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# Leading and Learning in Community

Faith Gabelnick  
Pacific University

*Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we recreate ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life.*

...Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*

When faculty and administrators confront challenges of student persistence rates, cross-disciplinary learning, faculty roles and rewards, student needs for professional and civic education, they often look for “solutions” through curricular innovation. Learning communities, although no longer a “new” response, continue to be initiated as a kind of “silver bullet” because they seem to offer a complex approach that can stimulate or promote a variety of transformations on a campus. Still, learning communities continue to occupy privileged space at colleges and universities. While programs such as Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS) find wide residence and application at large state universities, other types of learning communities that involve linking or clustering courses or that provide a full immersion experience for a student for a quarter, semester or even an entire academic year are relatively few in number on any particular campus. They often reside in special programs or focus on special student populations. In some ways, therefore, the acknowledged versatility of learning communities in a wider institutional setting is compromised by their particular location on that campus. Paradoxically, as the great popularity of the term “learning community” increases, the real sustainability of vigorously constructed learning communities is being challenged. Some faculty and administrators, rushing to get on board a late 20th century initiative, almost turned the idea into a fad, making the concept and its implementation so general, that it ceased to have much potency.

Who takes the lead in establishing and sustaining learning communities is still an issue for discussion nationally. Administrators and faculty, as campus groups, are attracted in almost equal proportions to learning communities, and therefore learning communities continue to enjoy surprising support among both groups (although not necessarily both groups at the same time on the same campus). *Sustaining* learning communities, however, usually falls to the administration or faculty administrative committees, such as the curriculum committee. Often, learning communities are tied to *personalities* on campus, and when other priorities or opportunities beckon, learning communities may not claim the type of support that they once had on that campus. Leadership and leadership’s understanding of the role of learning communities as a subsystem in organizational transformation

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efforts thus become central factors in establishing and sustaining learning communities.

In this paper, we shall examine factors that influence the change process and qualities of learning that contribute to transformations on our campuses. We live in a dynamic world of change, but our ambivalence toward this world can serve as an impediment to the very programs or agenda we claim we want to accomplish. In thinking about this phenomenon of change, we offer these ideas about learning and leading in community and link them to the variable successes of learning communities, an acknowledged vehicle for change on our campuses.

### **Creating and Sustaining Change: the Challenge for Leaders**

Joseph Jaworski, in his book, *Synchronicity*, explores the many themes, patterns and synchronic events that led him to leave his profession as a trial lawyer and pursue a path as a creator and enabler of change. Founder of the American Leadership Forum, Jaworski and others designed a program which brought together a group of young and/or emerging leaders and built them into a community of learners. Using experiential learning, didactic content, professional development seminars, and collaborative projects, Jaworski and his associates purposefully structured a learning experience and environment that fostered an enduring learning community. Those who have completed the ALF program stay in contact with each other, and the “reunions” are opportunities for these lifelong learners to continue to share and learn from each other and to keep track of how they are making a difference in the world.

Jaworski never mentions the phrase “learning community,” but he writes about three important elements for creating change in organizations that are directly applicable to creating and sustaining innovations such as learning communities. He notes that three important shifts need to occur in order for us and our organization to change. These shifts are 1) *how we see the world*; 2) *how we understand relationships*, and 3) *how we make commitments*.

#### **How we see the world**

We have been taught to look for predictabilities in our world. We like to label or name the elements of our world, and we like certainty. At the same time, campuses are filled with conversations about future possibilities: how and where we will teach; who will comprise the faculty; what the university or college of the future will look like—structurally and physically; where it will be located; how our students will become engaged in a broader society. Listening or observing these dialogues we conclude that colleges and universities at one level are all about change and development and at another level are conservators of century-old practices and attitudes about the nature and content of knowledge. On the one hand, the traditional academic organizational and governance structures, such as majors or other curricular programs, tenure or even the architecture of universities carry a sense of authority and permanence akin to religious belief. Attempting to tamper with these structural “certainties” is sometimes akin to heresy and carries with it the same types of “deadly” consequences for the leader who introduces change. Yet on the other hand, academics will transform general education or create new

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interdisciplinary programs or link community service with academic courses or will invent extraordinary ways of teaching and learning using technology as a tool; they will vigorously pride themselves on their creativity in the classroom, in the research labs, in the administrative halls—so long as the perceived basic philosophy and core values of the institution remain intact. Therefore, whenever an innovation, such as learning communities, is introduced to a campus, the “buzz” is usually about how much of a change is likely to be introduced. Ironically, one of the most common ways to accomplish change is to claim that the innovation is not an innovation; that it is being accomplished at other institutions and that this innovation will have little or no impact on university resources.

Underneath the discussions about change or the processes that resist change is a deeply held common belief that the educational system as we know it is fundamentally Valuable and Good and that those who work at these institutions serve a Higher Purpose whose general task is to Make the World a Better Place. Discussions of outcomes assessment, distance learning, anytime/anywhere education often perturb academic constituencies because they appear to challenge this bedrock set of beliefs in the fundamental validity of the academic enterprise—in other words, *how we see the world*. How can you demonstrate that what you are doing is producing the results or outcomes you claim, asks the educated public? This question unsettles academics because responding to it leads us to examine open-mindedly why we do what we do. The fear is that we may discover that some of what we do has little educational impact and ought to be stopped and that some of what we do does not make a great change in the lives of students but perhaps ought to continue in a different way. While we want to believe that most of what we do has high correlates for producing the type of educated citizen we claim we want to graduate, the reality is that we are not often prepared organizationally or psychologically to validate that belief. Can there be transformational change without challenging some of these dearly held basic assumptions of academia? Probably not. Can there be transformational change without some type of “cost” to the institution? Probably not. Can leaders inaugurate change without also transforming the culture in which the change is to occur? Probably not.

Change at institutions is often driven by external factors. Because students are changing and coming to our institutions with different life experiences, we begin to adapt. As students came with superior technology skills, we moved toward using technology in our learning environments. As students came with different attributes, especially age, we began to change the times and types of class offerings to accommodate adult learners. As the market place has become the most competitive for higher education institutions, we have learned business strategies and fundraising skills. Even as we have tried to hold on to our traditional beliefs and ways of learning, the world has become more plastic, less predictable, more open-ended. And so, as we move into a more contingent, mediated yet unpredictable century, the world of learning and leading is changing. Questions and questioning, learning about learning, become a way of being. One inquiry opens up a set of new questions to think about, and possibility becomes a partner to creativity. On many campuses, change is occurring and resistance to change is occurring. Many predictions about the end of education as we know it abound in journals and newspapers as if once we make that first step to change, we leave everything else behind. Making this first shift in how we see the world is experienced by many as akin to walking off the edge

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of a cliff. It is the most extraordinary first step in any type of transformation, because the perceived world truly changes and once that happens, many possibilities appear that were never before considered.

Not surprisingly, people defend against looking at the world in different ways because they fear that they will lose a series of comforting and long-lived assumptions about how they are to live and thrive in that world. For example, if one questions the nature of the academic major, the catastrophic fear is that “someone” might eliminate the concept of the major. After eliminating the major, we would wonder about what would become of the thousands of faculty who “practice” in these majors and the hundreds of graduate programs who prepare them for this practice? A vista of unemployed academics would loom. Even framing hypothetical questions publicly can flood a campus with fear and uncertainty. And so, while there are endless discussions on campus about revisions of majors and even elimination of some majors that are not drawing students, there is very little discussion on most campuses about whether or not we should be organized around majors. Similarly, while faculty spend years working to achieve tenure and then serving on tenure review committees, for the next group of aspirants, there is relatively little open discussion about the contemporary purpose of tenure and how the professorate will and must change. Discussions about change are framed in the least disruptive ways, and when faculty votes occur, most times, tradition roars back into the room. This is the way that the academic industry preserves the status quo.

Suppose we envision a world that is more open, dynamic and interconnected. Suppose we see our universities, not as a series of small countries or territories but as a landscape of learning communities, interacting and leveraging resources and sharing a set of common values about learning, civic engagement and professional development. We might have a different budgeting process, a different way to understand faculty achievement, a different way to learn with and from our students, a different way to structure our campuses. Might we not frame this shift in terms of possibilities for enrichment and not as scenarios for loss and desperation?

Ultimately, *how we see the world* in the 21st century will have a major impact on how we teach and lead in our communities of learning. The continuing tension in higher education and American society between individuality and community lies at the heart of the matter. Future educational paradigms will be based fundamentally on openness and the ability to learn and to use that learning in a variety of work and living environments. If we hold on to a particular way of seeing the world, we keep ourselves locked inside our fears of change and miss the tremendous opportunities for generativity that lie ahead.

### **How we understand relationships**

Margaret Wheatley's book *A Simpler Way* portrays a world that is interconnected in every way possible. Her photos show the repeated patterns in nature, and her text reveals a natural world that is a dynamic, interconnected system. When one reads this book, one wonders how it could be any other way. The connections, at all levels of our consciousness, abound, and we are suffused with a sense of wholeness and well-being. Why then do we spend so much of our lives breaking down these connections and setting up barriers to communication?

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In academia, we chop up our knowledge base into schools, colleges, divisions, departments; we provide hierarchical titles and roles for faculty and staff; we distribute funds on seniority bases, or criteria of sufficiency. We give awards and endlessly find ways to separate people into “the Good, the Not-So-Good, and the Stars.” Classes that actually foster the connection between learning and living are few. Students sit in classes as anonymous participants. Faculty often do not know each other outside of their departments or divisions. Everywhere there is separation not connection. Learning communities purposefully attempt to connect some of these single courses through thematic linking of traditional studies. They often break down the barriers of 50 minute classes to engage students and faculty across a broader time span. They challenge the academic structure by encouraging learning to span several disciplines; and they can build a different way of learning together that values collaboration not competition to accomplish assignments. Leading and learning in community mirrors the natural world that Meg Wheatley describes because the world is perceived as both chaotic and orderly, variously patterned and endlessly changing, alive to possibilities and honoring connections.

Martin Buber’s classic text, *I and Thou*, speaks to the importance of developing mutuality as a way of enhancing our humanity. If we experience the world as fundamentally connected, then our views about relationships reflect this unity and connection. Our understanding of relationships then moves away from power and competition towards collaboration and vulnerability. As learners, we begin to understand that we do not /cannot learn alone. If we are in the role of teacher, we begin to see that we can work with our students in ways other than as an authority figure. We begin to act like a mentor and coach; we facilitate our students’ learning; we begin to speak to our own areas of ignorance and then we begin to see ourselves as learners, too. If we are in the role of students, we begin to understand that knowledge is not finite, that information can be found in many places, and that learning with other students and other faculty does not have to produce a grade. Relationship becomes the basis for learning, and we understand that unless we establish strong relationships, our learning will be compromised.

An important part of this shift in the nature of relationship involves a capacity to experience, tolerate and speak to disappointment and loss. The end of an academic term can be experienced as the possible end of a special set of relationships, not simply the end of a class where a grade is given. If we do not provide a space for reflection and grieving, we thereby try to protect ourselves from acknowledging loss in order to maintain a more distanced, utilitarian view of our education. Grieving and reflection on one’s experiences thus become an important element of growing and changing and therefore need to be a part of a learning community’s culture. It is our flight from death, our wish not to grieve that fundamentally blocks change. Change must involve loss. We ask our students to change every semester, every class. We ask them to learn in different ways regardless of their preferred learning style and yet subtly, pervasively, we try to keep our world predictable and orderly.

Truly confronting how we develop and sustain relationships is very difficult because of the natural tendency to avoid the pain of loss, and this is one of the fundamental reasons why institutional change is so difficult. Human beings are changing every moment; their lives grow and contract; possibilities at 20 years old may be past accomplishments or missed opportunities at age 50. Students are the

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main drivers of change: they come to an educational institution in order to change. Faculty, especially tenured faculty, have made a commitment to their institution and to a set of relationships that form the academic community. Administrators, especially senior administrators, are often viewed as transients by the other two constituents. Nationally we know that administrators are more mobile than faculty—and probably students, who, by and large, tend to attend schools within a 500 mile radius of their homes. Change implies mobility, and when the most mobile group tries to implement change, the campus can react to these initiatives as an administrative fad and dismiss them. Even though many learning communities are started by faculty, the institutional commitment is interpersonal and relational. When the supportive administrator leaves, the learning community is at risk. Taking up innovations thus implies their loss unless the assurances for institutionalization are great. A campus community comprised of changing human beings embraces any change very carefully because the university must continue beyond these innovations and the custodians of the institution, the faculty, feel a deep obligation and responsibility to preserve their idea and ideal of an traditional community of scholars.

Once we make a shift in how we see the world, however, some of these resistances also shift. Now we see that the world is contingent upon the relationships in that world, and if we work differently with our colleagues and students, our expectations of the kinds of relationships that are possible also change. This is clearly the case with learning communities: students and faculty report deeper learning, more complex relationships when the roles, the relationships, shift. Because the learning is contingent and connected, the possibilities for teaching also enlarge; the opportunities to work together expand; the assignments are more imaginative; and the baselines for expectations for teaching and for learning rise. Those who become members of a learning community are able to establish deeper relationships with one another and approach learning from multiples perspectives. If a shift truly occurs, if faculty and students complexly understand what learning in community means, then they will use that knowledge to institute other changes and they will change themselves.

### **How we make commitments**

In these dynamic times, the idea and experience of commitment is a vital but fleeting concept. We can remember a time barely 10 years ago when workers or potential workers (college students, for example) might have had the expectation that their careers would be fairly stable and that the employer would continue to have an investment in the stability of its work force. In the 21st century, this assumption of continuance is disappearing. Neither the employer nor the employee bring to work an expectation of loyalty or commitment to an organization. Rather the commitment has been transferred to the individual and the particular knowledge base any individual can bring to a particular problem at a particular moment. This condition is gradually impacting higher education as students and employers value less and less a degree from any one institution. In a buyer's market, colleges and universities become one of many sources of education and training. And in a buyer's market, what is being sold is knowledge. The knowledge is being packaged in a variety of forms and this market segmentation is exploding. Technology makes it

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possible for students all over the world to construct their own educational plans and to use a variety of educational providers to fulfill those plans. Institutions of higher education are simply one resource to use in building one's knowledge base. Even the concept and need for a college degree is challenged.

One could ask why learning communities continue to flourish when "community" as we have experienced it is already being transformed. What does commitment look like in a transformational environment, and what can endure when the assumptions about how we are leading our lives is shifting so dramatically?

As has been noted, when learning communities are established, they are often seen as ways to address certain problems, as "silver bullets" aimed at general university concerns such as retention, cross-disciplinary studies or even faculty development and invigoration. Their creation is often established at the edge of the curriculum, not embedded in the heart of the academic enterprise, and their number, except for FIG's or formal living/learning communities like residential colleges at state universities, is small. In other words, the institutional commitment is conditional and local and usually connected to a particular group of faculty or administrators. Students join one or possibly two learning communities while attending a particular institution.

Thinking about a shift in *how* we make commitments means we must be purposeful in thinking about *why* we want to create and sustain learning communities. A commitment to establishing learning communities must reside in a whole systems view of an institution and a holistic plan for what learning communities represent. For example, establishing a learning community does not often mean that the university is committed to cross-disciplinary education although it ought to mean just that. It means, at minimal, that the university is providing a space for some cross-disciplinary education to occur for some students and faculty. Placing learning communities among special populations or confining their existence to special programs does not signify that the institution changes its other programs in relation to these populations, although it ought to mean that. Because true institutional change is not embedded in the creation of learning communities, learning communities like many other so-called innovations, last for a period of time and then yield to the next iteration of campus change. Areas of campus such as the registrar's office, the admissions office, the alumni office have to think about their roles in a different way if learning communities are to flourish. Curriculum committees, tenure and promotion committees, hiring committees have to rethink the types of individuals who can work in a learning community environment. Enduring change is not cosmetic; it is systemic; and leading such change requires patience and a view of an institution as a complex, interrelated entity.

When learning communities are created out of a shift in how we see the world and how we establish relationships, then institutional commitment is necessary, not conditional. Also, the work within the learning communities shifts from being a kind of experiment or temporary innovation to being a vigorous engagement with important curricular and value-based assumptions. Learning communities are then not seen as vehicles for solving particular problems but as ways to foster constructivist thinking, collaborative engagement, team work and a habit of connected relatedness. In an environment of commitment, trust flourishes and connection to one another and perhaps to the institution deepens. When people rely



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on one another, they work in community. They can argue and test out new ideas; they can validate evidence; and they can move into uncertain territory. The flow of meaning that can be created through learning communities links to other aspects of the curriculum and to others in the community, on campus and off campus.

Learning communities that are created out of an institutional commitment to learning then have meaning for many. Opportunities to reflect on discoveries and experiences are not contained within the walls of the learning community but find voice and influence among those not formally engaged in the learning community. Those discoveries become linked to the institutional plans and elaborated in other examples of shifts in how one sees the world, how one establishes and continues relationships and how one makes and continues commitments. When the experience and dynamism of learning communities are encapsulated, the institution loses an extraordinary opportunity to expand the learning for others.

The challenge for leaders, those who enable learning communities to exist and those who teach and learn in learning communities, is to urge and maintain a dynamic whole systems perspective. This will demand a rapidly cascading change in how we see the world. Leaders do not always bring this point of view because they do not necessarily see themselves as part of a learning community in a very broad sense. Leaders live in a world that asks for concrete solutions to enormously complex problems and their focus, understandably, is to drive towards addressing those problems. Shifting that more directed, goal-driven stance to a more open, process-oriented, flexible and inclusive posture is difficult, but is exactly the challenge posed by teaching and learning in a learning community. The kinds of transformational learning that learning communities can foster replicates in microcosm the macrocosmic learning and leading that also must occur in order to sustain, in a deep way, the learning community experience.

### ***Learning as a way of being***

When we consider the dramatic changes in the students who are studying at colleges and universities and the pressure those institutions feel to address the needs of these “customers,” the challenge to higher education seems enormous and even depressing. Yet futurists like Peter Schwartz and Peter Leyden, writing recently in *Wired* magazine note that the advent of the Information Age can be seen as an enormous positive opportunity for learning and for our society as a whole. They write: “We are watching the beginnings of a global economic boom on a scale never experienced before. We have entered a period of sustained growth that could eventually double that world’s economy every dozen years and bring increasing prosperity for—quite literally—billions of people on the planet. . . . these two mega-trends—fundamental technological change and a new ethos of openness—will transform our world into the beginnings of a global civilization, a new civilization of civilizations, that will blossom through the coming century.” (“The Long Boom,” p. 116).

What they and other futurists predict is that a shift in how we see the world, moving from an expectation of predictability and formality to an engagement with possibility and a continuous construction and re-construction of our world and its opportunities will allow us to dream and play, learn and work, in ways we cannot yet have imagined. This “letting go,” however, is subtle and scary, and yet it is

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precisely what we try to effect in many of our learning communities.

Peter Vaill's recent book, *Learning as a Way of Being*, speaks to this shift in how we must navigate. In his previous work, he noted that leaders and learners are now operating continuously in a world of "permanent white water." What this means is that we cannot expect that once we manage one crisis or one period of turbulence, we can expect peaceful times. In fact, what is expected is that our world will be and is constructed of a series of turbulences and that these turbulences are the norm. Thus, when we exhort faculty and students to learn about critical thinking and complex decision-making and to develop better verbal and written competencies, we are seeing that these skills will be needed to work in a more plastic, less predictable environment.

Vaill sees this new world as a wonderful opportunity for transforming the ways we learn. Like others we have noted, he speaks to the fact that learning must be connected to how one understands oneself in one's work role and in one's private life. We are not isolated, separate entities, and, in fact, our ways of living are becoming intricately connected with our ways of working. How we understand the world and how we approach learning are inextricably connected to who we are internally. Thus his latest book, *Learning as a Way of Being*, systematically compares more traditional, academic learning approaches to a more expanded, experientially based stance. This stance speaks directly to the ways learning communities can be constructed in order for them to endure and contribute to institutional transformation.

Each of the types of learning listed below actively engages and empowers the learner. When one engages in these types of learning, one does not rely on the teacher but rather creates a partnership with a more experienced learner. This shift from a teaching to a learning paradigm means that students and their teachers each have much at stake in the learning enterprise. They must work in the present to explore, to connect their minds with their bodies, to assess critically the outcomes of their discourse and their experimentation. When one engages in these types of active learning, the traditional accoutrements of faculty life begin to fall away. If learners are self-directed, then what is the role of grading, we might ask. If we connect explicitly our feelings with learning, then we become more vulnerable and thus more able to admit our mistakes. Learning truly becomes an active noun because it involves exploration, discovery, wrong turns, and stunning mistakes.

Learning communities use the types of learning listed below:

- |                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <i>Self-directed learning</i> | Non-prescribed learning: no road maps; invention, integrated with one's values, skills, life experience   |
| <i>Creative learning</i>      | Inventive learning: divergent thinking, exploration, discovery  |
| <i>Expressive learning</i>    | Learning in the here-and now: connecting feelings with discovery and expressing it in the external world. |
| <i>Feeling learning</i>       | Vulnerable learning: making mistakes, trying out, acknowledging limits of competence                      |

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<i>On-Line learning</i>	De-institutionalized learning: on-the-job learning
<i>Continual learning</i>	Lifelong learning: continuation of learning themes; feeling like a beginner again and again, testing oneself and one's knowledge base.
<i>Reflexive learning</i>	Learning about learning: paying attention to the learning process; folding back reflections into lifelong learning themes.

When we link explicitly learning and living, the shifts in perspective become apparent and almost commonplace. The role of the learner in a learning community is taken up by the student and the faculty and the internal and external themes of their relationships, their life long experiences, develop into what Senge calls a "Purpose Story." How each learning community unravels and learns its story then becomes a launching point for re-integration into the larger system—the college and the community. Vigorous learning communities contain many stories: students speak to the joy of cross-disciplinary study, to the freedom of dialogue among themselves and their teachers; the faculty tell of being rejuvenated, of working with their colleagues in a new, more meaningful way. Telling these stories becomes an active way of assessing the success of the learning communities and, at the same time, discovering new ways of understanding how people are learning. Telling the stories shows that we are a healthy organization; that we are on a journey which is both general and specific, purposeful and theoretical. Stories reveal how we see the world, how we understand relationships, how we make commitments. They form the core of institutional identity—and these stories are changing...away from the heroic teacher who is embedded with the wisdom of the ages toward a more democratic, participatory community.

Senge writes: "Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human." When learning communities engage in "real learning," they involve human beings in a deep way in the process of living. Thus learning communities are alive, dynamic arenas to pursue one's being. Leaders, whether they be administrators, faculty or even students, cannot create a learning community out of context and cannot keep it away from the changing context after it has been established. When we lead and learn in community, we discover our roles over time; we purposefully commit to shared values and goals; and we acknowledge a diversity of viewpoints, perspectives and backgrounds. When people choose to become members of a learning community—in all their various roles— they need to make a commitment to examine and reexamine what membership in this community entails. Living in a world of permanent white water, in a world where the definitions of what it means to learn are changing, those who claim to undertake change must examine how that change affects every aspect of the system in which they work. Far from heading over a cliff, this type of work brings life to an organization and connects it with the enduring spirit of living and learning in community.

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