-class assignment.

Finally, our experience demonstrates that a disciplinary learning community is possible even in a small department. Because current staffing precludes us from offering separate sections of our courses for a learning community, we used an embedded cohort model that allowed us to nest the learning community in

existing courses. Although this model does not require offering any additional course sections, it does require more careful planning of integrative assignments; in creating the assignments, we needed to ensure that we provided opportunities for the LLC students to make cross-class connections while simultaneously offering non-LLC students essential course material.

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Appendix: Domestic - International Politics Simulation

In this simulation, students in *POS 2900: Introduction to International Relations* will consider the manner in which domestic politics impacts international politics, and vice versa. Each member of the class will play the role of a political actor within a state: some governments will be democratic, while other governments will have undemocratic political systems.

Specifically, the class will work to negotiate a new free trade treaty (see the draft treaty below). Those leaders who favor the treaty argue that it will open up new markets for goods and also accelerate growth in developing countries. Not all domestic actors agree; many actors worry that the treaty will harm the economy, the environment, and workers' rights.

The activity will involve several rounds of negotiations, where the domestic players decide on their position, and then bargain at the international level. The goal of the simulation is to create treaty that would be acceptable to the greatest number of countries.

In addition, students in *POS 1125: American Political Systems* will play the role of major U.S. and Canadian business interests, including manufactures and

retailers. The students in *POS 1125* will provide the U.S. and Canadian leaders with information on the degree to which the industry will support the treaty.

The Countries:

1. United States (democracy)
2. Mexico (semi-democracy)
3. China (non-democracy)
4. Russia (semi-democracy)
5. Canada (democracy)

The Domestic Players (all countries)

1. Leader of Government
2. Business Representative
3. Labor Representative

In addition, the Democracies and Semi-Democracies will have the following additional Domestic Players

1. Leader of Major Opposition Party
2. Environmental Activist
3. Farming Representative

Essay to Prepare for the Free Trade Simulation

In a short essay 1/12-2 pages answer the following questions. You must cite all outside sources.

1. Describe the nature of your government. To what degree is the government responsive to public opinion?
2. What are some of the powerful domestic actors in your country? What do you think would happen if the government refused to work with these groups?
3. Describe your role in the simulation. How do you feel about the proposed treaty?
4. Consider your role in the simulation. How much influence do you have in your country? What could you do if the government adopts a policy that goes against your interests?

Reflection Essay on Simulation

Please Write a Response of Approximately One Page

1. Describe the negotiations inside your country: What were the major points of contention? Were you able to overcome them?
2. How do you think the type of government influences a country's power to negotiate?

Draft Treaty

All provisions are subject to modification by the negotiators

The proposed World Free Trade Treaty (WFTT) will promote greater trade and cooperation among the participating nations.

All nations signing the treaty must agree to implement the following policies at the national level:

1. Eliminate all tariffs on goods from fellow signatory nations, except those tariffs accepted by a majority of participants
2. Eliminate all subsidies to domestic producers, aside from those accepted by a majority of participants
3. Ensure that all workers have humane working conditions; the specific nature of these standards will be developed by the participants
4. Remove all national laws and regulations that restrict trade, except when granted exceptions by a majority of signatories in negotiations