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Becoming Responsible Learners: Community Matters

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Abstract
Students at Iowa State University had the opportunity to enroll in a two-year National Science Foundation (NFS) Scholarship for Service (SFS) leadership development program, in addition to their work within their majors. This interdisciplinary program included faculty and students in computer engineering, computer science, mathematics, political science, management information systems, and education. The expected learning outcomes for this interdisciplinary effort were focused on "learning in community," specifically to develop professionals and citizens who will continue learning for life while consistently supporting and encouraging the growth of others. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to examine students' experiences of learning in community in the SFS program. Participants identified a definable developmental process where students' experiences moved from resistance to the interactive and participatory nature of the class, to reluctance to step outside comfort zones, to reliance on others within the community, to assuming responsibility for self and others in the community.

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Becoming Responsible Learners: Community Matters

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A primary goal in higher education should be to help students become productive citizens who solve challenging problems and gain new insights. However, in many college courses, students succeed by memorizing facts and basic principles from lectures or texts. The good grades received from such practices don't always translate into abilities to solve ill-defined, real-world problems students will face the rest of their lives (Huba & Freed, 2000). Meeting the challenges of the future requires not only technical knowledge and skills but also the ability to communicate effectively, think critically, and form meaningful relationships based on mutual trust and respect. The challenge, therefore, for educators is to structure learning opportunities that will allow students to develop both cognitive and interpersonal abilities with a goal of developing citizens and professionals who take responsibility for their own learning and accept the obligation to help others grow and develop. Learning communities clearly help move post-secondary education in this important direction.

Learning communities, with a long history in higher education, were developed with the intent of increasing student success—both academically and socially. Most learning communities today resemble one of the four typical structures (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004): paired or clustered courses; cohorts in large courses or freshman interest groups; team-taught programs; or residence-based learning communities. Examples of rewards in academic achievement and intellectual development for students involved in learning communities are numerous (as cited in Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). These results include increased GPAs, higher-quality learning, more complex thinking, increased quality and quantity of learning, improved connectedness within social and academic realms, greater engagement in learning, increased opportunities to write and speak, a more complex world view, and a greater openness to ideas different from one's own. Two possible reasons for higher retention rates in learning communities

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are commitment to peers and total absorption with the program content. This supports a claim made by Tinto (1987) about the importance for students to make a successful transition into both the social and academic communities of college. Clearly, learning communities produce multiple benefits. However, it is likely there is a challenge that has not yet been addressed.

Instead of limiting the possible outcomes of learning communities to academic and social success in college, what might happen if the expected outcomes focused on developing professionals and citizens who will continue learning for life while consistently encouraging and supporting the growth of others? If this can be accomplished in higher education institutions, graduates will be more prepared to thrive as productive citizens for a lifetime of facing problems and issues that have not yet been imagined. This study examined the experiences of students in a program that was designed specifically with these ends in mind.

As opposed to the more traditional notion of learning community, we have called this experience learning in community. Typically, traditional learning communities fit the definition of community according to Webster: a unified body of individuals, people with common interests living in a particular area, or an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location. Peck (1987) further clarified the meaning of community as "a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment. . ." (p. 59). This definition of community more accurately describes the phenomenon we observed. The purpose of this study was to uncover the fundamental structure of learning in community as perceived by the participants. While the findings section will discuss this fundamental structure in more detail, Figure 1 provides examples of similarities and differences between traditional learning communities and our notion of learning in community.

Background for the Study

Recently, we had the opportunity to combine our knowledge of human learning and the principles of learning organizations in a leadership development program for National Science Foundation (NSF) Scholarship for Service (SFS) students at a land grant, Research I university in the Midwest. As part of the NSF SFS program, students are awarded full scholarships in exchange for two years of federal government work in cyber security following graduation. The NSF SFS program is an interdisciplinary effort involving students and faculty in computer engineering, computer science, mathematics, political science, management information systems, and education. Fellowship recipients participate in a two-year leadership development program in addition to the requirements of their majors. The leadership program is designed with an emphasis on: (a) learning about learning, (b) learning about self, (c) purposefully developing community, (d) deliberately practicing and refining skills to support and encourage the growth of self and others, (e) practicing metacognition, and (f) engaging in intentional

mental processing (Wiersema & Licklider, 2006). In addition to affording plenty of individual talk time, weekly three-hour meetings provide opportunities for students to participate in frequent team learning. Consistent with our goal of helping students manage and control their own growth and development while supporting the learning of their colleagues, the team learning opportunities are centered on both the science of learning and the deliberate development of community. See Figure 2 for examples of structured learning opportunities.

According to the students, the knowledge, skills, and dispositions desired as outcomes of this program are certainly outside the experiences and comfort zones of their previous educational encounters. For example, students had been able to attend many classes without getting involved in discussions. We expected them not only to express and defend their thinking publicly but also to challenge the thinking of their peers. Students had not been expected to use rubrics to critique their own performances or to set their own goals for growth and development. One of the greatest challenges for most of the students was to engage regularly in reflection and to record those thoughts and feelings in their journals.

By the end of the first year, it was clear these students were not only taking responsibility for their own learning, but they were also developing into a productive community of learners—a group of individuals who interact regularly with a common purpose of promoting the growth and development of every member. Evidence was found in both their behaviors prior to and during class and in personal reflections captured in journals. For example, not only did students come to class having done the reading, they also met with each other outside of class to discuss the assignments and to challenge each other to think more deeply. Without being prompted, students developed questions to engage each other in perspective taking or problem solving. They began analyzing current events and applying theories studied in class to real-world situations. It seemed appropriate to try to discern some of the reasons for changes in students' behaviors. This study sought to determine the important factors affecting student self-responsibility for their own learning while encouraging and supporting the learning of others in the community of learners.

Methodology

"Drawing from a long tradition in anthropology, sociology, and clinical psychology, qualitative research has, in the last 20 years, achieved status and visibility in the social sciences and helping professions" (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). Procedures used in qualitative studies differ distinctly from the more traditional methods of quantitative research. "Qualitative inquiry employs different knowledge claims, strategies of inquiry, and methods of data collection and analysis" (Creswell, 2003, p. 179). In this section we provide a rationale for the selection of phenomenology to guide the study, briefly explain our roles as researchers and our efforts to set our own beliefs and biases aside, and describe the processes used for data collection and analysis.

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Methods

Phenomenology flows from an interpretivist theoretical perspective. Our desire to uncover the essence of the students' experiences—to discover what contributed to their learning and development—made this an ideal phenomenological research study (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994). True to phenomenological studies, it allowed the essence of how they experienced the phenomenon to emerge from the eight participants (Creswell, 2003). As developers and co-facilitators of the leadership program, we witnessed the phenomenon of learning in community and observed the students develop into responsible learners and worthy team members (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). The growth we witnessed in these students far surpassed any similar successes with students in all of our combined years (almost 60) of experience in public education. Therefore, it was our desire to uncover the factors that contributed to that growth.

Epoche Process

We realized in conducting this study that our own biases and beliefs are the result of many years of experience in education, and they are very strong. Therefore, as researchers, it was necessary to bracket our own viewpoints in order to uncover the essence of the students' experiences. We did this by following the phenomenological epoche process. According to Moustakas (1994), the epoche is:

> ...a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time. (p. 85)

The best way for us to engage in this process was through reflection—identifying, first of all, our own beliefs based on our experiences of helping others learn and then our biases as a result of our interpretation of the students' experiences throughout the learning opportunities in the leadership program. Reviewing this list of beliefs and biases frequently before engaging in the interviews and while working with the data allowed us to focus on the lived experiences of the students.

Participants

The participants in this study were the students who experienced the observed leadership development phenomenon. The cohort was small enough that we had the luxury of not having to select a subset of participants. Of the nine students, eight consented to be a part of the study: four undergraduate men, one undergraduate woman, and three graduate men. Two male undergraduates were

majoring in computer engineering, one in management information systems, and one in computer science. The female undergraduate student was also a computer science major. Two of the graduate students were computer science majors and the other was a math major. Although the eight participants, who had always received high academic grades, were in the fourth semester of the NSF SFS program, the retrospective study was designed to focus on the learning experiences during the first two semesters.

Data Collection

The goal in data collection for a phenomenological study is to collect rich, meaningful data that accurately depict the participant's interpretation of the phenomenon. The primary method used to achieve such data is the interview (Merriam, 2002). Phenomenologists usually use in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions to increase the probability of gathering comparable data across subjects. This type of interview elicits descriptive data in the subjects' own words to provide insights on the interpretation of the experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The first interview was a focus group with all eight participants. Open-ended questions were emailed to students one week prior to the interview. Students were encouraged to engage in reflection before the meeting and bring any written thoughts with them. The focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. It was audio taped and transcribed.

The same researcher interviewed each of the eight participants individually. Semi-structured interviews to uncover each individual's own personal meaning for the experience that led to his/her development as a responsible learner. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy.

Frequent reflection and periodic written self-assessments were requirements throughout the leadership development program. Reflections were recorded in journals. Student journals were copied and used as sources of data. At the end of each semester, students were required to complete self-assessments describing their growth and development as leaders. Those written self-assessments were also used as data in this study.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data were analyzed and interpreted by both researchers independently following steps suggested by Colaizzi (1978): read all data, extract significant statements, formulate meanings, organize into clusters of themes, integrate into an exhaustive description, and formulate the exhaustive description in as unequivocal a statement of identification of the phenomenon's fundamental structure as possible. We started the analysis by reading through all data to become familiar with them and to begin listening to the words of the participants as they described their experiences. Reading through the data a second time, we began coding by using various colors to highlight significant statements. Rereading and sorting the

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coded statements allowed us to begin formulating meanings from the significant statements. Any discrepancies that arose were resolved by discussing individual interpretations and by returning to the data for additional evidence to support claims. It was also through the discussion that themes began to emerge. The findings were validated by taking these themes back to the participants and asking for feedback. Since this member-checking provided no new data nor new insights about interpretations, we proceeded to the final step in the analysis—to formulate the exhaustive description in as unequivocal a statement of identification of the phenomenon's fundamental structure as possible.

Findings

As referenced earlier, the last stage in the analysis of the data is to organize the themes into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon and formulate the exhaustive description in as unequivocal a statement of identification of its fundamental structure as possible (Colaizzi, 1978). In general, the themes that emerged were self-identified growth and development, continuous reflection, metacognition, high expectations for addressing challenging tasks, interdependence, accountability, and supportive environment. Therefore, the fundamental structure of learning in community, as perceived by these eight participants, is a self-recognized transformative development resulting from engaging learners in continuous personal reflection before, during, and after challenging them with, and holding them accountable for, addressing complex, meaningful tasks in an interdependent and supportive environment over time. This complex statement gives rise to a multitude of possibilities of exploration with implications for educators and students. This paper addresses the impacts of learning and community in this transformative experience.

Learning in community made a difference as students moved toward becoming responsible learners—individuals who take charge of their own thinking, actions, and ultimately, their own learning. In addition to becoming responsible learners, they developed into interdependent members of a community. Through their words, collectively, participants identified two critical concepts related to experiencing a community of learners: (1) a developmental process sprouting in resistance, growing through a reluctance to step outside their comfort zones, flourishing in reliance on others within the community, and eventually taking root in a responsibility not only for self, but also for others in the community; and (2) key factors that contributed to movement through the process. The words of the participants illustrate each stage and describe supporting factors critical for movement through the stages as they developed into responsible learners and interdependent community members.

Resistance

The leadership program is developmental in nature. The learning experiences

created were the result of many years of experience in helping others grow and develop. It was surprising how much our expectations of interaction and participation conflicted with those of the students. Although not always overt, the data reveal an internal resistance with which many students struggled and the critical components of the learning experiences necessary for their growth—being held to expectations of participation and interaction.

All students in the NSF SFS program had enjoyed high academic grades throughout high school and college. They were comfortable and secure working alone to complete requirements for classes as Alex admits during a journal entry during October:

> I have largely been working on my own for most of my life. In elementary school, junior high, high school, and the first few years of my undergrad, I did very little group work. My preference is definitely to be safe and secure in my room working alone.

They expected the leadership program to be more of the same as Cody revealed during the focus group interview:

> I came into leadership training thinking that the class would be similar to other college courses. I anticipated that I would be able to perform my work largely in isolation. I never expected to become part of a tight-knit group. I had no desire to do so. I preferred to work alone—or at least I thought I did.

Both the expectation of and preference for working alone were common and in direct conflict with the highly interactive nature of the leadership class. Starting with the first minutes of class, students were expected to interact with others, and this was a source of frustration as Rob revealed during the focus group interview:

> Leadership class was definitely a struggle for me in the early goings. I was not used to working with people on such a close and continuing basis. I felt very scared to have to rely on others for academic support and just support in general.

Not only had they been successful working alone, but many also had previous negative experiences with group work that caused them to consider such interactions burdensome as Cody explained in his self-assessment at the end of the year:

> In the past, the bulk of my work inside and outside of class was done alone. I was concerned with my own performance primarily. I generally did not value or want group work because I viewed group work as an impediment—extra work that I

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would end up doing alone.

As students confronted their beliefs and understandings about learning and teamwork, it became a challenge to expose them to new experiences that conflicted with what they thought they knew—to help them begin to realize that becoming a responsible learner requires hard work. The ultimate goal was to develop interdependence within the community so they would experience the power of learning with others, but the first step was to set the expectation for participation within and responsibility to the community. The following excerpts from two different self-assessments at the end of the first semester suggest an understanding of such an expectation:

> The most important part of leadership class for my development was the interactive, participatory nature of the class. In the vast majority of my other classes, I show up for class, jot down a few notes, do the homework and take the tests. I am not forced to share thoughts of my own or involve myself with others. Indeed, most college classes allow students to work in isolation, which is a grievous error. (Cody)

> [In many groups] the people in the group do not feel like it is their position to contribute to the group. This is something that I have realized more and more as I have been a part of the leadership class. It is a stark contrast to most of my experiences with groups. The class is designed so that each member knows that it is their responsibility to participate. (Brett)

Since each student is expected to contribute, it is necessary to establish a safe environment early in the semester where all will be willing to speak. To encourage participation, every meeting begins and ends with a "go 'round" — one of our favorite interaction strategies. The facilitator poses a question or a notion to elicit a response, and after individual think time, each person is expected to speak. During the focus group interview, participants were reflecting on those first classes and the early go 'rounds. Alex recognized the extent to which his willingness to speak up had been influenced by the go 'rounds: "I think the go-rounds actually had a pretty good effect.... We were all given equal expectations of participation and forced participation." Once students understood the expectations of interaction and knew they had a safe place to practice, they became more willing to participate, even if a bit reluctantly.

Reluctance

All learning takes time, especially when that learning conflicts with previous experiences. During this stage, as students continued to confront their beliefs about

teamwork, it was necessary to plan activities that would allow them to experience the value of learning in community. The critical components during this period of reluctance seemed to be working together over time, cooperative interactions, and communication as identified by Russ during the focus group interview:

> One of them [factors contributing to growth] was just coming into the [NSF SFS] group and just the culture of it. The culture was to speak up, it was to communicate, it was to work together, and I guess I felt that desire to conform. Not just to say that it was peer pressure but just because I could see the value in doing so and so I guess I made a conscious choice that I was going to try and towards the beginning of the first semester it was quite difficult. I did struggle to speak up....

In addition to being reluctant to speak up, an entry from a journal mid-semester illustrates the cognitive dissonance experienced by Cody and the struggle for resolution:

> I am largely accustomed to only being responsible for myself. I see my own performance as distinct from that of other people who work with me. While I would not hesitate to help a group member out, I still do not see our performances as one. I therefore need to adjust my thinking somewhat to better reflect the true nature of group work. If I only appraise my own part, I will get a skewed image of the group's success or lack thereof.

Causing learners to confront their own beliefs is only the first step in helping them learn. As they begin to think and believe differently, it is necessary to provide them with experiences that conflict with past experiences. This happened as individuals participated in team activities meant for interaction, fun, and getting to know others as evidenced by a journal entry written by Russ:

> Ever since Wednesday, I've been thinking about the group activity we did with the poker chips, surviving the cave. I enjoy those activities especially because not only are they fun, but I think I get to know my classmates better. I believe it creates greater group cohesion and it builds the community aspect.

As students did get to know one another and began to feel more comfortable, the focus of the interaction shifted to interdependence. Kevin touched on this during the focus group:

> Our cooperative group mentally developed due to the fact that we were not made to compete against each other in leadership

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> class. In fact, our performances as a group were appraised quite regularly and our individual performances quite rarely. We were taught that we all needed to do well or none of us did well. Consequently, our group started working with each other instead of competing against each other.

Our desire was for students to realize the power possible from being a part of a community. These thoughts from Dave during the focus group interview summarize the critical components participants valued during their growth through the reluctant stage on the journey of becoming responsible learners and community members:

> For sure, the way the three hour class periods are spent, because they're spent interactively talking most of the time, performing activities that are fun and then after you're done with the activity, talking about everything that happened in the activity, that was something that I never would have done before and that was probably the most valuable key as a group, was definitely the most valuable thing that we did. Just having to talk about everything, analyze what other people did, analyze what you did, try to do that, and being held accountable for what you say. Like you might offend somebody in the group and then you had to deal with that, having other people do that too.

The students had experienced teamwork as opposed to group work. They had come to value the interactions during class, and were beginning to understand the importance of cooperation. As with all deep learning, the next challenge was to transfer that new understanding into situations outside class. During the focus group interview, as participants were reflecting on their growth, Joni's words illustrate the transfer:

> I think the turning point, I may have written about this, but if I didn't, it was early on in the semester and I realized … people in [the NSF SFS program] sat together and helped each other and in that way our group wasn't just confined to the leadership class but rather exceeded that class, went beyond it, transcended that, and I guess at that point I felt like I was part of the group and felt like there was a group, it wasn't just something that was imposed on us.

It appeared the students were beginning to rely on the community they were developing.

Reliance

The transformation from reluctant participators to dedicated members of the learning community happened at differing times and in response to a variety of activities or circumstances. For some it was a gradual realization of the collective power as described in their journals:

> I've realized (slowly) that you can't do everything yourself. Teams can accomplish way more than individuals and followers can lead just as well as leaders (and can be just as essential). (Dave) Eventually I came to struggle less. I began to see the benefit of being a part of a group. I could turn to other people if I had troubles and vice-versa. I quickly came to see that I would have eventually faced group work anyway. No job—or at least no rewarding job—allows a person to work in total isolation. Sooner or later I would have had to become part of a team. (Cody)

For Dave, it was possible to recall the specific day he internalized the value of working with others:

> I always considered myself a pretty independent person. I usually keep to myself. But one thing I've noticed today is that I am energized after meeting with familiar faces. I think there is a bit of an adrenaline rush during and after any conversation I have with them. This was really a revelation to me today because I have always preferred to be a pretty independent person, not needing or asking for much from anyone.

As students confronted their own beliefs about learning, it was necessary for us to do the same. In spite of their initial struggles, we held on to our belief in the power of learning in community. We were determined to provide them with experiences that would overcome past frustrations. Excerpts taken from self-assessments at the end of the year indicate success:

> I became a better team player through much experience to group work. All of the leadership class activities—of which there were several per class—involved a great deal of group work. I was given more time to develop cooperative skills, whereas other classes would perhaps have just one group activity for an entire semester. I see now the reason my
> previous group experiences were not positive—I lacked the practice that leadership class has given me. (Kevin)

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> Leadership class has afforded me more opportunities to work in the company of others. I applied myself during those opportunities toward becoming more outspoken. My work paid off, and I have gained interpersonal skills. I now know that if there are characteristics that challenge my leadership development, I can work to improve those proclivities. (Alex)

In retrospect, during the focus group interview, as participants reflected on experiences different from previous group work, they were able to identify that it was more than just time spent in interaction that was critical for their development. According to Rob, it was time spent in meaningful interaction, learning together:

> More than just spending time together. I think it was the fact that we were actually studying material and being taught material, how interactions are supposed to happen. I'm sure some of it was just the fact that we grew accustomed to each other, but I think for the dynamic to truly work, we had to be aware of what the proper way for a group to function is.

It was a pleasant surprise that participants recognized the importance of learning "how interactions are supposed to happen." Much time was invested in helping students learn effective interactive skills—active listening, providing support and encouragement, asking good questions, offering justification, and more — and expecting them to practice those skills. In addition to learning about effective teams, Kevin also distinguished the importance of engaging in meaningful, challenging activities together:

> Probably also as a group, when you have to get through a lot of things together, we're doing the semester projects, interview projects, papers. We're doing all this similar work, it's all hard, so we had gone through all these things together so we automatically had all these bonds between each other. Even if they weren't the heaviest memories we still did them, got through them, as a group.

For us, the most important evidence of deep learning is the ability of learners to transfer their learning into new situations. Once again, the words of one participant, Cody, provided the evidence of such learning:

> I had much trouble and my level of participation was low the first few sessions, but I wanted to do better because I saw my classmates, I saw that they were doing better and I think they encouraged me to do better and so I wanted to do better, I wanted to speak up and eventually I kept doing so until I got

> in the habit and it came easier and of course that filtered into my character, or personality, so I was able to use those skills in avenues, such as job interviews and meeting new people. And I guess that increased level of social activity is to explain the skills I have picked up.

It was clear that students had become responsible learners. They understood the importance of diligent practice and deliberate transfer required before new skills could benefit them as professionals. They had learned to manage their own growth and development. They were ready to move into the next stage in their development as interdependent members of a community.

Responsibility

By the end of the second semester previous attitudes and values toward group work had been replaced with a truer sense of community, as revealed by Joni: "I realize I feel pretty strongly about the power of group cohesion. Committed individuals can and will put group needs first." Individuals had learned to value not only the result of working with others but also the process as Kevin described in his journal:

> No longer do I look at group activities as a burden, I look at them as a challenge because not only can I make a difference, when what I do works out, but the group works so well that the accomplishment isn't so much in the final product as in how we created it.

It was during the focus group interview that participants realized just how much their beliefs, values, and skills related to learning in community had developed. Dave's words provide evidence that they had taken responsibility not only for their own growth and development but also for those in the community:

> I guess the biggest example that just came to my mind is how we're approaching the job searching stuff. That is difficult, there are consequences of the whole process.... I haven't really seen competitiveness. I've seen people helping each other out and I don't feel the need to be competitive with them at all here. I was the first person, I was first through the NSA screening, and people are kind of following me through that process and I don't feel like, I shouldn't give them hints or whatever, I feel like I should help them so they can find success in that area, too.

Once again, they were able to transfer their new understanding of community beyond the classroom as illustrated by Kevin:

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> It has been absolutely imperative that I have friends I can count on this year for a variety of reasons. I imagine having people I can depend upon will be even more important in the working world. I want to have as strong a support network in the field as I do here.

Having experienced learning in community, the participants understood the power and were anxious to seek out similar conditions for their future.

Our goal had been to develop a community of learners with a focus on both learning and community—with a focus on individual development as interdependent community members. Cody's words provide evidence of the power possible through learning in community:

> I always knew that I liked being part of a team, especially in sports, but never really knew why. I guess now that I look back on it, I liked the feelings of comradery, I liked being part of a team where I could depend on others and they could depend on me to make that catch or tackle. What I now realize is that I really enjoyed the interdependence that leadership created. We all empowered each other with words of encouragement to perform better. I could empathize with the person next to me. We were honest with each other and showed each other respect. All of these were merely components of an empowering leadership relationship. This course has allowed me to identify one of the main reasons why I enjoy being part of a team. This goes to show that empowering others is vital.

In addition, students not only were beginning to internalize the importance of true community, they also were transferring their understandings to their futures as articulated by Rob:

> I think a sense of community in the work environment is essential. This sense of community can only come from people actively working to show that they care about the people around them, and that they are people who can be trusted. These things take time.

Indeed, these students were beginning to identify notions of true community, which, as suggested earlier, have some differences with a more typical meaning of community.

In our culture, the word community has been applied to almost any group of individuals—a town, neighborhood, church, professional organization, social group, dorm, or residential building—regardless of how well or poorly those individuals communicate and interact with each other. Peck (1987) would argue

this is a false use of the word:

> If we are going to use the word meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to "rejoice together, mourn together," and to "delight in each other, make others' conditions our own." (p. 59)

Traditional learning communities likely fall along a continuum defined by Peck's notion of the false use of community on one end and his meaning of true community on the other. The data from this study indicate that the ultimate goal for a community of learners ought to be to reach true community. The participants could readily identify and articulate how their experiences of learning in community had transformed them as learners and contributors to the learning of others. They could identify stages in their own transformation and recognize the critical factors. This has important implications for post-secondary education.

Discussion

Just as we would not expect a handful of acorns to become a grove of oak trees in one season, neither can we expect naïve students to mature into responsible learners within an interdependent community during a single semester. Growth and development take time! We did, however, during one year, observe a small group of students sprout in resistance to participation and interaction, grow through a reluctance to step outside their comfort zones, flourish in reliance on others within the community, and eventually establish roots in responsibility not only for self, but also for others in the community. As depicted in Figure 3, students appear to make steady progress toward becoming responsible learners, but the stages are not discrete. As learners continue forward progress, they may backslide occasionally. Awareness of these developmental stages will help those who are in charge of learning communities, or have the opportunity to work with a group of students, structure experiences that will move students through the process of becoming responsible learners who support and encourage the development of others.

Students enter post-secondary education with a myriad of experiences. Some of them have been successful working in isolation, others have excelled competitively, and many have experienced working with others. Whether good or bad, those experiences form the foundation for each individual's beliefs about learning. It may be necessary to help students confront such beliefs to change their paradigms of thinking and learning. Students need to understand that although "learning is indeed a private, internal process that takes place in the head of the learner" (Leamnson, 2000, p. 37), much learning does occur through

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social interaction (Brandt, 1992; Caine & Caine, 2001). This means more than just having students practice and recite terminology together (Brandt; Caine & Caine; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). It means providing them opportunities to make their implicit knowledge explicit—giving them the chance to explain their thinking to each other, listen to each other, and help each other explain. This kind of learning does not occur automatically when students are put together—it must be nurtured.

Just as a seed is vulnerable when it begins to sprout, so, too, is a learner very fragile when being introduced to a new way of learning. To reduce resistance during this initial stage, not only is it important for educators to set expectations of participation and interaction and to hold students accountable for meeting them, but it is also critical for them to provide a supportive environment to nurture the growth. Short, non-threatening activities—icebreakers, go 'rounds, warm-ups, mixers, etc.—provide opportunities for interaction while students learn more about themselves and others. Especially during these early interactions, those in charge must foster an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect by modeling appropriate behaviors and insisting students engage in supportive actions. As students perceive a safe environment and know they will be held accountable for participation and interaction, their resistance will give way to a reluctant engagement.

During this reluctance stage it is critical for educators to provide numerous opportunities for learners to work together over time. Each activity must be planned purposefully to allow the learners to experience the value of social interaction, but the experience alone will not result in learning. "Learning, as David Perkins points out, is a consequence of thinking—it's less the doing than the thinking, the reflecting on that doing, that counts" (Leamnson, 2000, p. 37). As the reluctant learners confront their own beliefs about working with others, reflection becomes critical to cultivate growth. They need to engage not only in personal reflection, but also reflection about team functioning. It is important to allow time for communication—to discuss what happened, why it happened, and how to be more productive in the future. As students engage in meaningful reflection, they will begin to identify differences in teamwork and typical group experiences from their past. Coming to value these interactions will reveal to them a deeper meaning of the importance of cooperation and will move them into the stage where they begin to rely on one another—an important step toward true community.

During the next two stages where students begin to rely on one another and then take responsibility for each other, the focus of all interactions should be on learning, practicing, and reflecting—learning about learning, learning about self, learning about and practicing effective interactions, learning and practicing the skills and knowledge critical for professionals and citizens, and, of course, continuously reflecting about the meaning and implications of all experiences. As post-secondary educators, it is easy to accept the responsibility for helping students learn about a specific discipline, but rarely is time taken to help students understand learning at a deeper level. Even more challenging is the notion that students must be taught how to interact effectively and be given opportunities to

practice and develop such skills. Without these skills students will take little more from, nor give to, the community of learners than the oak tree, without a well-developed root system, can take from or give to its environment. Not until learners struggle together will they begin to experience true community.

Conclusion

Limitations were inherent in the nature and the purpose of this study. Because it was a phenomenological study to uncover the essence of the participants' experiences of learning in community, the findings are limited to a specific small group of students, in a Midwestern university, during the first year of a two-year program. The purpose was to identify key components that contributed to the growth and development of individuals. No attempt has been made to generalize the results to other populations; however, early indications from our work with three other groups of students learning in community do suggest that similar results are likely to occur. Therefore, supporting students in becoming responsible learners while experiencing true community may well be the next important challenge for those in charge of learning communities in higher education. Community does, indeed, matter.

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Figures

	Traditional Learning Communities	Learning in Community (as used in this study)
Purpose	promotion of academic and social success for college students	development of professionals and citizens who continue learning well beyond college while supporting the learning of others
Structures	Typical structures: 1. paired or clustered courses 2. cohorts in large courses 3. team-taught programs 4. residence-based	• cross-disciplinary cohort working together in leadership and teamwork courses over 2 to 4 semesters • high expectations for addressing complex, meaningful real-world tasks • individual responsibility for self and others in the community
Focus areas	Vary depending on the structure of the learning community, but might include any of the following: 1. content of the specific courses; possibly an interdisciplinary theme 2. opportunities for faculty and students to interact and get to know one another 3. faculty or peer advising component 4. seminars based on real-world situations 5. integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences	• understanding self • applications of the knowledge of human learning for self and others • responsible team membership • action planning and implementation • self-assessment with attention to thinking and action • connections among discipline content, self, world, professional practice • engaged citizenship • intentional mental processing (Wiersema & Licklider, under review) related to all learning experiences
Outcomes	Vary depending on the structure of the learning community, but these results have been identified: 1. increased retention in course(s) 2. increased GPA 3. improved connectedness within social and academic realms 4. greater engagement in learning specific to the courses 5. more complex world view 6. greater openness to ideas different from one's own	• abilities to manage and direct learning of self and others • ownership of thoughts and behaviors • commitment to leading from within • improved connectedness within social and academic realms • greater engagement in learning • more complex world view • greater openness to ideas different from one's own

Figure 1. Similarities and differences between traditional learning communities and learning in community

Learning as biological brain change: An activity early in the year requires that students first read the article "Learning as Biological Brain Change" written by Leamnson (2000) and come to class prepared to discuss the article with their colleagues. Students are encouraged to share not only those ideas with which they agree and their own personal experiences that support those ideas, but also to challenge others to think more deeply by posing questions related to notions they might have experienced differently. After a period of discussion, the small groups of students (3 or 4) are directed to create a list of insights for learning and implications for their own learning based on those insights. To bring closure to the activity, each group has the opportunity to share their list with other groups and provide clarification or justification as needed. The final expectation for this activity is that students will select specific insights and deliberately apply those insights to deepen their learning in all areas of school and life. As with every learning opportunity, the students are held accountable for implementing the learning by intentional mental processing of the experience (recording thoughts in their journals). Additional accountability is in the form of a written "practices inventory" where students record (1) their insights, (2) practices or habits that are congruent with the insight, (3) practices or habits that interfere with their learning based on the insight, and (4) ideas to implement that might deepen their learning.

Engaging Learners in Intentional Mental Processing (Wiersema & Licklider, under review): Intentional mental processing (IMP) describes the typical kinds of thinking required for deep learning—reflection, active processing, critical thinking, metacognition, etc.—and adds the notion of intentionality. A key to developing responsible learners is to help them develop IMP as a habit of mind. Examples of experiences and expectations used to engage students in IMP are listed below:

- Go 'rounds: Learners make their thinking public by responding to a question or statement.
- Meaningful discussion: Learners own actions, beliefs, and opinions; justify claims; listen to others; and challenge self and others to think more deeply.
- Team activities: All team members contribute to the accomplishment of the task and maintain positive relationships.
- Application of skills: Learners deliberately apply all skills in new situations and engage in thoughtful reflection related to growth and development of the skills.
- Self-assessments: Learners write detailed analyses of growth and development at the end of each semester.
- Journals: Learners engage in written reflection regularly guided by a rubric.

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Recipe for teamwork (West, 1997): Individually, learners create their recipes for teamwork, being creative but giving serious thought to those "ingredients" them deem most important. Additional considerations should include quantity of each ingredient, the value it adds to the mix, and the manner of insertion. Next, learners work in teams of 3 or 4 to develop a complete recipe for effective teamwork. Deliberate efforts to integrate multiple ideas from each team member should be apparent. Creativity should be encouraged. Prior to closure, allow time for individuals to record thoughts in their journals. Provide questions to guide their intentional mental processing. Ask each learner to name one ingredient he/she will provide each time her/his team meets.

Purposes for this activity: (1) confront beliefs about team membership, (2) engage in creative thinking with team members, (3) integrate multiple perspectives into a final product, (4) identify skills and attitudes that contribute to team success, and (5) commit to individual development as a team member.

Leading learning for others: The best way to begin to internalize learning theory is to apply it. This is best done via planning and leading learning for others. Learners plan and lead one session in class to help others develop either effective group interaction skills or experience an aspect of group dynamics. They must complete a learning plan for the session that includes

- learner/team member outcomes,
- strategies for achieving the outcomes, and
- assessment of the progress of the learners/team members toward meeting the outcomes.

Figure 2. Examples of learning opportunities

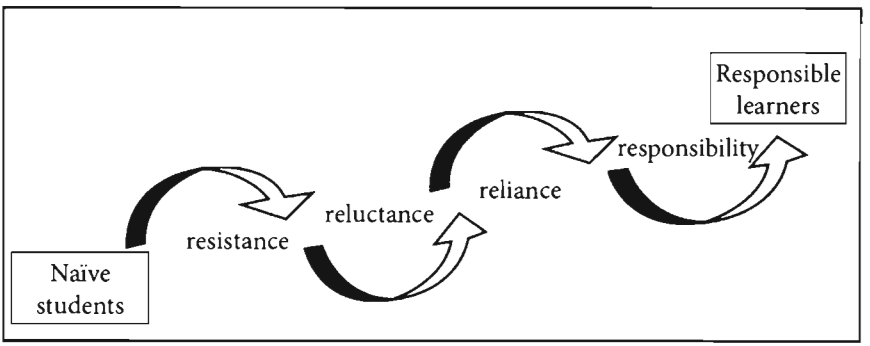

Figure 3. Developmental stages as naïve students become responsible learners

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