Facilitating Dialogue Across Disciplines: A Thematic Learning Community at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College

Abstract

The reputation of Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, a campus of Memorial University of Newfoundland, is a narrative in which undergraduate student teaching is at the heart of the institution’s mandate. Central to this narrative is the premise that a lower student/faculty ratio enhances the learning environment as it increases the potential for interaction between the two. However, a growing awareness in post-secondary education is the necessity of students interacting with each other as an important element in facilitating intellectual growth and constructing a sense of belonging within the academy. At Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, a psychology and a French professor piloted a thematic learning community project in the fall of 2006 bringing together 16 students registered in introductory French and psychology courses. These students attended both classes together and met once a week for an additional 50-minute session. The premise of the additional session, as well as the project itself, was to enable students to appreciate the overarching themes connecting two seemingly unrelated disciplines and to understand better the interconnectedness of their first-year undergraduate experience both intellectually and personally. This paper will outline how the learning community project at SWGC fits the institutional mandate, how it has been influenced by recent trends in pedagogy of higher learning, and how the project was designed and executed.

Sir Wilfred Grenfell College (SWGC), the west coast campus of Memorial University of Newfoundland, fosters and promotes excellence in undergraduate teaching. Throughout its history, SWGC has consistently placed students at the heart of its mandate, and its small campus setting encourages students to engage in regular contact with faculty members. Despite the intimate learning environment, however, a first-year student beginning her or his studies at SWGC will still encounter many of the hurdles that new university students often experience. Specifically, students cope with a course load in which each course is seemingly disconnected from others, resulting in a sense of fragmentation in the first-year experience. A pilot project at SWGC, offered for the first time in the fall semester of 2006, helped first-year students establish thematic and study-based links across two of their courses. Participating
students were enrolled in the same section of an introductory psychology and French course, and an additional weekly session was organized with students and faculty present. This project’s historical context within SWGC and Memorial University, its relevance to the modern academy, its method, and its assessment will be outlined.

In order to achieve one of Memorial University’s founding mandates – to educate citizens of the province – the university has engaged in a number of strategies aimed at improving retention at the undergraduate level. In the past, a key initiative was the establishment of a Junior Division of faculty in 1968, in which faculty members were hired based primarily on competency in teaching. In 1975, the Regional College in Corner Brook (later to become Sir Wilfred Grenfell College) was opened and was comprised largely of faculty from Junior Division. In the early years of the institution, beginning in the 1976-1977 academic year, a Basic Academic Skills course was introduced for students who were deemed to be ‘at risk,’ meaning that their averages were below the 65% admission average. Students were enrolled as a group into foundation courses in English, math, psychology, history, French, chemistry, and a basic academic skills course with a view to transferring into regular studies during the second semester should their skills improve to the necessary level. The program was widely viewed as a great success in the early years of SWGC. Sullivan and Wilson (1980) credit much of this success to the support of faculty and the coordination of material across the courses so that students were able to apply study skills from their Basic Academic Skills course across the disciplines. This program contained many elements of what today constitutes a learning community.

Sir Wilfred Grenfell College has, since then, evolved considerably in terms of its course offerings and its faculty complement, both of which have had a significant impact on the manner in which students are now taught. SWGC has evolved from an institution in which students took their first year or two of courses before moving on to another campus into a degree-granting institution within Memorial University of Newfoundland. SWGC today offers a liberal education in arts and science and a professional education in business, education, nursing, theatre, tourism, and visual arts. As a result, while SWGC maintains its small campus setting, faculty are increasingly divided into
disciplines, and they are increasingly focused on their own areas of research. Tussman (1997) has identified this division of faculty into disciplines as one of the causes of the decrease in cross-disciplinary work that now characterizes the academy. In addition, due to the fact that faculty at SWGC are increasingly hired to teach specialties, as in the wider academic world, faculty tend to see their research as their priority and are being encouraged in this perception (Finkelstein, Seal, & Shuster, 1998; O’Meara & Rice, 2004). Research means specialization, and the teaching of research specialization is, usually, reserved for classes at the third- or fourth-year level. Faculty are increasingly expected to focus on their research and senior-level teaching so as to accommodate the larger number of upper level courses and independent student research projects that are part of a degree-granting institution. Despite these increasing demands on faculty, the overwhelming majority of first-year courses at SWGC continue to be taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty. With the significant faculty turnover reflecting changing demographics that has characterized the recent past and that will continue to be prevalent in the near future, therefore, it is important to find new ways to ensure that teaching maintains its historic place as a priority for faculty at Grenfell.

One way in which faculty can be encouraged to engage in teaching-based initiatives is through interdisciplinary collaboration with colleagues that is not necessarily limited to research. Sir Wilfred Grenfell College’s Academic Plan (2004) reaffirms the importance of collaboration across the disciplines as a priority for SWGC, and such collaboration can have significant impact on both teaching and research within the institution. This interaction has become increasingly visible in recent years with the development of cross-disciplinary degree programs such as Social/Cultural Studies, Humanities, and Sustainable Resource Management. Such interaction across the disciplines allows faculty to find links between their course material and motivates them to adapt their course offerings. However, many courses that bridge disciplines and that are cross-listed are often offered at the third- or fourth-year level after students have completed introductory and intermediate level courses in each discipline. Students are able to see coherence across the disciplines in such senior-level courses. For these students, however, a sense of belonging has often already been established for them. The challenge for SWGC is to create this same sense of belonging and coherence for students in their first year of studies.
Recent research examining the transition of Newfoundland and Labrador students from high school to university has revealed a number of difficulties that suggest the need for support mechanisms in which university faculty can play a role. These challenges for students include a change in teaching style, differing academic expectations, stricter grading practices, and a modified system of time management (Sharpe, 1996). These adaptations can occur over time, but Sharpe (1996) suggests that an objective of university educators should be to facilitate such adaptations in a timely fashion. In addition, Birnie-Lefcovitch (2000) of Memorial University reported that there is a distinction to be made between students’ perception of change upon their integration into university and the reality of what that change entails. In order to ensure that this transition is as seamless as possible, Birnie-Lefcovitch (2000) recommends that the university provide structures and opportunities that enable students to create relationships with their new peers. A tool for retention of students, then, is to ensure that support mechanisms are put in place for students in their first year of university so that the transition faced by university students can be facilitated from the earliest possible point in their studies.

A useful model for addressing student retention in the first year is that of the learning community. The idea of a learning community has been in existence for decades, and it refers to a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). The comparison of the university to a community is entirely appropriate for a setting like Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, as the student and faculty population is small enough to create a sense of intimacy similar to that found in a community. A learning community is premised on a student-centered teaching environment and can take many forms. A common characteristic of all models is that rather than relying on the lecture as the most effective method of undergraduate teaching, learning communities are constructed on the premise that students will learn more effectively if they are provided with a holistic and coherent approach to their education (Smith, et al., 2004). In other words, students must see how their courses fit together and be engaged in that connection.
For many professors, the learning community approach can initially appear daunting, as most faculty members have not been taught in that manner themselves and tend to see the academy as composed of separate, unrelated forces, due to the fact that they have increasingly specialized in particular domains over time (Senge, 1990). Creating a learning community at the first year level at SWGC also allows faculty to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration in a similar manner as they might in preparation for upper-level courses. Faculty members establishing learning communities also engage in conversations about their pedagogical methods so as to ensure that students are able to see how courses fit together. Similarly, at the first year level, common themes among linked courses in a learning community are the intellectual growth of the students and their sense of belonging to the institution.

There are a variety of approaches to establishing a learning community that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, usually around an interdisciplinary theme. Developing the most effective learning community for a group of students is challenging and involves a significant amount of adjustment on behalf of faculty. As a general rule, a learning community links courses from different disciplines and brings together students as well as faculty and staff. A learning community also provides a holistic, coherent approach to the undergraduate learning experience. A variety of models exist, and choosing the appropriate one requires a careful examination of the environment in which it is offered and the objectives of students and faculty participating in it. Gabelnick et al. (1990) presented the four main types of learning communities: linked courses, in which students register for pairs of courses and assignments are coordinated; learning clusters, in which students do courses together as a group and may attend additional sessions; first-year interest groups, linking together courses that have common themes along with weekly meetings with a peer advisor; federated learning communities, which present overarching themes that link courses together with a Master Learner facilitating regular seminars; and, finally, coordinated studies, in which there are no boundaries between courses, and one faculty member teaches an entire course that straddles different disciplines in a non-traditional schedule. In this SWGC pilot project, the model chosen most closely resembles that of a learning cluster.
Although the learning cluster model is the one that most closely resembles the pilot project at SWGC, the model was tailored to suit the goals of the project. The learning community pilot project at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College began from discussions among faculty and staff members on the SWGC Student Retention Committee. Dr. Michael Newton, professor of Religious Studies, proposed the concept as a viable method to enrich the first-year learning experience and to enhance student retention. The authors agreed to develop, execute, and evaluate the first learning community at SWGC during the fall semester of 2006 by pairing two of their individual introductory level courses. Students participating in the project enrolled as a cohort in both Psychology 1000, taught by one of the project facilitators, and French 1500, taught by the other project facilitator, and attended an additional 50-minute weekly session. A total of 16 students were enrolled in the learning community pilot project. French 1500 consisted of these 16 students only, and Psychology 1000 embedded these 16 students in a class of 90. In addition, a peer mentor, a fourth year psychology honours student with a minor in French, attended the weekly sessions as an active participant, assisted in session planning, held a weekly office hour, and provided tutorial support and academic consultation to the students in the learning community.

Prior to the first meeting of the facilitators to identify links between French 1500 and Psychology 1000, they independently wondered about the extent to which thematic links between these two courses could be found. After the first meeting, however, it was clear there were many overarching themes. The facilitators met on a regular basis throughout August, 2006 and began exploring common links in their courses by comparing course syllabi and textbooks. Once discussion began, it was discovered that there were many themes linking French and psychology that were not, at first, immediately apparent. Many of the themes linked overarching concepts rather than specific learning objectives, and it was around those overarching concepts that the weekly sessions were structured. As a result of the facilitators meeting on a regular basis prior to the beginning of the fall semester, it was discovered that some of the interesting links between the courses included memory, learning, the process of language acquisition, principles of reinforcement, brain physiology as it relates to speech comprehension and production, dreaming in a second language, and the
motivation to learn French. These links also assisted in establishing goals for the project.

There were four main goals of this French-psychology learning community. Before sharing the goals of the project with the students, the facilitators requested that each student submit his or her own goals for the learning community. Upon reviewing students’ goals, it was clear that there was significant overlap with those of the facilitators. The first and primary goal of the project, as well as the goal for any learning community, was to elucidate the common themes in introductory French and psychology in an effort to enhance students’ intellectual coherence. Rather than experiencing each course as separate and disconnected, the goal was to explore how learning in one course related to and augmented learning in the other course.

The second goal of the project was to assist in skill building for these first-year students. As discussed earlier, a challenge for first-year students is adapting to university standards and environment, and the skills that the facilitators sought to improve were ones that would assist students in their adaptation to university. In addition, it was important that students see how their university education can be applied to vocational opportunities. This goal was addressed by offering sessions on library skills, resume writing, and interviewing skills (maximizing the transfer of skills they are acquiring in first-year university to the marketplace), study skills, identifying learning preferences, and adjusting to the demands and expectations of university.

A third goal was the enhancement of students’ institutional awareness. Due to the demands of beginning a program of study in a new setting, first-year students may not sufficiently recognize the resources available in a university and, therefore, may not access the services or participate in the societies and social activities available on campus. It is sometimes not until students reach their third or fourth year of study that they truly feel connected to the institution. The goal of fostering students’ awareness and sense of connection to the university in the first year grew from this knowledge. Sessions were, therefore, provided to highlight the resources Sir Wilfred Grenfell College has to offer students, including information on academic support services, scholarships, and employment opportunities within the university. The sessions also included
information on social activities, clubs, and societies. Representatives from these various groups met with the learning community students to provide information and to extend an invitation to participate.

The final goal was facilitating relationships, and this goal permeated all aspects of the project. There were four key relationships established and fostered through the project. First, by bringing together a group of students through the commonality of French and psychology courses, the aim was to enhance the sense of connection students felt with their peers. In relatively large classes, students can complete a term without getting to know their peers. The learning community project, therefore, was designed to bring a group of students together on a smaller scale and on a regular basis to facilitate peer relationships. The second relationship facilitated by the project was the relationship between students and faculty. As mentioned, Sir Wilfred Grenfell College offers a small campus setting, but first-year students do not always have significant contact with their professors. In classes with many students, such as introductory psychology, unless students initiate contact with their professor, interaction is minimal. For students in the learning community project, they met with their French and psychology professors on a weekly basis outside of classroom hours. The third type of relationship facilitated by the learning community project was the relationship between the students and other members of the university community. These relationships were facilitated by having staff and faculty members attend and participate in relevant sessions. For example, the coordinator of the Learning Centre led a session on a topic relevant to her expertise. There was also a session exploring professors’ activities in the summertime. This session allowed the students to meet professors they otherwise would not necessarily have met, to learn about their research, and to tour their laboratory and studio space. Finally, the fourth type of relationship facilitated by the project was the relationship between students in their first year and students in their senior year of university, which was primarily achieved through the peer mentor. The project provided the opportunity for the students to meet and interact with a senior-level student on a regular basis, a relationship that would not likely have developed otherwise.

An integral component of the learning community pilot project is its evaluation which, at the time of writing, is still ongoing. This evaluation involves both the
students in the learning community and a matched control group. The students in the control group were also enrolled in Psychology 1000 and French 1500 and were matched with students in the learning community on age, gender, admissions average, and urbanity of hometown. A questionnaire was developed to assess the first term university experiences of both groups. The learning community students also received a second questionnaire to assess their learning community experience. The questionnaires for both groups consisted of questions answered on a Likert-type scale as well as open-ended questions. After completing the questionnaire in the final weekly learning community session, the students were then asked to engage in a discussion about their experience in the project and to provide feedback. The faculty facilitators were not present for the evaluation or the discussion, as it was led by the peer mentor. The questionnaire packages were mailed to the students in the control group with two stamped, addressed envelopes in order to return separately the signed consent form and the questionnaire. In addition, the evaluation includes written reflections about the learning community project from the peer mentor and the two faculty facilitators. Responses to the questionnaire were anonymous, confidential, and voluntary. Each participant signed an informed consent form before completing the questionnaire. The data collected in the evaluation will be analyzed quantitatively (Likert-scale answers) and qualitatively (open-ended questions, discussion, and written reflections). The GPA and retention status of the control group and the students in the learning community will be tracked over the course of their four-year degree. This procedure for the evaluation of the learning community project has been approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee at SWGC.

It is hypothesized that students in the learning community pilot project will report an increased level of intellectual coherence, interpersonal connectedness, and institutional affiliation as a result of their participation. This hypothesis, however, has yet to be verified. It is hoped that the evaluation will adequately represent the experiences of first-year students and the impact of their involvement in the learning community project. The results of the assessment of the project will contribute to the overall assessment of the learning community concept in the modern academy as a way of fostering student learning and increasing faculty’s connections with their students – as well as with each other.
References


