"Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning" - The Importance of the First-Semester Experience: Learning Communities and Clustered Classes

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
CHAPTER THREE

The Importance of the First-Semester Experience: Learning Communities and Clustered Classes

SUSAN E. DINAN
PACE UNIVERSITY

I served as Director of the Honors College at William Paterson University for ten years in a half-time capacity while I also worked as a Professor of History. Last year, I took a new position as the Dean of the Pforzheimer Honors College at Pace University. Both honors colleges have special courses for first-semester honors students that are meant to help successful high school students transition into successful college students. First-semester consolidated courses can offer honors students an experience that is challenging and rigorous and that helps them to better understand the expectations of professors and the staff of the honors college.
The goal of this essay is to highlight the strengths of the two models of linked courses at William Paterson and Pace Universities to determine what might stand out as best practices. Considerable literature exists about the importance of linked classes and learning communities in determining the success of first-year students. For example, Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University posits:

Efforts on most campuses do not go far enough to promote student retention, especially for first-year students. Add-on classes that are disconnected from one another cannot give students the cohesive environment they need to connect with faculty and other students. What are needed are learning environments, such as learning communities, that actively involve students, faculty members, and staff in shared learning activities. (5)

American universities, note John K. Fink and Karen Kuromitsu-Inkelas, have experimented with learning community models that link courses for many decades; some include a residential community, and others do not (5–6). The recent interest in learning communities emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in response to calls to reform undergraduate education (Fink and Inkelas 9). In 1984, the National Institute of Education, which is part of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, called upon American colleges and universities to “organize smaller communities of learning” and “integrate their curricula to be more inclusive, coherent, and connected” (Fink and Inkelas 10). As more students attended college, as tuition prices rose, and as state legislatures cut higher education funding while increasing attacks on the quality of education, reform movements expanded. Promoting learning communities was an important element of these reform efforts. According to Fink and Inkelas, there are currently over 500 learning communities at U.S. colleges (13), examples of a high-impact educational practice that is meant to improve the quality of student learning and more broadly the student experience.

More recently, in 2008, the Association of American Colleges and Universities released a report entitled *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They*
Matter. In it, George D. Kuh, using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and elsewhere, identified ten postsecondary educational practices found to confer substantial benefits to students in their college performance and retention. Included in the ten practices are learning communities, but also included are first-year seminars and other common intellectual experiences, which also could be construed as part of a broader definition of learning communities (Kuh 11).

Both William Paterson and Pace Universities have adopted such best practices, placing students into their first-semester courses so that considerable control can be exerted over course planning. At William Paterson University, a public regional institution in New Jersey, first-semester students are usually placed into honors clusters, three courses taught by collaborating faculty. The courses are taught back-to-back two or three days a week. The cluster is nine or ten credits that compose most of the students’ course load in the first semester. The three courses count for honors credit, and all are part of the university core curriculum. In some cases, the classes are also designated writing intensive. Therefore, the students make progress in the core and toward their honors degree by taking the cluster.

In clustered classes, the faculty choose a theme and work together to design plenary-like sessions that require meetings and regular email contact in the months before the semester begins. The goal is to attain considerable overlap between some of the topics in the three classes, enabling students to experience a thoughtful cross-disciplinary academic base in their first semester. The faculty teaching in the clusters must be dedicated to the courses, one another, and the students. Many excellent members of the faculty balk at the time the clusters take, but the experience is certainly rewarding because it allows for the exchange of ideas and pedagogical experimentation among colleagues. A core of faculty members remain committed to the clusters and find them especially rewarding because they cultivate professional growth.

Of course, some students can find the clusters quite intimidating. The clusters are deliberately rigorous, requiring considerable
time and effort. The goal is to have students develop the critical reading, thinking, and writing skills they will need to manage college-level courses. Students often refer to the clusters as “boot camp” because of their intensity. First-semester students are often unprepared for the expectations of college faculty, and they are surprised when they do poorly on assignments. Honors students can be particularly alarmed when they receive low grades. The cluster format builds in a support network for students. The students console one another in late September when they are not doing as well as they anticipated, and some will organize study groups or writing groups or work together less formally to improve their preparedness for their classes. Because of the close relationships between students and cluster faculty, conversations examine what constitutes satisfactory college-level work in more detail than might take place in other classes. More importantly, the students and faculty members know one another, so the students are less anxious about making an appointment to speak with a professor or stopping in during office hours. College students recognize their instructors as partners, and this observation is especially true of honors students who understand that they need to cultivate relationships with faculty in order to undertake independent study courses and undergraduate research projects.

One semester, a colleague suggested we have the cluster students write letters at the end of term and address them to next year’s cohort. The letters were very revealing. The students wrote about their frustration early in the semester over the level of difficulty of the cluster courses, but they also reassured the new students that they would receive considerable support from the faculty and one another. We used the letters every semester thereafter, and they helped create connections between the first-year students and the sophomores, many of whom served as mentors. This move supported our larger goal of connecting first-year students to a range of people within the university community; the more points of connection offered to the students, the more likely they will find an anchor on campus, increasing their likelihood of persistence.

Many students acknowledged the cluster as a transformative experience, one that made them more confident of their ability to
succeed at the university. Moreover, I have had juniors, seniors, and alumni tell me that the cluster was the most important academic experience they had at college. Nevertheless, clusters are complicated creations, and most universities opt for more modest first-semester programs that link courses in a less intensive way.

At Pace University, a private national university in New York, first-semester students are commonly assigned to learning communities of two honors courses. Faculty have quite a bit of flexibility in the structure of the learning community. In some learning communities, faculty collaborate on a shared topic but do not teach together. The classes often meet back-to-back, but this arrangement is not always the case. Other learning communities are jointly taught interdisciplinary courses that focus on one theme. In one case, the learning community includes two courses in the fall and two in the spring and requires residential students to live together on a specific floor in a residence hall. Clearly, the different models vary in their demands.

As with clusters, the students in the learning communities get to know members of the honors faculty well, bond closely with one another, and engage in rich collaborative learning. The practice of assigning first-semester students to connected courses helps to situate them in the institution, provides them with supportive allies, and facilitates successful performance at the college level, assets that are especially important for commuter students who are often less integrated into campus life. The honors learning communities are also academically demanding, and they teach students how to meet the expectations of college professors.

Linked courses and learning communities improve the student experience, but faculty teaching in clusters and learning communities also benefit from their collaboration, whether it be shared teaching of a class or sharing a theme. Colleagues become better connected, better able to learn from one another’s pedagogy and from experimenting with teaching methods that might not work in a more traditional classroom setting.

Cluster programs and learning communities have proven themselves a best practice in higher education, but they come at a
cost. Departments can be wary of allowing popular faculty to teach smaller honors courses instead of larger traditional sections, especially when adjunct faculty members need to be hired to cover the standard course. Pace’s learning community model did prove easier to administer, fund, and manage than the cluster program at William Patterson, where faculty members teaching in clusters earn an extra credit of salary for the additional work, making administrators reluctant to encourage program growth. Also, many faculty members in clusters feel one credit is insufficient compensation for the work entailed. Moreover, placing all the first-year students into a cluster can be hard. In the case of honors students pursuing a Bachelor of Music degree who had very rigid schedules with a reduced set of core requirements, none were in the clustered courses. Some students who entered the university with credit for numerous AP courses could not be placed into a cluster because the clusters contain fundamental core classes, resulting in some first-year students missing an opportunity that most found transformational. That these groups were excluded was not ideal.

Pace’s learning community model provides students with more options and proves easier to administer. Combining two courses instead of three and allowing faculty the option of working collaboratively or individually meant that the compositions of the learning communities could change more readily over time and more faculty could be involved in teaching linked courses. Faculty members receive additional compensation for participating in learning communities, and for full-time faculty the reward is comparable to that provided to faculty in cluster courses. Plus students in every major have the opportunity to participate in at least one learning community because they are less credit-intensive and contain a more varied array of courses. Importantly, all first-year students are part of a learning community that is often a transformative experience.

The two-course learning community model has another advantage. The large block of time required for the cluster could be challenging for students who find it difficult to remain focused for three classes in a row. Breaks occur between classes, but concentrating for a four-hour stretch can be hard. The learning communities
are more flexible, and no student is compelled to take courses that meet back-to-back. Students can also select a learning community that is more closely related to their majors or a particular topic of interest and elect to take more than one learning community set of paired courses, whereas the clusters are more limited and students take only one.

All college students would benefit from being part of learning communities in their first semester, but I would argue that they especially benefit honors students. While high-achieving students come to college having been successful high school students, often better prepared for their studies than the general student body, college is different and overwhelming to many students, even for the very bright ones. Honors students benefit from forging close relationships with members of the faculty with whom they might network and find research opportunities. Honors students are often the institution’s best candidates for prestigious scholarships, and to be strong applicants they need close relations with faculty mentors who understand how systems work on campus and beyond. Encouraging honors students to thrive during their first semester means those students can achieve some great things for themselves and for the institution.

Research indicates that learning communities work because they challenge and support students. According to Chun-Mei Zhao and George D. Kuh:

Done well, the interdisciplinary and interactive nature of learning communities introduces students to complex, diverse perspectives, as contrasted with expecting students to come up with the ‘right’ answer which is characteristic of traditional pedagogical approaches such as the large lecture class. The structure of learning communities also promotes critical thinking and contextual learning, skills that are increasingly important in an era of information overload. . . . (118)

Learning communities are important for student success, and Tinto shows that students in learning communities have better grades
and higher rates of retention than those in traditional courses. Zhao and Kuh used the NSSE to assess the reports of over 80,000 undergraduates; they found:

Participating in learning communities is uniformly and positive linked with student academic performance, engagement in educationally fruitful activities (such as academic integration, active and collaborative learning, and interaction with faculty members), gains associated with college attendance, and overall satisfaction with the college experience. (124)

At the end of the first semester, learning communities and clusters transform students by making them better readers, thinkers, and writers prepared to succeed in college. Students appreciate how different disciplines consider similar texts, ideas, and events from a range of perspectives, and they recognize that developing that skill is an important one to possess. They often connect well to a group of peers, feel at home on the college campus, and are confident in their ability to do college.

While requiring institutional investment, linked courses and learning communities create students who have higher retention and graduation rates than students who take a number of standalone courses during their first semester. Tinto writes:

institutions that provide academic, social, and personal support encourage persistence . . . [and] students are more likely to stay in schools that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students have repeatedly been shown to be independent predictors of student persistence. (5–6)

Clustered programs and other forms of learning communities grow from an investment of the institution, the faculty, and the students. They help students comprehend the expectations of college in a supportive setting and allow them to settle into the community for the long term. Learning communities are an integral part of student
success, especially in the first year, and they are an important tool for honors educators keen on embracing new learners in their honors communities.

WORKS CITED


