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# Communities of Practice: An International Learning Experience

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# Communities of Practice: An International Learning Experience

## **Abstract**

**Excerpt:** Collaborative inquiry through communities of practice has long been recognized by SoTL scholars as a powerful way for teachers to improve the teaching and learning processes for their students. Communities of practice provide teachers the opportunity to share educational practices, the challenges...

## **Keywords**

Collaborative inquiry, Learning communities, Global learning communities

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## Communities of Practice: An International Learning Experience

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“Building community is the foundation for any successful educational journey. Academic initiatives and educational resources of every kind will have little impact until the framework for building community is established.” (Taulbert, 2006)

Collaborative inquiry through communities of practice has long been recognized by SoTL scholars as a powerful way for teachers to improve the teaching and learning processes for their students. Communities of practice provide teachers the opportunity to share educational practices, the challenges they may be facing as they attempt to facilitate learning with various generations of students, and the impetus to develop new and innovative methods that can help shape more effective learning environments for their students. Development of international communities of practice for both faculty and students is the focus of the work we will be describing below.

We feel very fortunate to work at Valencia Community College, a college that not only subscribes to SoTL practices, but clearly puts the practices to work each and every day. Whether in focused conversations in a “big meeting” about student learning and assessment or in casual conversations with our data team about how to close gaps between groups of students, our priority at Valencia is to work to create the best learning environment possible for our students through great teaching and learning experiences. We do this by continuously building a strong community of scholars who are not afraid to tackle any question or challenge if it is felt that by doing so we will improve our ability to assist students in learning.

### Learning Communities and Communities of Practice at Valencia

“And we have to see that learning—deep learning, learning that matters, learning that lasts—is not something that teachers do to students or even that students do for themselves. Rather it is the product of action in a context shaped by goals, performance, feedback, time horizon, and community—of all of the principles that define the cognitive economy, acting

to create an environment that empowers and engages students.”  
(Tagg, 2003)

At Valencia, we have discovered through years of research and practice the importance of learning communities and communities of practice for our students, faculty, and staff. In our work with the Achieve the Dream Initiative and the Developmental Education Initiative, we have created a learning commons environment for faculty and staff. This learning commons environment encourages faculty and staff alike to discover through conversation and analysis of our practices how we can best assist our least prepared students. At Valencia our research has confirmed that learning communities and communities of practice really do make a difference in student learning. By creating intentional “integrated teaching and learning experiences” for students, Valencia faculty and staff have seen gaps in academic performance closing between our underprepared students and our college ready students when students learn in community (Shapiro, 1999).

By intentionally creating communities of practice that guide our student learning and assessment work, faculty and staff are working together to identify what students are learning and how the learning environment can be changed to assure more students are successful. The development and implementation of the Teaching and Learning Academy (TLA) for new faculty and the Destination Program for faculty and staff at Valencia are other ways in which communities of practice are being used to engage faculty and staff in the improvement of both teaching and student learning. The Teaching and Learning Academy supports new teaching faculty, counselors, and librarians as they develop and implement Individualized Learning Plans, a fundamental phase of the tenure process. Candidates are assisted in expansion and improvement of their professional practices related to pedagogy, course design, student development, and student learning assessment. Destination is Valencia's faculty development program that features 20 hours of intensive, collaborative work on course design, teaching techniques, and assessment of student learning.

### **Global Learning Communities and Global Communities of Practice at Valencia**

After 9/11, our ability to attract international students and our ability to participate in international exchanges with colleagues from across the world decreased considerably. Committed to giving our students the best global education possible, Valencia faculty and staff joined together in a renewed commitment to global learning for Valencia students in fall of 2007. We set out to see if we could use our SoTL practices to shape and renew our international efforts for students.

Influenced by Johansson's work on innovation in *The Medici Effect*, Valencia faculty and staff joined together to share practices from our past international work and to evaluate the possibility of future global curricular development for our students (Johansson, 2006). As we shared best practices, it was our hope that this inquiry would assist us in finding possible intersections between our present general education outcomes, our student learning assessment work, and our growing focus on learning communities and communities of practice as a means for producing deeper student engagement and student learning. At the same time, we hoped that the inquiry process would encourage the creation of a global community of practice for our faculty, staff, and students.

Using our initial research results, a number of faculty who had participated in the inquiry sessions, each of whom had years of experience traveling with students to other countries, were chosen to create a new global learning community of students, faculty, and staff. The faculty members worked with other faculty and staff to create global learning outcomes and

assessments for each global learning experience. Each group also created orientation sessions for the students who would participate in the experiences and de-briefing sessions for the students when they returned. Both students and faculty were engaged in the global learning experience through learning community models. Summaries of the initial global learning experiences follow.

### **Deymond Hoyte, Professor of Business**

Professor Deymond Hoyte and his business students joined two other community colleges and their students as participants in an International TROIKA Program in China. The objective of this program is to immerse small learning communities of business students into the Chinese culture giving students the opportunity to witness business activities, economic changes and social/cultural impact in China due to the globalization that is occurring in China. In this program, students have the opportunity to view China's growth and transformation to a market economy by traveling to China and experiencing the changes firsthand with other U.S. college students. Faculty members are also joined in communities of practice to develop outcomes and to assess the effectiveness of the experience on meeting the student outcomes.

The following outcomes were established for learners in this program. The globally competent learner will be able to do the following at the completion of this program:

- Identify key components that transform China from a command to a market economy.
- Assess the impact of the Chinese culture on foreign business activity.
- Illustrate practical business communication skills and leadership skills expected in the Chinese culture.
- Employ critical thinking skills in geography, other cultures, international relations, and global issues.
- Demonstrate a capacity to work in diverse teams.
- Evaluate the impact of other cultures on American life and vice versa.
- Analyze the geopolitical and economic interdependence of the United State and China.
- Demonstrate the responsibility of global citizenship.

During the program, the following activities were used to help students achieve the established outcomes:

1. Lectures from business faculty in China about China's change to a market economy using bench marks of recent Chinese history, conversation with Chinese students, and individual observations.
2. Case Study: IKEA stores in China and the failure of the company to recognize the impact of culture in their business model. Students visited several international business operations while in China.
3. A series of conversations with our Chinese, British, and Russian students about their views of the United States and the world at large.
4. Lectures and debate on the Global Financial Crisis and what steps China has taken to survive the crisis.
5. Lectures on China history and culture, including a discussion about Tibet.
6. Discussion on pollution and climate change, and what steps China has taken to correct global warming trends.

7. Students developed their own investigation and agenda using activity-based learning (Shanghai largest market place), engaging in critical thinking and testing their interpersonal and negotiation skills.

### **Steve Myers, Professor of Biology**

In biology, Professor Steve Myers has learned that students learn best in small communities of practice where they are given the opportunity to engage in learning in nature's global laboratories. For this reason, he has developed three courses: Ethnobotany (BOT 2800), Neotropical Ecology (BSC 2366), and Field Biology (PCB 2340), where small communities of learners travel to Guyana and India to be immersed in biology and global outcomes.

The following learning outcomes have been established for learners in these courses. At the completion of course, students will:

- Identify the critical roles that plants play in the modern world and into the sustainable future.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the use of plants in the local culture.

Students are given the opportunity to meet these outcomes by participating in the following activities:

1. Students study plants that occur naturally in India and Guyana. Students then prepare and give presentations about their research to their small learning community. From this experience, students learn that the use of many of these plants dates back hundreds or thousands of years. They quickly learn that herbs supply the design principles for many of our modern medicines. They also learn that a number of these plants may be our food sources and fuel supplies of the future and why it is necessary to conserve these plants.
2. In Guyana, a small Valencia student learning community is immersed in Amerindian culture while living and working with the indigenous, Amerindians. This is experiential learning that students cannot get in their classrooms in Orlando. During this experience students learn about the contributions of the Amerindians to the global community and see how the Amerindians live in the natural world, discover their culture, and how they use native plants in their daily lives. While in Guyana each student chooses a research topic to explore. The topics range from Amerindian culture to ethno botany of various Amerindian tribes. When the students return from their immersion experience, they do a teaching presentation for other students at Valencia.
3. In India, students in learning communities research the culture and Ethnobotany of the indigenous, Irula people. While in India, students visit a traditional Irula botanical garden and learn about the uses of botanicals in Ayurvedic medicine. Students also go out in the field and watch the Irula (legendary snake trackers of India) collect venomous snakes and extract the venom from the snakes. The venom is used in the production of anti-venom which saves lives in India each and every day. The snakes are then released back into the wild where they will eat rats. This is a good thing as rats eat rice and other crops. From this experience, the students learn firsthand the intricate relationship of humans, culture, and nature. All of this gives students an appreciation for different cultures. When the students return to

Valencia, they go out into the community and teach other people about their global knowledge and experiences, and global knowledge spreads!

Professor Myers feels that these experiences produce students who have an appreciation for global learning and cultural diversity. These opportunities empower students, as they work in small communities of practice, to learn about the value of conserving biodiversity, as well as, the value of conserving human diversity. Students realize that the vanishing indigenous people have traditional botanical knowledge that may unlock cures of some of our most dreaded diseases or help our existence in any number of ways.

### **Lana Powell, Professor of Business**

Professor Lana Powell has recognized that students today will work in a global community. She feels that it is, therefore, important to design curriculum that affords students opportunities to learn to be effective citizens and participants in the global community in which they live and work.

The business curriculum that Professor Powell has developed is directed towards four global outcomes:

- **Global Knowledge Outcome:** Business students will be able to discuss how different countries and cultures conduct business.
- **Global Skills Outcome:** Business students will be able to identify those skills necessary to communicate and work as a team across national boundaries.
- **Global Attitudes Outcome:** Business students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the cultural differences that impact the conduct of business.
- **Ethical Conduct Outcome:** Business students will be able to discuss the importance of maintaining ethical boundaries regardless of a change in environment.

The following examples illustrate two ways in which Professor Powell has incorporated the outcomes into her classes and has assisted her students in becoming contributing citizens of the world:

1. Professor Powell travels with students to the Dominican Republic for a service learning experience where they live and work in community with residents living without electricity or running water. After researching local businesses in the community they are serving, students develop a business plan for a cottage industry within the community.
2. Professor Powell teaches business students at Koning Willem I College/School for the Future, a collaborative partner with Valencia, in The Netherlands each summer. Being part of a new faculty community of practice in the Netherlands allows Professor Powell to enhance her Valencia classes through: sharing cultural differences, incorporating international best practices in her Valencia classes, exchanging email contacts between her Dutch and Valencia students, sharing video interview of Dutch students with Valencia students, and sharing her daily travel journal with faculty and students so that they can benefit from her experiences.

### Richard Sansone, Professor of Portuguese

Professor Richard Sansone believes that teaching a foreign language without a cultural context is like teaching chemistry without a laboratory. While Professor Sansone infuses music, dance, film, art, sports, and food into his language classes at Valencia, he has found that study abroad opportunities for language immersion offer students the greatest possibilities for learning languages. Professor Sansone believes that there is no substitute for the experience of actually *being* there, immersed totally in the target culture, where one can interact 24 hours a day, seven days a week with the target language and culture in all of its rich, unique, vivid, complex and sometimes frustrating manifestations.

Professor Sansone has partnered with colleagues at the Federal University of Ouro Preto (UFOP) in a community of practice to develop educational learning communities for Valencia students in Brazil. These learning communities engage in a four-week intensive language and culture immersion program. While in Brazil, students live in the republicas which provide a ready social and support network, as well as, a ready pool of peers with whom to develop and further their language and cultural skills. The service learning component of the program includes working with children with physical and emotional disabilities and working as volunteers for the Winter Arts Festival.

The following learning outcomes have been developed for participants in the program:

- Students will **DEVELOP PERSONALLY** by: (1) meaningfully experiencing a culture different than their own, (2) better understanding/appreciating the relativity of cultural values; (3) better understanding the importance of collaboration to the success of a group experience
- Students will **DEVELOP ACADEMICALLY** by: (1) furthering their native language proficiency as well as that of the target language, (2) learning through first-hand experience of another culture, (3) applying/furthering their understanding of the course content as related to the cultural experience
- Students will **FURTHER INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE** by: (1) successfully navigating and interacting in a different cultural context, (2) understanding and respecting cultural values and expressions distinct from their own, (3) communicating effectively in the host culture
- Students will further their **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT** by: (1) gaining self-confidence and self empowerment and, in so doing, further leadership skills, (2) broadening their awareness of global career opportunities, (3) developing critical thinking skills through problem solving and decision making in a different cultural setting

These cross-cultural experiences are powerful, transformative tools that help students to grow beyond the insularity of their world view. Professor Sansone notes that he has had the tremendous satisfaction to witness the growth and change that this type of program can effect in students. It is not a question of seeing a better way of approaching life, but rather learning another culture's successful approach and then coming to understand that we have a great deal both to learn and teach one another.



## Conclusions

For those of us who spend our lives as teachers and lifelong learners in the colleges of our communities, we continue the search for ways to open the eyes, minds, and hearts of our students so that they are prepared to work effectively in our ever changing, global world. Our work at Valencia has, however, just begun as we continue to design and redesign new global experiences for our students through conversations, inquiry, and continual assessment of our work. International communities of practice and international learning communities provide new avenues for our search for truth in this journey together with our students and colleagues around the world. As great teachers, we will continue to learn from one another as we add to the growing body of knowledge surrounding the scholarship of teaching and learning. This knowledge will enable us to provide the greatest global learning environments and experiences for our students.

In closing, Parker Palmer reminds us in *The Courage to Teach* that “The hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it (Palmer, 1998).” As great teachers, let us continue to search for new ways to build community by opening the eyes, minds, and hearts of the students we are called to serve through our global communities of practice.

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