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Christina L. McDowell Marinchak
University of Alaska Anchorage, cmcdowell2@uaa.alaska.edu

David Deluliis
Duquesne University, deiuliisd@duq.edu

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The Learning Community Experience: Cultivating a Residual Worldview

Abstract

In this essay, we conceptualize first-year learning communities as worldviews that, during the first year and residually in subsequent years, allow students to recognize and engage difference and acknowledge and articulate their biases. Students who take part in a learning community have an opportunity to develop the biases and presuppositions of the community, as well as a position that is present throughout life. Using the first-year learning communities at Duquesne University as an example, we contend that inclusion in a learning community upholds a given worldview – as narrative, philosophical or theological system, or shaper of individuals. This, in turn, fosters the biases and presuppositions of the community's members, a residual outcome that stays with students for the rest of their lives.

Christina L. McDowell Marinchak is an Assistant Professor of Business Communication at University of Alaska, Anchorage.

David Deluliis is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA.

Keywords

worldview, learning communities, outcomes, residuality

The learning communities at Duquesne University consider service and learning to be integral parts of the college experience that create a comfortable environment for incoming freshman students. Academically, students in each community have similar major interests, take courses together, and partake in a service-learning project connected to the learning community theme. The objective is to create a sense of “home” for entering students so they can focus on learning; the hope is that they will also retain more of what they’ve learned after graduation. The communities are a way for students to get to know others with similar interests in what can be an intimidating matriculation process. Participating in this program is an engaging experience in terms of service and learning. Thus, students involved in a learning community cultivate a greater appreciation for the importance of service and learning inside and outside the classroom. In this essay we conceptualize the first-year learning communities at Duquesne University as worldviews that, during the first year and residually in subsequent years, allow students to recognize and engage difference, acknowledge their biases, and more fully articulate “what it means to be human” (Jensen, 1997). We do so using Fritz, McDowell, and Arnett’s (2008) three-pronged definition of worldviews as narratives, or philosophical or theological systems, that shape us as individuals.

Each of the eight learning communities in the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts at Duquesne University—Civitas, Fides, Judicium, Litterae, Orbis, Personae, Populus and Ratio—is given a Latin name that serves as a guidepost for student development during the first year of college.¹ Each community follows a “curricular approach that intentionally link(s) or cluster(s) two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll(s) a common cohort of students” (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 20). The goals of Duquesne University’s learning community program are to (1) help first-year students in the College find friends and study companions, (2) create a sense of identity and unity among students in the College of Liberal Arts, (3) help students learn how topics in different courses are related, and (4) connect the classroom with the community through service (Duquesne University, 2013). When these goals are achieved, learning communities become a home away from home, an embodied praxis in which the university mission is lived out in communities through reflective engagement with ideas and people (Garrett, McDowell, Cesareo, & Fritz, 2008).

Students choose their communities based on broadly defined interests, and leave with the ability to situate those interests in a more subtle and sophisticated worldview. The cultivation of this worldview is not an intended outcome of the

¹ See Duquesne University’s Learning Communities website at <http://www.duq.edu/academics/schools/liberal-arts/undergraduate-college/learning-communities> for a thorough review.

learning communities at Duquesne. Rather, the idea emerged as a byproduct from our participation in and association with the learning community programs. As students study together, they develop worldviews that meet, merge, and congeal with existing positions and presuppositions.

We were both afforded the opportunity to work with a learning community during the 2012-2013 academic year at Duquesne University. We each taught courses situated in the learning communities and, along with a team of faculty from various departments, developed shared learning outcomes and objectives for our communities based on common foci and compelling themes. Examples will now be provided from each of our experiences working with the *Judicium* and *Personae* learning communities that reflect such an outcome.

The *Judicium* Learning Community

In the *Judicium* learning community, students study “the role of the citizen in the quest for truth and justice, as well as the complexity of truth in an age of diversity through the goods of judgment, decision, and evidence” (Duquesne University, 2013a). Students are assigned to the *Judicium* learning community based on an expressed interest in pursuing one of its core themes. They take five classes together as a community during the freshman year: Public Speaking, Epistemology, Introduction to Criminal Justice, Basic Philosophical Questions, and Research and Information Skills. Additionally, students in the community participate in a service-learning project at a local prison, where they interact with inmates and collaborate on a project designed to “question, explore, and engage the various nuances found within the topic areas of truth and justice” (*Judicium*, 2013a). Throughout the semester, small groups of students and inmates study criminal law (Introduction to Criminal Justice) and collect evidence (Research and Information Skills) to thoughtfully question social policy and its philosophical presuppositions (Basic Philosophical Questions and Epistemology) in a public presentation (Public Speaking) that is the culmination of their learning community experience.

In addition to the service-learning project, each community features integrative assignments that are approached from various perspectives in all of its constituent classes. For instance, during the 2012 presidential campaign between Governor Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama, students in *Judicium* Public Speaking class were assigned one of two candidates and acted as policy spokespeople for their candidate. As part of the course requirements, they gave a brief position speech on a given issue and responded to questions from the instructors and classmates. In order to excel at this assignment, students must rely on much more than style, rhetoric, passion or party affiliation. They must have intimate knowledge of both candidates’ policies and platforms and build coherent arguments supported by strong and valid evidence. Students learn to gather the

information in the Research and Information Skills class, to analyze it as a reflection of and orientation to public life in Introduction to Criminal Justice, and to reflect on questions about the pursuit of knowledge and articulation of truth in Epistemology and Basic Philosophical Questions.

The Personae Learning Community

The Personae learning community is “concerned with the personalities, parts, roles, and characters that shape who we are: as persons and as members of social groups” (Duquesne University, 2013b). Students assigned to the Personae learning community are interested in exploring “how individuals and groups shape one another” (Duquesne University, 2013b). The Personae students also take five classes together—four courses in the fall semester; one course in the spring semester—as a community during the freshman year: Exploring Interpersonal Communication, Thinking and Writing across the Curriculum, Introduction to Psychology, Research and Information Skills, and Theological Views of the Person. As with the other learning communities, students in the Personae community participate in a semester-long service-learning project. The community partner for the Personae learning community is a local organization that works with immigrants and refugees. Each week throughout the semester, small groups of students assist during English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, working with the ESL students to help “increase their communication skills, make cultural adjustments, and navigate community resources” (Duquesne University, 2013b).

As part of their community service project, students, working in small groups, prepare a written report that consists of four prompts (one from each of the fall courses). In addition to the written report, each student group participates in a debriefing session about their service learning experience, responding to questions from Personae faculty. This project is intended to have students “engage in an open discussion about their personal growth in relation to service learning activities...draw links across disciplines and [to] provide suggestions to enhance both service and learning” (Duquesne University, 2013b). The hope is that students will have an increased understanding of the complexities of human experience, relating academic learning to the lived world through their service learning experience.

As previously discussed, integrative assignments are incorporated as an additional component across the principal courses. For example, the instructors of the Exploring Interpersonal Communication and Thinking and Writing across the Curriculum collaborated to develop an integrated assignment that utilized the selected common text for all learning communities at Duquesne University. The assignment combined what students had learned about argument of evaluation while ethically integrating interpersonal communication ideas and theories from

class discussion, journals, and other supplemental readings. Students were asked to choose a term from the common text, which discussed the concept of self-presentation. After choosing a term, students responded to a series of questions, including: How does the author define the term? Why is it important to the author? What does the author think it has to do with the subject of the book? What sources serve as backing for the author's claims?

After defining the term from the author's point of view, students then defined the term from their own point of view as college students in 2012 and addressed its impact on their own patterns of interpersonal communication. The third part of the assignment asked students to reflect on their own self-presentation, making direct connections to a specific interpersonal communication idea in three contexts: the online world, at school/service learning, and at home. In the last section, students addressed whether they agreed or disagreed with the author's definition of the term, using an individual, a cause, or movement that emulated their stance, and supporting their claim with academic sources from both classes. The goal of this assignment was to invite students to engage in reflective thinking about how they present themselves in everyday communicative interactions.

The Learning Communities as Worldviews

These learning communities serve as worldviews by crafting a set of common principles and practices that characterizes the students' first year of study. In both communities, students "have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990, p. 19). By encouraging students to consider their and others' biases, the courses and service-learning projects embedded in the learning communities serve to reinforce the common principles and practices established in each learning community, giving students a basis for articulating their own position and developing a worldview that lasts beyond the end of the learning community experience.

What we refer to as the "residuality of the worldview"—a framework for revealing the values, attitudes, and beliefs of a student to other people after the learning community experience ends—has been cultivated through various approaches, including global learning communities (e.g., Kerlin, 2009), professional learning communities (e.g., Cranston, 2009) residential learning communities (e.g., Pike, 1999), or themed learning communities (e.g., Doolittle, Sudeck, & Ratigan, 2008), as it has at Duquesne University. In the remainder of this essay we interpret the learning communities within Duquesne University as worldviews, and provide student reactions to their experience as evidence of residuality.

Each learning community promotes a set of ideas, perspectives, and information that, through integrated courses such as Public Speaking and Exploring Interpersonal Communication, train students to make clear both the presuppositions that ground their worldviews and the biases through which they articulate them. By supporting the carrying out of common principles and practices of reason, reckoning, judgment, method and evidence, the *Judicium* and *Ratio* learning communities function as philosophical or theological systems. *Personae*, *Litterae* and *Populus* function as narratives cultivating common principles and practices of letters, literature, masses and multitudes. Finally, the *Fides*, *Orbis* and *Civitas* communities allow the common principles and practices of trust, confidence, belief, and faith to shape their members as individuals. Because 81% of students in Duquesne's eight learning communities reported that the most helpful aspect of the learning community was the ability to quickly find friends and study companions (Duquesne University, 2013), the ability to articulate these biases remains strong long after students' formal inclusion in their communities ends. From the learning community experience emerges a residual outcome that remains part of a student's internal locus for life.

The residuality that emerges from the learning community experience helps shape the person a student will become. Students who take part in a learning community have the opportunity to begin to develop the biases and presuppositions of the community, as well as a position that is present throughout life. A person's perception of the world is guided by experience. Through the learning community experience, students begin to shape and/or reshape frames of reference in which a residual worldview emerges. Asked about the relation of the service-learning project to the overall goal of the learning communities, a Duquesne University student remarked, "Service-learning, in my experience, was beneficial to understanding the overall message of the learning community."² Similarly, other students commented that, "My experience with my learning service project was helpful, exciting, and opened my eyes to the problems my surrounding community faces," that "my experience with the service learning aspect of the course was very eye-opening," and that "my learning community has given me a practical look into what it is like to be a responsible citizen, making me look at many aspects of life as an 'adult.' " This understanding of part to whole and individual events to collective experience is crucial to not only the success of a learning community, but also for developing the skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly complex world. Inclusion in a learning community, then, upholds a given worldview—as narrative, philosophical or theological system, or shaper of individuals—that in turn fosters the biases and presuppositions of the

² All quotations were taken from the Washington Center's Online Survey of Students' Experiences of Learning in Learning Communities that the Duquesne University Learning Communities administered in November and December 2012.

community's members, a residual outcome that stays with students for the rest of their lives.

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