An Integrated Approach to Learning Communities: Designing for Place-Based, Communication-Intensive Learning

Jody R. Rosen
CUNY New York City College of Technology, jrrosen@citytech.cuny.edu

M. Justin Davis
Northeastern University, mich.davis@neu.edu

An Integrated Approach to Learning Communities: Designing for Place-Based, Communication-Intensive Learning

Abstract

This article describes the design of a learning community that paired an English Composition and a Public Speaking course at the New York City College of Technology (City Tech) and explains the embedded teaching strategies: flexible scheduling, integrated assignments, and a place-based (Brooklyn) focus. These tactics, developed with the aim of engaging first-semester students in their general-education communication courses, served to orient students to City Tech and its neighboring environment. Flexible scheduling helped avoid making concessions due to time constraints and allowed for greater fairness and efficiency, while also expanding opportunities for classroom and out-of-classroom activities. Designing overlapping assignments helped students by scaffolding coursework throughout the semester, building toward increasingly challenging course objectives. The place-based focus on Brooklyn oriented students to the campus, supported their ability to find nearby places that expanded their campus experience, and gave them tools for interacting critically with their surroundings. Grounded in maker pedagogy, the semester's final project asked students to make a shared Google Map that included their videos and summaries of their research, creating a virtual tour of downtown Brooklyn. Ultimately, these strategies supported better student success and engagement in the courses while providing a creative outlet for successful college work.

Jody R. Rosen is an Assistant Professor of English and Co-Director of the OpenLab at New York City College of Technology, CUNY, where she teaches in the First-Year Learning Community program each fall semester. Her scholarship focuses on pedagogical approaches to foster community, and on Modernist narratological representations of gender and sexuality.

M. Justin Davis is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Communication Studies at Northeastern University. His research explores processes related to the production, performance, and consumption of identity, cultural memory, and public mind.

Keywords

place-based, communication-intensive, integrated assignments, flexible scheduling, learning communities

Cover Page Footnote

Learning communities[1] involve classes with a common cohort of students pursuing a set of shared learning objectives. A range of academic literature continues to document the positive benefits of learning communities, including increased rates of student retention, increased levels of student engagement (Oates & Leavitt, 2003; Tinto, 1998; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and higher levels of student performance (Hegler, 2004; Henscheid, 2004; Huerta, 2009; Kuh, 2008; Stassen, 2003). Additional literature identifies methods for assessing learning communities (Hegler, 2004; Huerta, 2009; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008/2009) as well as "best practice" strategies for planning learning communities (Beaulieu & Williams, 2006; Kuh, 2008). In this work, we describe how we incorporated a number of strategies to create a more fully integrated linked course LC.

Learning Communities at New York City College of Technology (City Tech)

Located in downtown Brooklyn, New York, City Tech is a commuter college that serves more than 16,000 undergraduate degree and certificate students annually. City Tech's First Year Learning Communities program enrolls students in their first semester of college and uses a linked-course approach to foster a sense of belonging for each cohort; this is especially beneficial for our underserved student population.[2] Before the formal learning community (LC) courses begin, students engage in a range of shared activities at the program level, including a welcome orientation and registration workshops. They also participate in shared activities during the semester, such as early- and mid-semester social events, and interaction with a peer mentor.[3]

A Learning Community of Integration, Communication, and Place

The paired courses described in this article, English Composition and Public Speaking, were taught as pilots during the fall 2011 semester, revised during the fall 2012 semester, and offered as polished versions in the fall 2013 semester. A cohort of 25 first-semester students was enrolled in both classes. Most learning

---

[1] The five types of learning communities identified by Kellogg (1999) are: linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies.

[2] City Tech is a majority-minority institution, with 61% of students reporting a household income of less than $30,000, and 33% reporting that at least one parent completed college (Facts 2013-14, 2013).

[3] Peer mentors visit with students during class time, making announcements about upcoming events for all students in learning communities and providing information about registration. They also check in with students via email, providing additional support as students transition into college life. Peer mentors in general education LCs, like the one highlighted in this article, offer general advice as well as more specific advice for students regarding their intended majors.

communities on our campus involve functionally separate linked courses that share one assignment. This learning community implemented a placed-based approach, focusing on Brooklyn as a shared topic, and went beyond simply linking the courses by theme. The core of our learning community was an investment in fundamentally integrating the courses through collaborative planning. This article addresses the high-impact teaching strategies we employed: flexible scheduling, extensively integrated shared assignments throughout the semester, place-based learning[4] and maker pedagogy, which encourages students to learn through a collaborative, problem solving process.[5] These strategies, developed with the aim of engaging first-semester students in their general-education communication courses, also served to orient our students to City Tech and its neighboring environment. Consequently, these strategies better supported student success and engagement in the courses and ultimately provided a creative outlet for successful college work.

Flexible Scheduling: Shifting and Sharing

Flexible scheduling refers to both the scheduling of joint classes as well as a concept we call "class shifting." The two courses were scheduled consecutively; students participated in the two classes back-to-back, attending the Public Speaking course first, followed by the English Composition course during the very next time block. This schedule ensured that students spent nearly three continuous hours together two times per week, including both class time and social time between classes.

Some sessions were organized as joint classes, in which both instructors attended a single (or double) class session. This required each instructor to be available during the other instructor's class time. For example, when instructors needed to discuss the overlapping assignments with the students, both instructors

---

[4] In planning our learning community, we had the benefit of working on two place-based initiatives whose student engagement goals are in line with the goals of the First-Year Learning Communities program at City Tech. The Living Laboratory, a US Department of Education Title V grant, focused on using the Brooklyn waterfront as a living laboratory for improved general education at City Tech. Students and Faculty in the Archives, a US Department of Education FIPSE grant, supported faculty fellows at City Tech and two nearby private colleges to develop curricula for first-year courses that would bring students into the archives at partner institution Brooklyn Historical Society. For further information on the Living Lab grant, see "About the Living Lab." For further information on the partnership with Brooklyn Historical Society, see "Students and Faculty in the Archives: About SAFA" as well as "The Project" at TeachArchives.org. These opportunities, combined with on-campus LC professional development and our weekly out-of-class collaboration, facilitated over two hundred dedicated hours of planning time for this LC.

[5] For more information on and examples of maker philosophy, see Gauntlet (2011), Sharples, et al. (2013), and Donaldson (2013).

---

would attend the class session to answer student questions. Joint sessions involving back-to-back class periods were used primarily for field trips, held in conjunction with Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS), a partner institution located a short walk from campus. In these instances, the three hours of class time were dedicated to walking together—both instructors as well as the students—in the neighborhoods surrounding City Tech and to participating in the planned activities at BHS. In a semester, we scheduled ten joint sessions, with the understanding that the extra expenditure of time would help solidify the community atmosphere and goals we sought to establish. Since students' written work became the basis for student speeches, speech days were also scheduled as joint sessions that both instructors attended.

Another way this learning community employed flexible scheduling was via class shifting—pre-arranged times when instructors swapped class sessions to create a more extended class time for selected activities, such as speeches. For courses in Public Speaking, students regularly research, organize, and deliver speeches. Because the size of Public Speaking courses at City Tech is capped at 25 students, the schedule for a standard Public Speaking course requires four class days for informative speeches and four days for persuasive speeches. In a typical Monday/Wednesday schedule, for example, students begin giving their speeches on Monday and do not finish until the following Wednesday. This schedule creates an inequity, since students who deliver speeches on the last of the four class periods have nine more days to prepare than those that give their speeches on the first day. By using class shifting, we were able to shift class days to make assignment flow more intuitive and equitable: the Public Speaking instructor took two double sessions in one week (a double session on Monday and a double session on Wednesday). Shifting these two class sessions meant that no student had more than two extra days to prepare. Students appreciated this focus on fairness. To balance contact time, the two additional class sessions were then shifted to the English Composition course on non-speech weeks, creating double sessions for time-intensive peer-review sessions and writing workshops. As mentioned earlier, double sessions and class shifting require the instructors to be available during the other's class time. Instructors' availability for both class meeting times also proved beneficial in facilitating the integrated nature of the learning community, since both instructors could be present for classes as needed. In all, we had six class-shifting sessions—three shifted to ENG and three shifted to COM—that provided flexibility while adding no additional time to our schedules.

Overlapping Assignments: Communication and Place

It was important for students to work toward one project for both courses in order to generate an authentic sense of community, even when the expression of

that project was in different formats within each discipline. We began with an introductory project that was due shortly after the start of the semester. We built on this experience with a semester-long final project that layered the work students did throughout the semester.

Self-Introduction Speeches and Essays

At the start of the semester, the learning community launched with related introductory assignments in each of the linked classes. For Public Speaking, students began practicing the methods for organizing an effective speech by giving a short speech in which they identified their passion, life philosophy, and vision for their future. All students delivered their speeches in one class session, introducing themselves to the class, while also getting feedback from faculty and classmates. At the same time, students were assigned an essay in English Composition for which they were asked to draw on their reflections about their passion, life philosophy, and vision for their future in order to write a bio introducing themselves to the college. Additionally, students were required to choose an image—or avatar—that represented one of these aspects, addressing both how it represented their identity and how another viewer could misread it. The essay assignment was due on the same day that the speeches were delivered, making the writing process a way to help students draft their speeches.

The essay assignment did not simply feed into the speech assignment; it also incorporated the additional aspect of asking students to consider a previous lesson about visual literacy. This additional aspect of the assignment helped students gain the vocabulary and experience they would need for reading images during their visit to BHS. Further, students were encouraged to use the introduction and image for their bio and avatar as they developed their online profile on OpenLab (http://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu), City Tech's customized open source online platform for curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. As an introduction to the learning community, this first assignment simultaneously demonstrated the benefit of overlapping assignments and formed a foundation for the remaining assignments in the semester.

Mapping Brooklyn.

Our campus consists of four interconnected buildings plus two additional buildings one and two blocks away, respectively, and is quite small for the 16,000 degree-seeking students. What we lack in space we make up for in unparalleled surroundings: we are fortunate to be located steps away from both the Brooklyn Bridge and the Manhattan Bridge, and a short walk from historic Brooklyn Heights, DUMBO, Fort Greene, MetroTech, the Brooklyn Tech Triangle, the Brooklyn waterfront, the evolving Brooklyn Navy Yard, and the Downtown Brooklyn civic center, as well as other neighborhoods. In response to our Brooklyn-based approach, most of our students reported unfamiliarity with the

City Tech environs. Their unfamiliarity can be explained through the demographics of the student population: although nearly half of City Tech's students reside in Brooklyn, the vast majority report a travel time to campus that is longer than 30 minutes.[6] As a result of their distant home locations, students have little experience with the area around the college. Expanding students' familiarity and comfort with the area surrounding the college can help them find a place—literally and figuratively—at the college.

Since the learning community program includes only first-semester students, we incorporated assignments that facilitate students' orientation to the college and its surroundings. The work that the learning community did with BHS helped orient students to the college's vicinity, introduced archival research, and offered an opportunity for impromptu speeches. On their walk from campus to BHS during a shared class session, students participated in a short tour of Downtown Brooklyn, learning from a tour guide about three locations: the Brooklyn Theater, the Henry Ward Beecher statue, and the BHS building (a landmarked building).[7] This community-based learning activity involved visiting landmarks of historical importance. Some of these locations—such as the site where the Brooklyn Theater once stood[8]—provided a framework for thinking about the value of accessing and relaying information through storytelling. The walking tour represented a model for the LC's semester-long project: students were tasked with choosing a site to present and completing assignments that would support their choice, including creating a video of their persuasive speech arguing for the inclusion of their chosen location on a virtual walking tour of the area surrounding the college.

In a separate shared-session visit to the BHS archives, students examined maps ranging from 19th century manuscript maps to more recent maps 19th, 20th, and 21st century maps that illustrate information about the larger Downtown Brooklyn Area and transportation in Brooklyn and New York City. Each map offered students a new lens, or representation, for understanding their new locale, Downtown Brooklyn. The maps activity rearticulated the learning community's focus on place while providing a sense of the layered history of Downtown Brooklyn. Through a consideration of how and why these maps were preserved and the function of archives, students would have a model for the LC's shared

---

[6] "The Facts 2013-2014" report shows the demographics of students' home boroughs: 46.8% Brooklyn, 26.5% Queens, 9.1% Manhattan 10.9% Bronx, 2.3% Staten Island, 2.6% Other NY State, .4% Other U.S., and 1.3% International. According to the 2012 CUNY-wide Student Experience Survey, 83% of City Tech students reported a commute longer than 30 minutes (p. 19).

[7] Julie Golia, Public Historian at BHS led the tour in 2011 and 2012. After the grant ended and support from the staff at BHS was streamlined, we led the tour ourselves.

[8] The Brooklyn Theater was destroyed by fire in one of the worst tragedies in Brooklyn's history.

digital interactive map, which would be stored on the OpenLab and thus preserved for future use.

The interactive map project developed through a series of smaller assignments. For example, students incorporated what they learned from examining the maps into impromptu group speeches that they delivered as a wrap-up for this maps session. In English Composition, students were asked to take another walk in the neighborhoods adjacent to campus and to identify a location representative of many different versions of the city overlapping, a point of view that acknowledges that single spaces are subject to multiple and varied readings (Whitehead, 2004). Students then completed a project that involved juxtaposing these overlapping New Yorks using both descriptive and comparative rhetorical modes. Students researched locations of their choice based on the walking tour, their individual walk through overlapping New Yorks, and their maps visit and used their newly acquired information to develop informative speeches, which they delivered in two swapped-time sessions for Public Speaking. They then drafted essays for English Composition that incorporated library research into a comparison of two different stories about their chosen location. These assignments culminated in the final collaborative assignment, a Google map embedded with summaries of their essays and videos of students' persuasive speeches recorded on-site to serve as a virtual walking tour of the area around the college.

Students went on site to their chosen location, filmed their revised persuasive speeches, which they then uploaded to YouTube and embedded into a shared Google Map. Although instructors provided support as needed, this was a DIY project. Students formed their own partnerships with classmates or with friends to record their speeches on site. Since the college does not allow students to borrow equipment outside of the class without direct instructor supervision, they used whatever cameras and equipment were available to them. The semester-long mapping project gave students the opportunity to choose locations that interested them enough that they would want to conduct research, deliver informative speeches about their location, and write essays explaining why it mattered, what story it told, and why it belonged on the walking tour. On the final day of the semester, the class watched the videos and conducted a critique of the finished products. Ultimately, the project empowered students to take an interest in their college location, make choices based on those interests, exercise their creativity, and acquire and apply new skills to collaboratively produce the final project.

Conclusion

Learning communities offer a valuable learning experience for educators and students. This work outlines how flexible scheduling, overlapping communication-intensive assignments, and a place-based focus can be integrated to create a course pairing that could not be taught as two individual courses. Flexible scheduling afforded us the ability to avoid making concessions based on time constraints, not only allowing for greater fairness and efficiency, but also expanding opportunities for classroom and out-of-classroom activities.

Our choice to design overlapping assignments helped students since we were able to better scaffold the assignments and have their work throughout the semester build toward increasingly challenging course objectives. What students lost through the collaborative assignment, namely conducting research on two topics instead of one, was far outweighed by the increased depth, breadth and multimodal nature of the work they completed.

We found that the place-based focus on Brooklyn oriented students to the campus, supported their ability to find nearby places that expanded their campus experience and gave them tools for interacting critically with their surroundings. The maker approach extended beyond a typical research project, encouraging students to use their research about a place in Brooklyn to construct and deliver speeches about that place, go to the place and make a video, and, finally, upload that video to a shared Google Map to create a digital walking tour. Consequently, our use of maker pedagogy lead to a collaborative product that not only provided students with a sense of ownership of a shared final project, but also became meaningful in its ability to endure beyond the end of the semester. Mindful of the phenomenon of hyperbonding among learning community students (Watts, 2013), we designed this project for students to work closely with each other, on their own, or even with other friends from outside of class for the video production portion of the assignment. The project made audience and purpose—two important aspects of both written and oral communication—real for students and facilitated their ability to communicate their expertise for the benefit of classmates in their learning community, students outside of the learning community, and those who would enroll in it in the future.

Students in the learning community we created found more success than the general first-year population. When calculating the failure rate of a course, City Tech only includes students who received an "F" grade. However, the 'Did Not Pass" (DNP) rate within the college's system encompasses students who received an "F" as well as students who received a W (official withdrawal) or WU (unofficial withdrawal). Therefore, although the rate of failure for the course was comparable to other non-learning community courses in our college, the Did Not Pass rate of our learning community was significantly lower than the comparable courses, largely due to student persistence, i.e., no students dropped out or

withdrew from our learning community.[9] The collaborative pre-semester design process forced each of us to rigorously re-evaluate course objectives and the teaching strategies we implemented to achieve them. In doing so, we streamlined our practices, establishing a more meaningful trajectory for our teaching and, we conclude, for student learning. We recommend a similar collaborative, reflective process to anyone designing or redesigning a learning community.

References

About the Living Lab. (n.d.). *A living laboratory: Revitalizing general education for a 21st century college of technology*. Retrieved from http://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/livinglab/living-lab/

Beaulieu, E.A., & Williams, L.B. (2006). Micro-strategies: Small steps toward improved retention. *Journal of Learning Communities Research, 1*(1), 19-27.

Donaldson, J. (2014). The maker movement and the rebirth of constructionism. *Hybrid Pedagogy*. Retrieved from http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/constructionism-reborn/

Facts: 2013-2014. (2013). New York City College of Technology. Retrieved from http://www.citytech.cuny.edu/files/aboutus/facts.pdf

Fall 2013 grade distribution report. (2014). New York City College of Technology. Retrieved from http://air.citytech.cuny.edu/digitaldb/pdfDocs/Fall2013GDR/Fall13GDR.html

Gauntlett, D. (2011). *Making is connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0*. Malden, MA: Polity.

Hegler, K.L. (2004). Assessing learning communities. *Assessment Update*, *16*(6), l-8.

Henscheid, J.M. (2004). First-year seminars in learning communities: Two reforms intersect. In J. M. Henscheid (Ed.), *Integrating the first-year experience: The role of learning communities in first year seminars* (Monograph No. 39, pp. 1-8). Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

Huerta, J.C. (2009). Classroom assessment of learning communities for political scientists. In M. D. Deardorff, K. Hamman, & J. Ishiyama (Eds.), *Assessment in political science*. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.

---

[9] Reviewing a 2013 Grade Distribution Report for the fall 2013 semester, we were encouraged to see our statistics for DNP significantly lower than the average for all students enrolled in these courses: 8% versus 22.3% for English Composition (268% lower DNP rate), 4% versus 16.9% for Public Speaking (422% lower DNP rate).

Kellogg, K. (1999). Learning communities: ERIC Digest. *ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education*. Washington DC: George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development. Retrieved from http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED430512.pdf

Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter.* Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Lardner, E., & Malnarich, G. (2008/2009). Assessing integrative learning: Insights from Washington Center's national project on assessing learning in learning communities. *Journal of Learning Communities Research*, *3*(3), 1-20.

Oates, K. K., & Leavitt, L. H. (2003). *Service-learning and learning communities: Tools for integration and assessment*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Sharples, M., McAndrew, P., Weller, M., Ferguson, R., FitzGerald, E., Hirst, T., & Gaved, M. (2013). *Innovating pedagogy 2013: Open university innovation report 2.* Milton Keynes: The Open University. Retrieved from http://www.open.ac.uk/personalpages/mike.sharples/Reports/Innovating_Pedagogy_report_2013.pdf

Stassen, M. L. A. (2003). Student outcomes: The impact of varying living-learning community models. *Research in Higher Education*, *44*(5), 581-609.

Student Experience Survey. (2012). The City University of New York--Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Retrieved from http://air.citytech.cuny.edu/air/Surveys/student-experience-surveys.aspx

Students and Faculty in the Archives: About SAFA. (n.d.). Brooklyn Historical Society. Retrieved from http://safa.brooklynhistory.org/home/about-safa/

Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, *21*(2), 167-177.

The Project. (2013). TeachArchives.org: Based on a Project at Brooklyn Historical Society. Retrieved from http://www.teacharchives.org/project

Watts, J. (2013). Why hyperbonding occurs in the learning community classroom and what to do about it. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, *1*(3), Article 4. Available at http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol1/iss3/4

Whitehead, C. (2004). *The colossus of New York: A city in thirteen parts*. New York: Random House.

Zhao, C., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, *45*(2), 115-138.