Spaces in between: Team teaching in a Freshman Learning Community

Tracy Daraviras
Stella and Charles Guttman Community College,
City University of New York

Author's Contact Information

Tracy Daraviras, Associate Professor, English
Stella and Charles Guttman Community College,
City University of New York
50 West 40th Street New York, New York 10018
Phone: (646) 313-8054
Email: Tracy.daraviras@guttman.cuny.edu

Abstract:

This paper describes the benefits and challenges of teaching in the First Year Experience at an urban community college where students travel exclusively in cohorts. Students are placed in Learning Communities, are taught by a multidisciplinary team of faculty, and meet with a dedicated advisor. Instructional Teams Meetings, comprised of both faculty and staff, occur weekly and are included in faculty teaching loads. These meetings are an "in-between" place for teaching, where instructors negotiate as part of a team, reflect on their work, and receive relative feedback.

Key Words:

Learning Communities, Instructional Teams, Reflective Pedagogy.

Introduction

The inclusion of Learning Communities as part of the First Year Experience for college students is becoming increasingly popular on campuses across the country. Belonging to a small community of learners during one's freshman year has been said to ease the transition to higher education, build confidence, foster socialization, and increase retention (Anderson and McCune 2013, Blake 2015, Carney, Dolan, and Seagle 2015, Fink and Inkelas 2015, Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts 2006, Jaffee 2007, Nistor et al 2015). Learning Communities are at the heart of the First Year Experience at Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, the first community college in the City University of New York in forty years. Students are required to attend a mandatory Summer Bridge Program, followed by full time fall enrollment, comprised of 25-30 hours of coursework. So far, the approach has been working, as since opening its doors in 2012, Guttman has on average a 29% two year graduation rate, 49% three year graduation rate, and a 72% retention rate after the first year (Fast facts-Guttman, 2016). The experiences of faculty working in this successful, albeit highly structured, cohort model are unique. As classes are team taught; your class is never really your own. Instructors have to juggle the demands of instructional team members, learning outcomes, standards of instruction, and most importantly, students. These issues are addressed in weekly meetings which foster negotiation of the spaces between team teaching, learning, and personal pedagogy.

Model Houses

City Seminar, the 10.5 hours per week/3 credit anchor course for the first year experience at Guttman, is composed of Reading &Writing, Quantitative Reasoning, Critical Issue, and a supplemental instruction component. This course has three weekly hours dedicated to writing, three hours dedicated to quantitative reasoning, three hours dedicated to a critical issue, and a one and one-half hour weekly supplemental instruction session. It is team taught by three faculty members and a graduate student, called a Graduate Mentor. All entering students are block programed into the City Seminar course alongside Ethnographies of Work (a sociology class that includes a 1.5 hour weekly imbedded advisement session called LABSS-Learning About Being a Successful Student) and Statistics. These courses are taught by Instructional Teams, comprised of faculty, an advisor, called a Student Success Advocate (SSA), a Graduate Mentor, and a member of the library staff. As a whole, the Instructional Team decides upon the theme for City Seminar; past themes have included "Democracy & Civic Responsibility," "Gentrification," "Sustainability," and "Public Health." Each team member works with the same students; all are a part of the same learning community, called a "House."

Each house is comprised of three cohorts of roughly twenty-five students, and each cohort travels together; five hours per day, Monday through Friday. Students are randomly assigned to houses; so that cohorts are heterogeneously grouped, as imbedded remediation is also a part of the Guttman model. Anderson and McCune (2013) refer to Learning Communities as the "spaces of the in-between," where students "negotiate the tensions between participation in academic communities and the expectations of the communities which shaped their wider lives which involved

particular perspectives relating to class, gender, and ethnicity" (Christie et al. 2008; McCune et al.2010; cited in Anderson and McCune, 2013, p 287). The notion that we are all of the same "House," both physically and metaphorically, lends itself to a cohesive first year experience; it is a safe place, with students facing the same struggles learning and meeting the demands of academic literacy working together as a team. For the most part, students view the experience positively. They use adjectives such as "supportive, helpful, and comfortable" to describe their first year experience (Personal communications).

> Being a part of a learning community has helped me to look at college as a community of help and support instead of a place where I struggle on my own. It's always good to know that my cohort has my back, and they want to see me succeed. I like how we have grown close to each other throughout the year-we are like a family. (Personal correspondence).

From a faculty perspective, a large part of the success of the model is due to the Instructional Team Meetings, which occur weekly and are included in faculty teaching loads. These meetings are a place for pedagogy; where open discussions about teaching and learning occur in real time, thus making room for reflection and more meaningful teaching practices. Team meetings occur across disciplines and encourage the dismantling of silos; thus allowing faculty to look beyond our classrooms and disciplines. Asked about these meetings, a teammate responded, "Teaching with colleagues from different disciplines helps me think about new ways to approach the classroom. We talk about strategies we're using in class and discuss why they're working or not. Sometimes we find out we have the same challenges even though we're teaching different classes" (Personal correspondence).

If I am having an issue with a student, as perhaps is another instructor, I will mention my issue during team meeting, where an advisor is present and will proactively reach out and "check in" with that student. In addition, as an instructor, I am able to see different perspectives of each student; someone not doing well in my class may be excelling in another area, thus prompting me to take a closer look at my pedagogy in regards to that student. Team meetings warrant reflection. They are a place to "increase our awareness of power and positionality; examine reflexive boundaries; explore the assumptions we hold about our students; clarify expectations; and offer transparency" (Schwartz, 2012, p 99). Our team meeting is the place where we reflect upon our teaching, our Learning Community, and our roles in that community. "When it's going well, being part of an instructional team feels like being part of an ongoing professional development seminar. Just the act of explaining my assignments and classroom activities to colleagues helps me think them through" (Personal correspondence).

Half-way House

Jaffee (2007) argues that there are "unintended outcomes" of placing students in cohorts, such as re-creating a "mutually reinforcing high school-like environment with the associated demeanors and behaviors, characterized by excessive socializing, misconduct, disruptive behaviors, and cliques" (67). Students claim they get "too comfortable seeing the same people every day" and are "easily distracted" (Personal correspondences). In a cohort full of first year students, there are no students in the

room who can model appropriate college behavior through experience, thus students continue the patterns begun in high school, such as continuous conversations and cell phone use; which proved successful, since they all graduated. The classroom becomes a half-way house; a midpoint between secondary and postsecondary education, as old behaviors emerge in a new setting. When cliques form, those students who are outliers have a difficult time, particularly as they try to find a space for themselves. "It is frustrating having to deal with people who aren't kind or are disrespectful. People quickly form relationships and do not stop talking or fooling around; teachers then treat all of us based on how they feel about the group" (Personal correspondence).

From a teaching perspective, meeting with a class that has been traveling together twenty-five hours per week is like stepping into a movie that has already begun and trying to alter the ending. It is their stage; as their teacher, I am merely a player with a brief role. Issues, adolescent dramas, and social activity take center stage. When I walk in with my literature anthology, I am an interruption. I have had to learn to negotiate group dynamics into my teaching (not of the collaborative learning kind), as students become hyper-bonded to each other, and in turn, gain a sense of power in numbers.

"First, the belief in the inherent morality of the group combined with the illusion of unanimity gives students the impression that their position and perspective on a particular matter is unassailable and shared by all. This can pertain to a group's opinion about an assignment, reading, form of evaluation or faculty member (Barnett et al. 2000; Maher 2004; Radencich et al. 1998). When students develop strong attitudes in opposition to any of these various aspects of the course, there will be negative consequences for student-faculty relations and the assessment of the instructor's performance (Eder and Enke 1991)" (Jaffee, 2007, 67).

I have seen faculty members grapple with issues of group think, as it can quickly become an "us vs. them" scenario, as opposed to the "we're all in this together" learning community philosophy.

Meeting in the middle

Weekly team meetings are a place of negotiation, not just of time and space, but of our roles as teachers. It is an "in-between" place for shared reflection among professionals. Boyd (1990) argues that the work of the professor is considered to be driven by research, and that "teaching is often viewed as a routine function, tacked on, something almost anyone can do" (p. 23). While most new school teachers (myself included) complete a formal training program in order to achieve certification, "most university professors are responsible for the evolution of their own teaching skills and abilities" (Shim and Roth, 2009, p. 3). Having a weekly space to discuss teaching forces us to think about our practice, not only in the domains of our disciplines, but holistically, as we discuss our methodologies with colleagues in other fields who are teaching the same students.

Last year, my team was comprised entirely of Adjunct Instructors, most of who had minimal, if any, teaching experience. During meetings, they primarily wanted to discuss issues of behavior and classroom management. I wondered if this was related to the fact that we were teaching at a community college (I rarely, if ever, experienced such

conversations when I worked at a senior college) or perhaps if the notions these new instructors carried with them about our population of underprepared, first-generation students were translating into a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. Ruth (2014) speaks of the need "to distinguish educational problems from technical or managerial problems" (263). Learning is messy, and often does not occur in a silent classroom. Yet, many of us have been conditioned to equate classroom management with learning; if the students are silent, they must be listening, therefore learning. "'Self' and 'role' are enmeshed with professional identity" (Ruth, 2014, p. 261) and it became clear to me over the course of the semester that our students did not fit into the definitions these instructors had crafted of themselves as teachers, and that they believed the students were to blame for the inconsistencies in meanings.

What particularly interested me were the "teaching personas" each instructor had crafted, the assumptions they made about themselves as teachers based solely on their newly-minted status, memories of previous teachers, and notions of how a teacher in their discipline looked, spoke, and acted. The tentative conclusion I have reached after reflecting on our work is that the "teaching personas" my fellow instructors had created left little room for critical analysis of student learning. As team leader, I felt as if I had to manage two different conversations about the same classroom experiences, one about teaching in which classroom effectiveness became synonymous with classroom management and was completely separated from student learning outcomes and a second one about learning as measured solely by scores on exams. This separation between teaching and learning (the in-between space) led to me question how teaching identities are formed by members of the professoriate and how that formation is enhanced or altered when teaching in a learning community.

Teaching Identities

The teaching identities formed by members of the professoriate, the processes through which those identities are formed as a result of teaching, learning, and life experiences, and institutional and individual notions of pedagogical success are all intertwined. Pinar (1975) calls for the "juxtaposition" of the past, present and future: "What are their complex, multi-dimensional inter-relations? How is the future present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both?" (p. 12). Extending Pinar's framework, I asked my team to reflect on their own teaching identities, beliefs about those identities, and how their experiences in the classroom shaped their pedagogy, particularly when working in a learning community. I asked them to share stories of their favorite teachers. What prompted the recollection of one teacher more favorably than another? The answered varied; but connection was a constant theme.

Instructors favored the teacher they felt most connected to; be it through personality traits, subject matter, or demographics. They also tried to emulate that favored teacher in their own practices. Novice teachers practice under the guise of their role models. "You learn to teach by listening closely to your own teachers, by taking on their voices, imitating them, digesting them so that they become part of your own voice" (Parini, 1997, p. A92). Parini (1997) compares teaching to writing, stating that as a young writer, he often imitated the voices of his favorite authors. Eventually, he was able to separate himself from his mentors and develop his own personal style, in both crafts.

Similarly, in my experience as a teacher educator and instructional team leader, I have found that new and pre-service teachers come into class with preconceived notions of themselves as teachers. As Parini (1997) predicts, these images of teaching selves are most often based on characteristics of former teachers as role models. The challenge for teacher educators lies in uncovering what may become "the deliberate assumption of a mask, that, in the early years especially, may not feel authentic" (Parini, 1997, p. A92); of enabling pre-service/new faculty to shift their "teaching personas" in order to enhance their teaching practices.

Creating authentic spaces

Authenticity is the goal of our team meetings; building community through honest reflection and dialog; sharing our strengths and fears. "Reflection is the apperceptive process by which we change our minds, literally and figuratively. It is the process of turning our attention to the justification of what we know, feel, believe, and act upon (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46). We begin each meeting by stating what "went well" for us during the week, not only celebrating our 'small victories' but stating why we thought what we shared was successful. Asking why forces us to reflect; why did we choose to do what we chose to share, why did we choose to share it, and why did we deem it successful. We also discuss our challenges; what obstacles did we face, why do we find them challenging, and how can we address them. We learn from each other, just as we learn from our students.

Faculty members are not only scholars of their disciplines; they are learners in the classroom as well (Boyer 1990, Shaughnessy 1976). Reflection will reveal the reciprocity of teaching and learning in the classroom. When teachers begin to look at their expectations for teaching, how those expectations are formed (perhaps beneath the demands of scholarship), and what cultural assumptions are embedded in the processes and assumptions, a more authentic teaching professor will emerge. Being a part of the teaching team within a learning community and attending weekly team meetings, where reflective pedagogy is put into practice, has allowed us to collaboratively craft a space of authenticity, where teaching and learning become a meaningful and reciprocal endeavor for both student and teacher. It is the connection; the space in between.

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