Refining themes and developing collaborations for clusters

Adapted from Designing a Learning Community in an Hour, Evergreen State College

Developing a strong learning community requires finding some common intellectual ground that will be of interest to you, your cluster teaching partner, and your students. The most powerful learning communities have some sort of conceptual framework – perhaps in the form of a critical set of questions, an authentic problem, or key concepts – that guides their overall shape. For this reason, it can be very helpful to fully explore the issues, questions, ideas, and problems that are on your mind, on the minds of colleagues, and as best you can predict, on the minds of students, when you first start planning.

Step 1: (5-10min)

As an individual, consider what larger meaningful interdisciplinary questions, issues, or problems might be intriguing for you and your students to explore (already done!).

Note signs around the room indicating potential topics or themes for today’s conversation, which were drawn from interests indicated on the Google spreadsheet or in RSVPs. Take a seat at a table corresponding to a topic of interest. You are welcome to add an idea to the “other possibilities” list but keep in mind that for this exercise, working groups of approximately 6 people are ideal.

Select a table timekeeper and a table notetaker.

Step 2: (10-15 min)

Each participant should briefly describe (in 2-3 minutes) his or her interests (identified in Step 1).

Step 3: (5-10 min)

See if your table can come to consensus on any common question, theme, or topic that conceivably could be the organizing idea for a learning community. If participants at your table are widely divergent in terms of interests, split into subgroups or simply settle on one of the themes that everyone feels comfortable working on for this exercise.

Continued on reverse side
Step 4: (15 min)

If your group was teaching collaboratively around this theme, what might you and your students do? Brainstorm the substance of your program: generate a list of particular questions, sub-themes, concepts, authors/texts, films, field experiences, dramatic performances, or research projects that might illustrate the theme. Think of as many ideas as you can; no need to prioritize or sequence activities at this stage.

Step 5: (10 min)

**Summarize key ideas and activities** that might underlie cluster courses developed around this theme. **Make a poster** including at least some of the following: title portraying the theme, contributing disciplines or courses, major concepts and questions, goals for student learning and learning activities.

Optional Step 6: (most likely for another day!)

Once you have a focus for your learning community, you can move to more specific planning. Each participant should choose one concept/idea/outcome that it is most critical to him/her and write it down. Consider each outcome in turn, discussing it as needed so that everyone has a shared understanding of what it means. Next steps would be:

- The person who named the concept identifying the kind of support s/he needs from colleagues in designing experiences so that students learn this concept
- Colleagues brainstorm how they think they could assist in helping students learn the concept.