

Integrating the Credit Information Literacy Course into a Learning Community

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Historically, the University of Baltimore was an upper division institution that served only juniors, seniors, and graduate students. That changed in August 2007, when the University began offering classes to freshmen and underwent a massive expansion of its general education curriculum. To prepare for the new student population, faculty and staff designed an entirely new program for the freshman and sophomores. They decided that all freshmen on campus would be grouped into learning communities, where 25-30 students would take a block of three thematically linked courses together: one humanities course, one social science course, and one skills course. While planning for the new learning communities was underway, librarians proposed, and received approval for a new three credit information literacy course. Librarians designed the course, IDIS 110: Introduction to Information Literacy, to serve as a skills course in the new learning communities. Through their experience working with faculty from other departments to develop and teach each section of IDIS 110, the authors made an important discovery: the credit information literacy course is effective as a stand-alone elective, but it is better when integrated into the curriculum as part of a learning community.

Learning communities provide an ideal context for an information literacy course because they reinforce several key characteristics that have been identified as best practices by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). According to the ACRL, successful information literacy programs: 1) provide context for information literacy instruction that “results in a fusion of information literacy concepts and disciplinary content” and “links information literacy to ongoing coursework,” 2) use a pedagogy that “includes ac-

tive and collaborative activities” and “encompasses critical thinking and reflection,” and 3) occur within an institution that “recognizes and encourages collaboration among disciplinary faculty, librarians, and other program staff and among institutional units.”¹ Teaching information literacy within a learning community creates a powerful synergy, because many of the best practices of both enterprises overlap.

Learning Communities: An Overview

Alexander Meiklejohn first developed the idea of a learning community in the 1920s. He believed that university students needed to obtain perspectives from multiple disciplines early in their academic careers in order to avoid the narrow thinking that can come with specialization. In 1927, Meiklejohn put his idea of a learning community into practice by founding the Experimental College within the University of Wisconsin. Students enrolled in the Experimental College would take a series of classes together as a group. The classes would focus on a particular theme or topic, covering multiple aspects of that topic with professors from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds doing the teaching.² For example, when first year students studied 5th century Athens, different professors led discussions on various aspects of the topic, including architecture, philosophy, medicine, mathematics and geography. In this way, students learned about different disciplines and ways to apply them.³ Meiklejohn thought that this approach to teaching would encourage students to think more deeply and more critically. Although the Experimental College only lasted a few years, the growing popularity of learning communities today stands as a testament to his enduring influence.⁴ In their most basic form, modern learning communities usually consist of a group of students who take two or more classes together.⁵ The classes in a learning community share a unifying theme so that students gain the benefit of a broad, interdisciplinary focus similar to that found in the experimental college decades ago.

Today, hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the United States offer learning communities.⁶ Despite their pedagogical origins, one of the driving forces behind many learning community implementations is their impact on retention. Vincent Tinto has conducted extensive research focusing on the value of learning communities for community colleges and commuter campuses.⁷ Tinto’s Student Departure Model suggests that students are more likely to stay

in school if they are socially and academically integrated into that school's culture.⁸ For community colleges and commuter colleges, that sense of engagement comes almost exclusively from classes.⁹ By creating an environment where students are engaged with each other and with their professors across several different classes, learning communities help build social support systems that some students need in order to be successful.¹⁰ However, learning communities do more than just help students stay in school. As Lardner and Malnarich remind us, while improved retention rates are a "welcome consequence of learning-community work, it has never been its aim." Instead, the goal is to provide students with an engaging and meaningful educational experience.¹¹

Context in Learning Communities

Learning communities create more meaningful learning experiences in large measure through the integration of several courses. As Meiklejohn envisioned, an integrated interdisciplinary approach to teaching allows students to achieve a deeper and richer level of understanding. Nowhere is this clearer than with information literacy. Students taking an information literacy course embedded in a learning community gain a better understanding and appreciation of their skills because they have a context in which to apply them.¹² Numerous studies have verified that student learning increases significantly when students have an immediate need to practice and apply their information literacy skills.¹³ Within a learning community, professors can collaborate when designing assignments and activities, so that information literacy training can be delivered at the exact time that students need to apply their skills in other classes. Researchers at the University of Hawaii at Manoa validated this point by conducting focus group interviews with students who had recently received information literacy instruction within a learning community. Student responses were especially positive about the opportunity to apply information literacy skills directly to their discipline specific course. The researchers found that the learning community served as a "valuable context for learning both affective and cognitive information literacy skills necessary in an undergraduate education."¹⁴ Delivering instruction at the point of need is especially important for lower-division students who may not recognize the relevance or value of information literacy skills for other course assignments without specific guidance and encouragement.¹⁵

A learning community under the theme of civic participation in American society, offered at the University of Baltimore during the fall 2008 semester, exemplifies the points above. The librarian and faculty instructors, teaching courses in information literacy, economics, and philosophy, asked first-year students to analyze the election platforms of American political parties. Students worked towards this goal throughout the semester, in all three classes, bringing together sources gathered in IDIS 110 with theories learned in economics and philosophy. Students successfully completed a large and complicated research project on the topic because of the immediate application of their information literacy skills within the context of their other learning community courses.

Similarly, in a 2009 fall semester learning community under the theme of Baltimore neighborhoods, students took courses in community studies, American history, and information literacy. Instructors asked the students to identify an economic, social, or cultural problem in a Baltimore neighborhood and apply everything they learned in the three courses to recommend a solution. To successfully complete the project, students drew upon their analysis of Baltimore community dynamics, their understanding the historical context of the chosen issue, and their mastery of the research process. Their guidance for this investigation came largely from IDIS 110. The librarian challenged students with identifying and narrowing an appropriate topic based on what they had learned in their disciplinary courses, writing a research proposal, gathering sources, and evaluating those sources according to disciplinary standards. Each student wrote and presented a single final paper, which was graded separately by each of the three community instructors.

In contrast, students in IDIS 110 have a harder time seeing the value and applicability of information literacy skills without the context provided by a learning community. A spring 2009 section of IDIS 110, which was not connected to a learning community, serves as an example of this problem. The librarian tasked students to create an annotated bibliography by finding, evaluating, and synthesizing research—a task which students in other sections of IDIS 110 completed successfully. The students in this stand-alone section struggled to select topics, gather sources, and bring them together into a coherent annotated bibliography. Without the context of other subject courses, students had more difficulty with narrowing their topics and writing annotations that showed the relationship of individual

sources to a broader theme. Despite the instructor's encouragement to choose topics related to their interests, the students had trouble recognizing the relevance of the research they were doing and applying information literacy skills to other coursework.

Instruction librarians often struggle to make students see the relevance of information literacy to their broader academic lives. Teaching the credit information literacy course alongside other courses addresses this issue by providing students with a context that makes student learning the subject matter more meaningful. Skills related to finding, evaluating, and synthesizing information within a content-based course only seem relevant to students thinking and learning about what a discipline has to offer. As Engstrom and Tinto note, in successful learning communities "the linking of basic skill courses to ... general educational courses results in deeper, more integrated learning experiences."¹⁶ Our experience reinforces the importance of teaching information literacy alongside disciplinary content.

Active Learning in Learning Communities

Learning communities offer faculty and librarians an opportunity to teach in new curricular models. Faculty members who enjoy the prospect of cooperation and coordination between multiple colleagues also tend to embrace collaborative pedagogies, like active learning, which are inherent in learning communities.¹⁷ Active learning plays a large role in creating the sense of engagement and deeper levels of student understanding that learning communities try to engender.¹⁸ A study of data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) by Zhao and Kuh confirms that "being in a learning community was strongly linked with active and collaborative learning and interaction with faculty members."¹⁹ This correlation is not surprising, since active learning has been identified as a characteristic of successful programs in both information literacy and learning communities.²⁰ Active learning has been shown in the literature to enhance students' ability to think critically, an important information literacy skill.²¹

The University of Baltimore experience serves as an example of the link between learning communities and active learning. As the University was designing its learning communities, the Office of the Provost encouraged faculty members to include active learning in new courses. The Provost sponsored a series of faculty workshops on

bringing active learning to the classroom, and encouraged faculty members to work with local experts. As a result of this institutional support, librarians teaching IDIS 110 embedded active learning techniques throughout the course. One popular classroom exercise involves creating a tour of the campus library using an online photo sharing site. Instead of simply following a librarian on a guided tour of the library, this activity engages students in the creation of their own tour that not only gets them more interested, but gives them the opportunity to demonstrate and reinforce some of what they have learned. Then, students use their information literacy skills to select, annotate, tag, and share photos of the library with classmates. For example, annotations of a photograph of the periodicals collection might contain an explanation of the difference between scholarly and popular publications. Activities like this reinforce information literacy concepts while engaging students with the material.

Learning community instructors go beyond integrating active learning activities into individual courses; they also collaborate on interdisciplinary active learning assignments. For example, students in an urban living learning community are required to identify a local, historical landmark of significance in their community studies coursework. They then use research skills being concurrently taught in IDIS 110 to identify primary and secondary resources to learn more about that landmark. Students synthesize knowledge learned in the community studies course and research gathered in IDIS 110 to create a walking tour of local landmarks—a final product based on material from multiple courses. Such active learning exercises, especially ones that create connections between learning community courses, create higher levels of understanding and engagement for students.

Faculty-Librarian Collaboration in Learning Communities

Just as students benefit from the interdisciplinary context and active learning inherent in learning communities, librarians profit greatly from the collaborative nature of learning communities. Librarians at many colleges and universities describe a disconnection with faculty and a lack of faculty interest toward instructional collaboration. Christiansen, Stompler, and Thaxton describe this as an “asymmetrical disconnection,” a separation which causes much angst and action among librarians, but of which most faculty members are unaware.²³ Outreach to faculty members is a major facet of many academic

librarians' work lives, but "in the eyes of faculty, librarians do not appear to play a central role in faculty teaching or research."²⁴ Indeed, when many faculty members think of librarians, they think of them as providers of services (research assistance and access to books and journals), but not as educators.²⁵

Embedding information literacy courses into learning communities can help to repair that disconnection and bolster the educational role of librarians. Learning communities, by their nature, depend on close collaboration between instructors. Tinto explains that "learning communities require their 'faculty,' that is the academic and student affairs professionals who staff the learning community, to collaborate on both the content and pedagogy of the linked courses... as equal partners."²⁶ This close collaboration changes the way that faculty members view the role of librarians in the classroom. In a review of the literature on librarian-faculty relations, Kotter observes that "interpersonal contact has a significant positive correlation with faculty attitudes regarding library service."²⁷ He also finds that faculty who have positive relationships with librarians will often take better advantage of the library and encourage their students to do so, leading to more support for the library across campus.²⁸ Collaboration in learning communities can also change the way that faculty members see librarians themselves. According to Tinto, faculty members in learning communities "come to 'discover' the wealth of knowledge that student affairs professionals [and librarians] bring to the discourse about teaching and learning."²⁹ This discovery leads faculty members to see librarians differently, acknowledging librarians' role as educators.

Librarians teaching in learning communities also gain a greater understanding of faculty needs. They experience teaching from the perspective of a faculty member, learning what it means to work in the classroom setting, create a syllabus, and prepare assignments for a credit course. This would be true of librarians teaching any type of credit course, but the close collaboration at the heart of learning communities enhances the process. In a study of collaboration between the faculty members in learning communities, Stevenson et al. stress that instructors within a learning community learn quite a bit from each other. The experience of "working together with other teachers in a true partnership... produces improvements in pedagogy" and "catalyzes [instructors] to learn new things" and to "grow and innovate as teachers."³⁰ This mutual learning is doubly

important for librarians, who have few other opportunities to get an in-depth look into faculty teaching and course design.

The University of Baltimore experience affirms the literature on these points. Faculty members teaching in learning communities with librarians frequently become avid library users, and they are observed enthusiastically encouraging their colleagues to use the library's materials and services. Similarly, as faculty members have seen librarians at the University of Baltimore teaching in the classroom and discussing their experiences with IDIS 110 at campus meetings, faculty members' perceptions of librarians have changed. Faculty members initiate conversations with librarians on pedagogy, classroom management, and assignment design in ways that they did not before—as equals.

Librarians' active participation in learning communities has also made them *de facto* experts in a subject of much curiosity and trepidation among University of Baltimore faculty—the new freshman population. As noted earlier, the University of Baltimore was an upper-division institution (with no freshmen or sophomores) until recently. Many of the University's faculty members are more accustomed to teaching adult learners than the new, more traditionally aged students. This makes the librarians' experiences with freshmen in IDIS 110 quite valuable.

University of Baltimore librarians use the visibility of their learning community teaching and their expertise with freshmen to bolster their outreach efforts to faculty members. The librarians had strong relationships with many faculty members prior to implementing IDIS 110, and participation in learning communities has strengthened those bonds. This effect goes beyond the librarians' teaching partners in the learning communities. Learning communities have led librarians to the center of university-wide discussions of Millennial students, pedagogy, and curriculum reform, bringing them into frequent contact with faculty members from across the university. This has translated into new and important opportunities for librarians within the university community, including representation on the Faculty Senate, more prominent roles on university-wide committees, closer personal relationships with faculty, and an increase in informal collaboration and communication across campus.

Conclusion

Librarians at the University of Baltimore were fortunate to have a

significant role within learning communities in the campus's newly designed First and Second Year Program. Teaching a for credit information literacy course within learning communities undeniably benefits students in several ways. Students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of research skills taught in IDIS 110 because they are able to apply what they learn in their other learning community courses. In addition, active learning exercises within the learning communities increase the level of engagement and help students make connections across disciplines.

Teaching within learning communities also results in new opportunities for librarians to work with other faculty and staff, and to demonstrate the value of librarians' expertise. This ability to collaborate extensively with faculty leads to a richer and more meaningful experience for students and a better and more visible role for librarians and information literacy. Wherever there are learning communities, librarians should seek to participate by including a credit-bearing information literacy course. While it requires much time and energy to plan and teach an information literacy course within a learning community, the benefits to the entire academic community make it clear that this investment is worthwhile.

Notes

1. Association of College & Research Libraries, *Characteristics of Programs of Information Literacy that Illustrate Best Practices*, June 2003, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/characteristics.cfm>.
2. Sarah Pederson, *Learning Communities and the Academic Library*. (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 2003), 3-4.
3. Julie L. Hotchkiss, Robert E. Moore and M. Melinda Pitts "Freshman Learning Communities, College Performance, and Retention," *Education Economics* 14, no. 2 (2006): 198-199; Sarah Pederson, *Learning Communities and the Academic Library*, 8-9; and Vincent Tinto "Learning Better Together: The Impact of Learning Communities on Student Success." In *Promoting Student Success in College*, 1-8. Higher Education Monograph Series 2003-1. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 2003, <http://faculty.soe.syr.edu/vtinto/Files/Learning%20Better%20Together.pdf>.
4. Erin Ablor "The Experimental College Remembering Alexander Meiklejohn." *Archive: A Journal of Undergraduate History* 5 (2002): 66-68.
5. There are several different models of "Learning Communities." See Pederson, *Learning Communities and the Academic Library* 8-9 or Tinto "Learning Better Together" for a more complete list. In this paper, we only refer to the specific model involving a group of students taking a block of classes together.
6. Faith Gabelnick, Jean MacGregor and Barbara Leigh Smith, *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990) found that several hundred colleges had experimented with some form of learning community. Barbara Leigh Smith, Jean MacGregor,

Roberta Matthews and Faith Gabelnick. *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004): 4, estimated the number of institutions of higher learning with learning communities to be over 500. The National Learning Community Directory (<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=73>) list 286 institutions with Learning Communities, but it is not comprehensive. David Jaffe, Adam C. Carle and Richard Phillips, "Intended and Unintended Consequences of First-Year Learning Communities: An Initial Investigation," *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* 20, no. 1(2008):55. point out that almost every college has some sort of First Year Experience program, many of which include a freshman learning community.

7. Elizabeth Wilmer, "The Influence of Learning Communities on the Interaction Levels of Developmental English Students," *Inquiry* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2009), <http://www.vccaedu.org/inquiry/inquiry-spring-2009/i-14-Wilmer.html>

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. American Library Association, *Final Report of the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy*, 1989, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential.cfm>.

11. Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich. "A New Era in Learning" *Change* 40, no.4 (2008): 32.

12. Trudi E. Jacobson and Beth L. Mark. "Separating Wheat from Chaff: Helping First-Year Students Become Information Savvy," *The Journal of General Education* 49, no. 4 (2000): 263.

13. P. J. Ford, N. Foxlee and W. Green, "Developing Information Literacy with First Year Oral Health Students," *European Journal of Dental Education* 13, no. 1 (2009): 49-51.

14. Vickery Kaye Lebbin, "Students Perceptions on the Long-Range Value of Information Literacy Instruction Through a Learning Community," *Research Strategies* 20, no.3 (2006): 215-216.

15. Jacobson and Mark, "Separating Wheat from Chaff," 261.

16. Catherine Engstrom and Vincent Tinto. "Pathways to Student Success: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Success of Academically Under-Prepared College Students." Final report prepared for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. January 31, 2007. p.3, 49.

17. Cathy M. Engstrom, "Curricular learning communities and unprepared students: How faculty can provide a foundation for success.," *New Directions for Teaching & Learning* 2008, no. 115 (2008): 5-19.

18. Tinto, *Learning Better Together*, 2; Engstrom and Tinto, "Pathways to Student Success: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Success of Academically Under-Prepared College Students," 46-47.

19. Chun-Mei Zhao and George D. Kuh, "Adding Value: Learning Communities and Student Engagement," *Research in Higher Education* 45, no. 2 (2004): 127.

20. Association of College & Research Libraries, *Characteristics of Programs of Information Literacy that Illustrate Best Practices*; Engstrom and Tinto, "Pathways to Student Success" 47.

21. Katherine Strober Dabbour "Applying Active Learning Methods to the Design of Library Instruction for a Freshman Seminar" *College & Research Libraries* 58 no. 4 (1997): 299-308; Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, no.

1, 1991. <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-9dig.htm>; Alison King, "From sage on the stage to guide on the side.," *College Teaching* 41, no. 1 (1993): 30.; and Nancy Youngblood and Janice M. Beitz, "Developing critical thinking with active learning strategies," *Nurse Educator* 26, no. 1 (February 2001): 39-42.

22. Robin L. Ewing and Melissa K. Prescott "Teaching Web 2.0 to Student 1.5" (presentation, LOEX annual conference, Oakbrook, IL, May 1-3, 2008) presented the idea of using Flickr to create a photographic library tour with students. The authors adapted the assignment from the presenters.

23. Lars Christiansen, Mindy Stompler, and Lyn Thaxton, "Report on Librarian-Faculty Relations from a Sociological Perspective," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 30, no. 2: 116-121.

24. *Ibid.*, 118.

25. *Ibid.*, 117.

26. Tinto, "Learning Better Together", 4-5.

27. Wade Kotter, "Bridging the Great Divide: Improving Relations Between Librarians and Classroom Faculty," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25, no. 4: 297.

28. *Ibid.*, 295.

29. Tinto, "Learning Better Together", 5.

30. Catherine B. Stevenson, Robert L. Duran, Karen A. Barret, and Guy C. Colarulli, "Fostering Faculty Collaboration in Learning Communities, a Developmental Approach," *Innovative Higher Education* 30, no. 1: 32.