

Linking Learning and Leaving: Exploring the Role of the College Classroom in Student Departure *

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The one experience that all college students share in common is that of the classroom. Indeed, for many students who commute to college, it may be the only educational experience they have in common, the only place where they meet each other and the faculty. That being the case, it is striking that the experience of the classroom has been largely absent from studies of student persistence and virtually ignored in theories of student departure (e.g. Bean, 1983, Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler, 1992; and Tinto, 1987, 1993).

This chapter represents a first attempt to address this shortcoming. Specifically it seeks to better understand how student experience of the classroom and persistence are linked and how current theories of student departure might be changed to include the classroom. It argues that we must reconstruct our theoretical models to include not only the classroom, but also the faculty and, in turn, pedagogy in our discussions of student persistence.

Classrooms as Communities

The beginning point of our conversation lies in the recognition that it is possible to speak of college classrooms as smaller communities that are located at the very heart of the broader academic and social communities of the college. For most students, classrooms serve as smaller academic and social meeting places or crossroads that intersect the diverse faculty and student communities that mark the college generally. Membership in the community of the classroom can provide important linkages to membership in communities external to the classroom. For new students in particular, engagement in the community of the classroom can become a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic

and social communities of the college generally. Thus the often overheard observation that if students, especially those who commute, do not get engaged in the classroom, they are unlikely to get engaged beyond the classroom.

At this point the informed observer might argue that there has been little research to support this claim. Indeed she might note that measures of academic integration have not always been found to be associated with persistence. But issues of specification aside - that is of the ways we have measured or perhaps mis-measured the concept academic integration - it is very likely the case that what we have measured reflects the fact that most classrooms are not involving and therefore not a factor in student persistence. This does not mean that they *could not* play a role in persistence, only that they have typically *not yet* played that role.

Reconstructing the Classroom

The fact is that most college classrooms, especially those in the first year of college, are not engaging. The unfortunate fact is that classroom participation is still very much a "spectator sport" in which faculty talk dominates (Fischer & Grant, 1983; Fassinger, 1995) and where there are few active student participants (Smith, 1983; Karp & Yoels, 1976; Nunn, 1996). Most students continue to experience college as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others and engage in solo performance and demonstration in what remains largely a show-and-tell learning environment. At the same time, students keep taking courses as detached, individual units. One course is separated from another in both content and peer group, one set of understandings unrelated in any intentional fashion to what is learned in other courses. Though there are majors, there is little academic or social coherence to student learning. It is little wonder then that students seem so uninvolved. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

Fortunately, there is change. Partly in response to a series of reports in the 1980's by the National Institute of Education (1984), the Association of American Colleges (1985), and studies in the late 1980's and early 1990's by scholars such as Astin (1987),

Boyer (1987), and Tinto (1987), a growing number of institutions have begun to reform educational practice and restructure classrooms to more actively involve students in learning. One such effort that is gaining increased attention is that encompassed by learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them. Unlike many programs which exist at the periphery of the academic experiences of students, learning communities seek to restructure the very classrooms in which students find themselves and alter the way students experience both the curriculum and learning within those classrooms.ⁱ

In their most basic form learning communities are a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together. The same students register for two or more courses, forming a sort of study team. In some cases, typically referred to as “linked courses,” students will enroll together in two courses, most typically a course in writing or math with a course in selected literature or, in the case of math, a course in science. In the larger universities such as the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, students in a learning community may attend two or more lecture classes with 200-300 other students but stay together for a smaller discussion section (Freshman Interest Group) led by a graduate student or upperclassman. In other cases, such as the Federated Learning Communities of LaGuardia Community College, students take three or more courses in which they are the only members of the class. In this way, they form a “community of learners” whose members are all studying the same material. In Seattle Central Community College however, students in the Coordinated Studies Program take all their courses together in one block of time so that the community meets two or three times a week for four to six hours at a time.

Typically, learning communities are organized around a central theme which links the courses -- say, “Body and Mind” in which required courses in human biology, psychology, and sociology are linked in pursuit of a singular piece of knowledge: how and why humans behave as they do. The point of doing so is to ensure that the sharing of a curriculum provides students with a coherent interdisciplinary experience that promotes a deeper type of learning than is possible in stand alone courses.

The themes, of course, can vary as do the audiences to whom the learning community is directed. At New York's LaGuardia Community College, for instance, learning communities are designed for students studying for a career in business (the Enterprise Center). At Cerritos College in California, they are also for students in science and engineering. At Shoreline Community College in Washington, they are directed toward the needs of "remedial" students. In other institutions, such as Iowa State University, learning communities serve the needs of new students. In those cases, learning communities frequently link the shared courses to a freshman seminar (e.g. University of Washington, Frostburg State University).

Though they may vary in structure and content, nearly all learning communities have three things in common. One is *shared knowledge*. By requiring students to take courses together and organizing those courses around a theme, learning communities seek to construct a shared, coherent curricular experience that is not just an unconnected array of courses in, say, composition, calculus, history, Spanish, and geology. In doing so, they seek to promote higher levels of cognitive complexity that cannot easily be obtained through participation in unrelated courses. The second is *shared knowing*. Learning communities enroll the same students in several classes so they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately and in a way that is part and parcel of their academic experience. By asking students to construct knowledge together, learning communities seek to involve students both socially and intellectually in ways that promote cognitive development as well as an appreciation for the many ways in which one's own knowing is enhanced when other voices are part of that learning experience. The third is *shared responsibility*. Learning communities ask students to become responsible to each other in the process of trying to know. They participate in collaborative groups which require students to be mutually dependent on one another so that the learning of the group does not advance without each member doing her or his part.ⁱⁱ

Recent research by this author on several first year learning community programs reveals that such restructuring can have a significant impact on student academic and social involvements and in turn on student persistence (Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo, 1993). The

results of this multi-year study which pertain to our current conversation can be summarized under three headings each of which reveals something about the underlying forces which link classroom experiences to persistence. These are Building Supportive Peer Groups, Shared Learning-Bridging the Academic Social Divide, and Increased Involvement, Learning, and Persistence.

Building Supportive Peer Groups

Participation in a first-year learning community enabled students to develop a network of supportive peers that helped students make the transition to college and integrate them into a community of peers. This community of peers, formed in their learning communities, provided students with a small, knowable group of fellow students with whom early friendships were formed. Some friendships lasted; others faded. But in all cases students saw those associations as an important and valued part of their first-year experience.

Meeting people and making friends during the first-year of college is a major preoccupation of student life, especially among younger students who have yet to establish families or acquire significant work obligations. While making friends may be a relatively easy task in smaller, more intimate residential colleges, it is far more difficult in commuter institutions and in very large institutions. It is not surprising then that so many students talked of their learning community as a place to meet new people and make new friendship, a way to make the remote college a more knowable place. One student in the program put it this way:

“That's why the cluster is really great, because right now I've made a lot of friends. In another school if I had different classmates, it would have been harder. I've made a lot of friends that I didn't know before, so that's good.”

Not surprisingly, many students saw participation in the learning community as an important part of being able to manage the many struggles they faced in getting to and participating in class (see Russo, 1995). Through seminars, group projects, class

discussions, and self-evaluation reports, the learning communities contributed not only to a high level of student participation in learning, but also to the development of supportive peer groups that helped students balance the many struggles they faced in attending college. The groups, which developed within the classroom, extended beyond it providing support which students saw as influencing their desire to continue college despite the many challenges they faced. One student, looking back on her experience in the prior Fall's learning community, put it this way:

"In the cluster we knew each other, we were friends, we discussed and studied everything from all the classes. We knew things very, very well because we discussed it all so much. We had a discussion about everything. Now it's more difficult because there are different people in each class. There's not so much - oh, I don't know how to say it. It's not so much togetherness. In the cluster if we needed help or if we had questions, we could help each other.

Shared Learning: Bridging the Academic-Social Divide

The shared learning experience of learning communities did more than simply cement new friendships; it served to bridge the academic-social divide that typically plagues student life. Often, social and academic concerns compete; causing students to feel torn between the two worlds so that students have to choose one over the other. Learning communities helped students draw these two worlds together.

The development of these interpersonal relationships was important because it was against this backdrop of a supportive network of peers that academic engagement arose. It did so both inside and outside the classroom. Groups that formed within the classroom often extended beyond the classroom in informal meetings and study groups. Once these were in operation, students were able to turn towards the material presented in class and their assignments. A common perception among program students was captured in the following comment:

" You know, the more I talk to other people about our class stuff, the homework, the tests, the more I'm actually learning... and the more I learn not only about other people but also about the subject because my brain is getting more, because I'm

getting more involved with the students. I'm getting more involved with the class even after class."

In this and other ways, participation in a shared learning experience enabled new college students to bridge the academic-social divide that typically confronts students in these settings. It allowed them to meet two needs, social and academic, without having to sacrifice one in order to meet the other. But more than simply allowing the social and academic worlds to exist side-by-side, the learning community provided a vehicle for each to enhance the other. Students spoke of a learning experience that was different and richer than that with which they were acquainted. As one student noted "not only do we learn more, we learn better."

Increased Involvement, Effort, Learning, and Persistence

It is hardly surprising then that students in the learning communities had higher peer and learning activity scores (as measured on the College Student Experience Questionnaire). Their engagement with their peers in and outside the classroom served to involve them more fully in the academic matters of the classroom. They spent more time with their peers and more time with their peers on class matters. As a result, they spent more time studying. As one student noted, they "spent more time in class even after class." Equally important, learning community students saw their peers and faculty as more supportive of their needs, their classroom experience as more involving, and themselves as having gained more from participation in the learning community.ⁱⁱⁱ

The result of such engagement and perceptions was, in each case, heightened Quality of Student Effort, and increased persistence to the following fall term. In the case of Seattle Central Community College, for instance, students in their learning community program scored higher on each factor that comprises the Quality of Student Effort scales (see Pace, 1984) and continued their studies into the next fall at a rate of 72.3 percent as compared to 51.4 percent for comparison group students. And all because of a relatively simple restructuring of the educational environment of the classroom designed to actively

engage students in learning in a way which required them to share knowledge and knowing.

It should be noted that the impact of the learning communities on persistence remained even after taking account of a variety of individual and contextual data (Tinto, 1997). That is to say that the impact of altered educational environments on student persistence was not simply the reflection of the students who participate in those environments. In this regard, it is noteworthy that findings were the same regardless of when students enrolled in the learning community classes. Students who enrolled late in the learning community, that is to say for whom it was the only available option - indeed some were not aware of the program prior to enrolling - showed similar outcomes and expressed similar views of their experience. Clearly, one could not dismiss the outcome of program participation as merely the result of the program having allowed particular types of student to self-select themselves into a program that permitted them to engage in behaviors they would have otherwise carried out elsewhere.

Linking Learning and Leaving: Classrooms as Educational Communities

These results yield important insights into the ways in which classroom experience shapes student persistence and by extension how current theories of student persistence might be modified to better reflect the educational character of college life. Specifically, it suggests important relationships, on one hand, between the educational activity structure of the classroom, student involvement, and the quality of student effort, and, on the other, between quality of student effort, learning, and persistence.

Student social involvement in the educational life of the college, in this instance via the educational activity structure of the curriculum and classroom, provides a mechanism through which both academic and social involvement arises and student effort is engaged. The more students are involved, academically and socially, in shared learning experiences which link them as learners with their peers, the more likely they are to become more more involved in their own learning and invest the time and energy needed to learn (Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo, 1993). The social affiliations that those activities provide serves as a

vehicle through which academic involvement is engaged. Both lead to enhanced quality of effort. Students put more effort into that educational activity that enables them to make friends and learn at the same time. That increased effort leads to enhanced learning in ways which heighten persistence (Endo and Harpel, 1982; Tinto and Froh, 1992).

It does not follow, however, that the linkage between involvement and learning on one hand, and between learning and persistence, on the other, is simple or symmetrical. As to the impact of involvement upon learning, one has to ask about the specific nature of student involvement. Not all involvements lead to learning in the same fashion. Much depends on the degree to which student involvement is a meaningful and valued part of the classroom experience. Having a voice without being heard is often worse than having no voice at all. As to the linkage between learning and persistence, though learning is in general positively associated with persistence, it is not the case that learning guarantees persistence or that failure to learn, beyond the obvious case of academic failure ensures departure. While it is the case for most, if not all, institutions that academic involvement matters more than social involvement, it is also true that both social and academic involvement influence persistence. For some students, even high levels of academic involvement and its consequent learning may not be enough to offset the effect of social isolation. For others, sufficient social integration or involvement may counterbalance the absence of academic involvement. They stay because of the friendships they have developed. Of course, the absence of any academic involvement typically leads to academic failure and thus forced departure.

Classrooms as Learning Communities

It is possible to speak then of classrooms as smaller communities of learning which are located at the very heart of the broader academic community of the college. Classrooms serve as smaller academic and social meeting places or crossroads that intersect the diverse faculty and student communities that mark the college generally. As students and faculty go about their daily lives, classrooms are the one place they typically meet. By extension, membership in the community of the classroom

provides important linkages to membership in communities external to the classroom. For new students in particular, engagement in the community of the classroom becomes a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally (Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo, 1993).

Colleges can then be seen as consisting not merely of multiple communities, but of overlapping and sometimes nested academic and social communities, each influencing the other in important ways. By extension, the broader process of academic and social integration (involvement) can be understood as *emerging from* student involvement with faculty and student peers in the communities of the classrooms. It is a complex multidimensional process which links classroom engagement with faculty and student peers to subsequent involvement in the larger academic and social communities of the college.

Bringing the Faculty Back Into Theories of Student Persistence

This view of the role of classrooms in student academic and social involvement underlines the importance of faculty to student persistence (see Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980, 1991). This is the case not only because contact with the faculty inside and outside the classroom serves to directly shape learning and persistence, but also because their actions, framed by pedagogical assumptions and teaching skills, shape the nature of classroom communities and influence the degree and manner in which students become involved in learning in and beyond those communities. Faculty do matter and not only because of their out-of-classroom activities.

This is what Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (1998) find in their recent study of the impact of active learning on student persistence. In a study of 718 first-time, full-time students at a highly selective private research university, they found that active learning experiences had positive direct and indirect effects on social integration, and, in turn, on subsequent institutional commitment and intent to return. As in research on learning communities, involvement in learning becomes a vehicle through which subsequent involvement or integration arises.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that both Fassinger (1995) and Nunn (1996) find that classroom traits, specifically the existence of a supportive atmosphere for student learning, is as important to student participation and learning as are student and faculty traits. The implication is clear, namely that much of the impact of faculty upon student involvement and persistence is likely to arise indirectly via their impact upon the ethos and educational activity structure of the classroom and in turn on the ways in which those classroom attributes shape students' engagement with each other, as well as with the faculty, in learning beyond the classroom.

It can therefore be argued that at least part of the often observed relationship between persistence and student-faculty contact outside the classroom is itself a reflection of faculty actions. Among other things, it is likely to mirror how faculty actions shape student experiences within the classroom and in turn student willingness to seek out faculty beyond the classroom. In effect, faculty help create student-faculty contact. This is precisely what we observed in our study of learning communities. Students in learning communities were not only more involved in learning within the classroom, they were also more likely to seek out and make contact with faculty outside the classroom. Therefore while it is undoubtedly true that many students find "validation" outside the classroom (Rendon, 1994), it is also likely that "validation" is at least partially the result of events within the classroom.

Constructing Seamless Learning Environments

Kuh, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (1991) have spoken eloquently of the need to construct "seamless learning environments" that bridge the gap between classroom and out-of-classroom experience. They argue that colleges must build learning environments outside the classroom which merge seamlessly with those of the classroom. In this regard, Kuh (1993, 1995) has shown that out-of-class experiences are important to student learning and development.

In this chapter we have argued here that the likelihood that students will take advantage of such environments is, for most students, a reflection of their experiences within the classroom. This is certainly the case for students who commute to college, in particular those who have numerous obligations outside college. In policy terms, it follows that if we are serious about building "seamless learning environments" we must begin by building those environments from the classroom out.

Closing Observations

What does all this mean for our existing models of student persistence? First it means that we need to remind ourselves that our current two-dimensional graphic representations of interaction which depict social and academic systems of colleges as two separate boxes masks the fuller relationship between these two spheres of activity. A more accurate representation would have academic and social systems appear as two nested spheres where the academic occurs *within* the broader social system that pervades the campus. Such a depiction would more accurately capture the ways, noted here, in which social and academic life are interwoven and the ways in which social communities *emerge* out of academic activities that take place within the more limited academic sphere of the classroom, a sphere of activities which is necessarily also social in character as well.

As a methodological aside, this research reminds us that we would be well served by supplementing our use of path analysis to study the process of persistence with network analysis and/or social mapping of student interaction patterns. These will better illuminate the complexity of student involvements and the linkages that arise over time between classroom and out-of-class experiences. More importantly, they will shed important light on how interactions across the academic and social geography of a campus shape the educational opportunity structure of campus life and in turn both student learning and persistence.^{iv}

The fact is that we have too long overlooked the essentially educational, developmental, character of persistence as it occurs in most college settings. There is

a rich line of inquiry of the linkage between learning and persistence that has yet to be pursued. Here is where we need to invest our time and energies, in a fuller exploration of the complex ways in which the experience of the classroom comes to shape both student learning and persistence. Among other things, we need to pursue Braxton's (1995) lead and ask about the role of faculty teaching in persistence and more carefully consider the notion, as we have here, that choices of curriculum structure (e.g. learning communities) and pedagogy invariably shape both learning and persistence on campus (e.g. cooperative teaching). They do so because they serve to alter both the degree to which and manner in which students become involved in both the academic and social life of the institution. As we do so, we will discover what many educators have been trying to tell us for years, namely that, at its core, college is an educational experience and that conversations about persistence that ignore important questions of educational practice are conversations that are at best shallow.

Footnotes

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- i. Learning communities are not new. In the United States, they date back to the early work of the philosopher and educational theorist Alexander Meiklejohn and to the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin which he helped established in 1927 (Meiklejohn, 1932). However, like Joseph Tussman's experiment at the University of California at Berkeley (1969), early learning communities were limited in scope and in the students they served. The current movement, led over the past twelve years by the Washington Center at The Evergreen State College, is different not only because it involves a greater range of institutions public and private, two and four-year, but also because it is being adapted to the learning needs of a broad range of students.
- ii. As a pedagogical strategy, learning communities are being adapted to the needs of a variety of students. Learning communities are designed for students studying for a career in business at New York's LaGuardia Community College, for engineering and science majors at the University of Texas - El Paso, and for students in law and journalism at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. At California State University at Los Angeles, the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, and Gateway Community College in the Maricopa Community College District, learning communities have been adapted to the needs of students requiring developmental education assistance. At larger universities, such as Illinois State University, the University of Washington, the University of Oregon, and Arizona State University, they have been employed to address the needs of beginning students. In such cases,
- iii. The scores for learning community students on each of the subscales that comprise the Quality of Student Effort Scale in the CSEQ were significantly higher than those for comparison group students. This was particularly noticeable at Seattle Central Community College where faculty also employed cooperative teaching methods in their classes. So too were their scores on the multi-item scale used to measure student's sense of their own intellectual gain.
- iv. Much like the concept "opportunity structure" that sociologists have employed to study the dynamic aspects of social stratification, the term "educational opportunity structure" can be seen as describing the interconnected chains of relationships and interactions out of which both personal affiliations are wrought and contextual learning arise.

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