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Broadening Participation in Research Focused, Upper-Division Learning Communities

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Broadening Participation in Research Focused, Upper-Division Learning Communities

Abstract

We address several challenges faced by those who wish to increase the number of faculty participating in upper-division learning communities that feature a student research experience. Using illustrations from our own learning community, we describe three strategies for success that focus on providing low cost incentives and other means to promote and sustain faculty cooperation.

Keywords

undergraduate research

Cover Page Footnote

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At the outset, investing time in the creation of new learning communities can appear daunting or even unwise. Many institutions lack the resources needed to incentivize new faculty collaborations. Participating faculty are often not directly rewarded for such time-consuming activities in tenure or personnel decisions. When combined with the uncertainty of securing the sustained cooperation of a new teaching partner, the risk of failure can seem to outweigh the potential benefits.

We suspect this cost-benefit calculation characterizes the thinking of many college professors who do not join learning community programs. In our experience, concerns about risks and rewards are often raised by those who already have substantial teaching, research, and service commitments. And, perhaps as a consequence, our learning communities program remains staffed by a stable but small cadre who mainly teach in clusters of lower-division courses. In such a context, far too few students (and faculty alike) enjoy the learning and social benefits that learning communities can foster.

How can a faculty member committed to expanding participation in learning communities win over a skeptical colleague? We address this challenge by reporting the results of a successful collaboration between a learning communities enthusiast and a (former) skeptic. While others have documented the benefits of learning communities (e.g., Tampke & Durodoye, 2013; Huerta & Sperry, 2013) for student learning, engagement, and retention, our focus is on sharing how we initiated and sustained a productive partnership without new institutional incentives.

In the next section we outline how we defined the challenge of enlisting faculty to cooperate in an effort to create research focused, upper-division learning communities (UDLCs) in political science. We then describe three strategies for success that were inspired by the game-theoretic literature on cooperation. In the conclusion we suggest that our approach can be replicated by others who also wish to broaden faculty participation in the face of similar obstacles.

The Problem

The idea of creating upper-division learning communities (UDLCs) is not new or something we invented. In the fall of 2011, the annual Atlantic Center for Learning Communities retreat featured many sessions – especially those facilitated by representatives of Wagner College – that described the benefits of integrating upper-division courses around a shared community-based activity. The benefits described included building new ties between students with shared interests, creating positive interactions between students and community

members, and integrating advanced curricula within or between departments. Our experiences at the retreat served as the spark for our initial conversations.

In spring 2012 we discussed creating a pair of upper-division political science courses around the theme of public opinion research, with the possibility of running a community poll. At that time, a UDLC program had not taken root on our campus. And, during our first discussion, the many failed attempts we had witnessed in the past weighed heavily on our minds. We could both agree on the potential benefits of working together for our students. However, we also worried that the time and level of cooperation required for such an effort would be difficult to sustain.

Somewhat jokingly at first, we described our concerns to each other as a variant on the classic prisoner's dilemma. In the original prisoner's game, two accomplices (A and B) are held separately and care more about their individual fate than about that of their associate. Each is individually offered the option to betray his or her accomplice by testifying that the other committed the crime or to cooperate by staying silent. If A betrays B while B remains silent, then A receives no punishment, but B receives maximum confinement. This is known as the "sucker's payoff." If both A and B betray each other, they each receive relatively lighter punishments. If both stay silent, they receive virtually no punishment at all. The dilemma is that each prisoner is better off betraying the other than keeping silent to avoid being the "sucker," but this punishment is worse than if they each cooperate. This game represents a conflict between individual and group rationality. If all group members behave in their self-interest, the group is worse off than if each individual behaved contrary to his or her immediate self-interest. We dubbed our version the "faculty dilemma."

In the *faculty dilemma* game, two instructors are faced with the choice to create a UDLC or not. The collectively optimal outcome occurs when both faculty members choose to cooperate, thereby resulting in a new undergraduate experience—the equivalent of both accomplices remaining silent. However, each faculty is tempted to choose "no UDLC" to avoid the sucker's payoff, a scenario in which one faculty member cooperates by initiating plans for a UDLC but the faculty partner elects not to cooperate. The campus learning community program will fail to grow if individual faculty opt out, a clearly rational decision that protects them from the potential of wasted efforts. By representing our situation as the faculty dilemma, we clarified the benefits of aligning individual faculty incentives with group goals.

Solutions to the Cooperation Problem

Having defined our dilemma as a cooperation problem, we brainstormed potential ideas that were inspired by the game theory literature (e.g., Schelling, 1960). In particular, we focused on creating an individual incentive to cooperate that did not require financial or other support from the institution. In short, we attempted to shift the incentive structure from “avoiding being the sucker” to one in which cooperation was clearly rewarded as the game was played and replayed over the course of a semester.

Strategy 1. Jump-start cooperation by acting like an entrepreneur

During the early planning phase, one partner (the enthusiast) initially invested far more of his time and energies than his potential (and more skeptical) collaborator. In a sense, one partner acted as a faculty entrepreneur who, as in business or politics (Salisbury, 1969), invests in and bears the organizational start-up costs for a venture without any certainty about the outcome. The faculty entrepreneur invests time, energy, and expertise to ensure that the initial stages of cooperation go smoothly.

In our case, the learning community enthusiast served as the principal coordinator and creator of initial ideas for the *Public Opinion Research* learning community. He began by identifying resources that would facilitate the integration of linked courses around a common telephone polling project. First, he worked with an administrator of Moodle, our course management system, to create a site and enroll students in two different courses as though they were one. Then, with the Moodle site in place, we could use the Wiki feature of Moodle to facilitate the writing of items and overall questionnaire design across two different courses. The Wiki platform is ideal because all students can edit the document, and their contributions can be tracked for evaluation and grading.

The faculty entrepreneur was also forced to address the fact that we were in jeopardy of losing access to the SPSS software package. Given the relative ease of teaching data analysis with SPSS, the faculty entrepreneur invested significant time in discussions that resulted in the campus purchasing a continuing subscription to the software. As a result, our students could write papers based on the tabular analysis of our data and a few measures of association that we would each introduce in our courses.

Finally, the faculty entrepreneur reserved access to the call center on campus. The director of the call center agreed to loan us the space because he wanted to contribute to our faculty-student project and, quite possibly, identify talented students who could later work at the call center.

Strategy 2. Create an incentive for cooperation: Pledge at the start to generate data for a future joint publication

With the necessary resources secured, it was time to create an incentive that would sustain our cooperation over the duration of a busy semester. To create such an incentive, we agreed at the start to co-author a paper based on data collected by our students. As data would only become available if the project was successful, each of us had a clear inducement to work toward the realization of the joint venture. In effect, the possibility of improving our individual chances to publish (and obtain tenure) made the goal of creating new student opportunities more attractive than electing not to cooperate. Both of us viewed these data as a material benefit gained through cooperation.

Strategy 3. Develop an integrative assignment as a focal point for collaboration

The last major challenge in solving the faculty dilemma was to reduce the cost of cooperation over time. Since this was our first joint effort, neither of us believed it was feasible to fully integrate our syllabi. Instead, we focused on designing a project of mutual interest for our students to complete. This was initially difficult as one of us specializes in American political institutions and the other in comparative political behavior. Because we had both witnessed many potential teaching collaborations falter at this stage, we turned to an exercise that was introduced at an earlier campus workshop (Huerta, 2011):

1. What public issue of concern to students could be used as a *focal point*?
2. What would each course contribute to student understanding of the issue?
3. What will students do that will contribute to their learning in each course?

In the first polling project, we elected to study public support for a proposed dissolution referendum of a local village. This was mutually interesting because we share an interest in sub-national governance. Since many of our students are from New York villages that have formed a dissolution study committee, we also believed this topic would pique their interest. Author 1 contributed his knowledge of state and local government while Author 2 focused on measuring public attitudes. Students benefited from studying a “real world” example of an effort to restructure governance at the local level.

The project would contribute to our students’ understanding of survey design and analysis. At the outset, our course texts supplied information about key polling questions, such as wording and question order. Student learning would deepen when we asked them to write new questions and work together via a course wiki, which was where we sited the novel questionnaire. They relied on a

list of registered voters from the local Board of Elections and drew a sample of telephone numbers using Excel. Finally, each student wrote a short paper about public support for eliminating our local government.

Conclusion

Applying the logic of cooperation games was helpful in generating new upper-division learning communities with a research focus. We identified several strategies that made participation “worth the price” to a skeptical faculty member who needed an incentive to dive in and get started. Our deviation from the traditional professor-as-lecturer format required an initial investment of time and energy, but it has paid-off in many ways.

The *Public Opinion Research* UDLC has been offered on three occasions and, in each instance, included a successful public opinion poll. As a result of our work together to frame the project, the first survey was completed with 9 students common to both courses. The second and third iterations required us to coordinate the activities of about 15 students in the two linked courses. Our students actively participated in the writing of the questionnaires, completed a total of 857 interviews, analyzed the results, and helped to publicize the findings in the local media. We expect to repeat this active learning experience with new students next year.

Our successful work with students has shifted the reward structure we originally faced when confronted with the faculty dilemma. The data generated by our students served as the basis for three conference papers and one article manuscript that is currently under revision. For faculty with a heavy teaching load, such scholarly productivity is a significant reward in itself and, at the time of this writing, has contributed to one author receiving tenure. These data simply would not have been available without our efforts at cooperation.

We believe our success translates into a fairly clear lesson for those who wish to broaden faculty participation in upper-division learning communities at other institutions. Our advice is to ask those who already believe deeply in the value of learning communities to attempt one new teaching partnership with a reluctant colleague. When that potential collaborator objects, perhaps citing the need to invest his or her time elsewhere, we suggest acting like an entrepreneur by investing time in the drafting of several potential common projects. If the skeptic can see the value of at least one of those projects, he or she may eventually join that cadre of learning community enthusiasts.

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