

## **Student Perceptions About Their Informal Learning Experiences in a First-Year Residential Learning Community**

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*Abstract.* This study examined the perceptions of six first-year students involved in a residential learning community during the program's pilot year. During group interviews, study participants shared their perceptions about what they were learning as members of the community and what value they placed on that learning. The findings indicated students perceived they were learning (a) how to relate to their peers in a number of ways, (b) that the new environment prompted them to question personal beliefs and assumptions, and (c) that they were benefiting from the academic and social support of the learning community. Findings from this study may heighten awareness among faculty and administrators regarding issues students face outside the classroom and may suggest to classroom instructors ways to use informal learning to enhance formal learning experiences.

Learning communities are found in hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the United States. These programs typically bring new students together to form a network of peers, faculty, and upperclass students with shared interests. Members of a learning community may share several classes in common, often relating to a specified area of academic or personal interest (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). They are also designed to encourage collaborative group work and supply students with a social support network that reaches beyond classroom walls. In the new and unfamiliar college setting, first-year students involved in a learning community typically

have a network of peers enrolled in the same classes who may also engage in the same cocurricular and social activities and may be assigned to the same residence halls. Broadly speaking, learning communities are intended to foster “active learning over passive learning, cooperation over competition, and community over isolation” (Cross, 1998, p. 5).

While the purpose of these programs is to provide both academic and social support to students, much of the research conducted to date has focused on two facets of the academic, or formal, aspects of learning communities: (a) quantifiable assessment measures (e.g., student retention, grades) and (b) student satisfaction (MacGregor, 2004). While results of these studies support the contention that learning communities improve formal learning and increase student retention and satisfaction with the institution (Huba, Epperson, & McFadden, 2000; Lindblad, 2000; Stassen, 2003), less is known about the students’ perceptions of the role the community plays in the informal learning that takes place outside the classroom. This study is, therefore, intended to bring understanding of informal learning into parity with understanding of the formal aspects of learning communities.

## **Informal Learning in Learning Communities**

Enculturation is the process of becoming an “insider” in a community (Brown & Duguid, 1991). During enculturation, a new member of a culture unconsciously studies the norms, behaviors, and language of the people who are part of that culture (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Students new to a college or university experiencing this type of enculturation may be helped by joining a group of supportive others, presumably with similar interests.

The learning that accompanies enculturation is fundamentally social in nature (Wenger, 1996). Social learning theory emphasizes that learning is a matter of engagement in practice, reflects participation in communities of practice, and fundamentally changes who one is (Wenger). This learning can also be considered informal in nature. Coombs (1985) defined informal learning as “the spontaneous, unstructured learning that goes on daily in the home and neighborhood, behind the school and on the playing field, in the workplace, marketplace, library and museum, and through the various mass media” (p. 92). Research about the learning that occurs in college- and university-level learning communities must include, then, both an examination of formal academic learning and the informal social learning that accompanies enculturation.

By definition, informal learning makes determining desired learning outcomes difficult. The nature of informal learning implies that learning occurs outside pre-set goals and objectives. Past assessments of learning in informal settings have often involved watching for learning-associated behaviors (Barriault, 1999), which, according to this author, assumes that the learners share goals with each other and with the designer of the learning experience. This further implies that all participants come to the experience with similar backgrounds and quality and quantity of prior knowledge. In fact, individuals typically come to a learning experience with divergent goals, motivations, interests, and prior knowledge (Dierking, 2002; Falk & Dierking, 2002), all of which affect learning outcomes and make learning an experience unique to each individual. Because diversity of goals is particularly acute in informal learning environments, researchers in these settings are increasingly taking a more holistic approach to “allow the learning experience to be situated within a larger context in order to make sense of why and what learning occurred” (Falk, 2004, p. S90).

Understanding learning in an informal environment is best achieved, then, by remaining free from the constraints of externally established goals and from the desire to count behaviors believed indicative of preconceived notions of learning. Understanding can be reached by taking an in-depth look at the individual’s perceptions of his or her own experience through observations and/or, as is the case with the study reported here, open-ended interviews.

## **Method**

The purpose of this study was to examine students’ perceptions of their informal learning experiences in a residential learning community during one semester in academic year 2004-2005. Study participants shared their perceptions about what they were learning as members of the community and what value they placed on that learning. Research questions included:

1. What are students learning through their experiences with the learning community outside the classroom?
2. What value do students place on their learning?
3. How does the community influence the individual’s approach to learning?

### *Design*

A qualitative research design was used. The intention of this study was to describe and interpret the perceptions of the students in the learning community consistent with interpretivist goals for qualitative research (Reeves, 2000).

A fundamental belief of qualitative research is that individuals construct their own reality as they interact with the world (Merriam, 2002). This idea, grounded in constructivist philosophy, is central to what Merriam calls basic interpretive qualitative research, which focuses on the meaning people make of a situation or phenomenon and how they interpret their experiences. Qualitative researchers are not interested in generalizing, contending that all human behaviors are “heavily mediated by the context in which it occurs” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 62). Rather, qualitative researchers seek to contribute to the social construction of knowledge (Stake, 2000) and prefer to speak of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### *Participants*

This study was conducted at a large, research-intensive public university in the southeastern United States with an undergraduate population of about 25,000 students. At the time of the study, the incoming grade point average of first-year students was, on average, a 3.74. The participants in this study were six students enrolled in a voluntary first-year residential learning community during the program’s pilot year.

When students received official acceptance to the university, they were given the option of applying to be in one of four thematic learning communities: science, education, social science, or global issues. Students were assigned a community based on their choice and community availability. Each learning community was composed of 20 students, all of whom lived in the same residence hall. Learning community members shared the same residence hall floor with other members of their same gender and other students not participating in the learning community. Each semester, the students in the education learning community (the community under study here) enrolled together in a one-hour education seminar, as well as two other courses (e.g., the first-semester education learning community students were co-enrolled in art and English). Of the 20 students in the education learning community, 18 were women and two were men.

To conduct the study, student volunteers were solicited from the education learning community during their bi-weekly seminar. Students were

informed that a decision to participate or not participate in this research would in no way affect their grade in the class.

The six participants were all 18 years old and classified as “in-state” students. There were four European American females, one female of Hispanic descent, and one male of Indian descent. All were born in the United States. Group 1 was comprised of Dan, Laurie, and Jessie. Group 2 was comprised of Allison, Nadina, and Carrie.

### *Data Collection*

Along with other students enrolled in the learning community seminar, study participants were randomly placed into groups of three to complete a “photo safari” for their learning community seminar. The assignment required students to visit places on campus and in the downtown area unfamiliar to them and to document the experience with photos. Both groups interviewed for this study had been formed as part of this assignment. The interviews took place approximately three weeks after they presented pictures and stories from their safari to the class. I conducted hour-long interviews with each group. According to Fontana and Frey (2000), interviewing several individuals together can produce “rich data that are cumulative and elaborative; they can be stimulating for respondents” (p. 652). Moreover, group interviews can aid recall of targeted events or situations. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim and occurred approximately three months into the students’ first year at the university.

Question construction and selection of questions for the interview were based on Spradley’s (1979) and Patton’s (2002) use of an open-ended protocol. Questions focused on the students’ experiences with other members of the learning community.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

I used an inductive process to analyze the data, allowing the theory to emerge as the analysis proceeded (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). According to Patton (2002), inductive analysis is about “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (pp. 55-56) by allowing dimensions to emerge without presupposing beforehand what the important dimensions will be. I used HyperRESEARCH™ 2.6, a qualitative data analysis software package, to assign codes and categories to the interview data, and to add memorandums. During coding, I used the constant comparison method from grounded

theory (Charmaz, 2002), repeatedly returning to earlier sections of each interview to compare new data to earlier passages. From these codes, I looked for themes that were prevalent across the cases.

## Findings

The findings indicated that students perceived that (a) they were learning how to relate to their peers in a number of ways, (b) the new environment prompted them to question personal beliefs and assumptions, and (c) they were benefiting from the academic and social support of the learning community.

### *Ways of Relating to Peers*

The ways that students related to and interacted with their peers were seen as sometimes inclusionary and sometimes exclusionary. As they were learning to relate to each other, the students tried to allow for differences between themselves and other community members.

*Inclusionary/exclusionary interactions.* Inclusion and exclusion can be viewed as perceptions of how the community embraces or rebuffs its members, either because of a member's own personal characteristics or the actions of other students. Study participants described actions they took with other members of the learning community that led to feelings of inclusion, especially at the beginning of the school year. Jessie and Laurie gave a list of activities they shared, such as "listen to really cool music," "visit people," and "spend so much time together." When asked what they did with other members of the learning community, participants listed activities such as: hanging out, going to dinner, going out on weekends, going to movies, going dancing, staying in and watching movies or playing games, and studying. Carrie said she felt she had found her "new college best friends in the learning community."

The nature of exclusionary interactions is illustrated by Dan, who expressed himself as an outsider looking in. When describing Laurie and Jessie's actions during their photo safari, Dan said, "they're saying all this stuff and it's so foreign to me, it's like I've never done this before." Dan declined to comment specifically about what the other students were doing that was so unfamiliar to him.

Allison, Nadina, and Carrie, however, did not consider any members of the learning community to be outsiders, though they all agreed that there was one member

...that just doesn't quite, like, fit in, doesn't seem as typical like college kid and so um, that person, like it's not like there's any, I don't have anything against this person, it's not awkward hanging out, it's just like the things this person says just kind of strike you as funny sometimes, when it's not always meant to be. But, still fairly easy to get along with. Nobody in the group, like this group seems to be, there's nobody so different that they don't fit in at all and they just seem out of place.

So while Dan admitted to feeling like an outsider at times, other members of the learning community said that there were no outsiders per se, just one student who did not quite fit in.

In some cases, an act of inclusion would result in the exclusion of another. For example, during one interview Laurie and Jessie tended to include each other in all of their stories and interactions. Their camaraderie often left Dan out of the conversation. This dynamic was not only apparent in their interactions during the interview; the stories that Laurie and Jessie shared about the photo safari reflected similar unequal treatment. From their recollection of the evening they conducted their safari, Laurie and Jessie shared control of the event. During the interview, Dan noted that the group followed a particular course of action because "the girls" wanted to see or do something. None of the group members indicated that Dan's interests drove decisions the evening of the safari.

*Accommodating differences.* While admitting that it was not always easy to work and live with people who were different, all participants agreed there was value in learning how to appreciate and adjust to accommodate differences. Dan shared an engineering class experience in which a group of students with different backgrounds worked together to solve a problem. He said the task was not possible for any one individual working alone but combining the expertise of all allowed them to achieve their shared objective. He later said this ability to work with others was "important because the world is getting much, much smaller."

Laurie and Jessie shared similar perceptions. Jessie said it was important to learn how to stay open-minded and recounted her college-preparation experiences in high school:

You really have to be able to connect with people or else they just won't listen, and it's just kind of useless to sit there and prattle on about stuff when they have no idea what you're talking about. So I did stuff like that to kind of help prepare me for college being able to connect with people really quick.

Laurie agreed, "In life, you're going to have to deal with people who aren't like you, so you might as well learn it at some point."

Allison, Nadina, and Carrie pointed out the advantage of working with different kinds of people and offered examples of how diversity was beneficial to groups, in general, and especially to their learning community. They particularly appreciated the experiences of other members of the learning community who had spent extensive time in other countries or who possessed intimate knowledge of other cultures. Nadina, who spent a significant part of her life in Colombia, said:

For instance, if you were interested in knowing things about a South American country someone could come to me and be like, how's it like there, or if they need help with their Spanish homework, or Meg can tell us about how it is to go to school in a Japanese school, or personal growth type things, not academic wise, but informal learning<sup>1</sup> type.

All of the students shared stories about the benefits of diversity and, specifically, about the benefits of learning to deal effectively with diversity.

### *Questioning of Personal Beliefs and Assumptions*

As the students recounted their experiences, they called into question previously held beliefs and pondered experimenting with new ideas and actions. As they questioned their beliefs, they expressed uncertainty, particularly in the face of new or unfamiliar situations. Dan faced a behavioral choice that conflicted with his family's work ethic emphasizing productivity:

If [what you were doing as a family member] was not productive, then you should not think about doing it. So it was like, you have to do school work all the time, you have to do things that's going to make you better off trying to get a job or whatever after college...

Dan said that coming to college and seeing other students go out drinking made him wonder if that was something he could do as well. In the end, he decided he could not allow himself to engage in this behavior, but seeing others take time off from schoolwork had shown him that there is time for play, too. He explained, "I have not seen a movie in a very long time and I saw half a movie a few days ago. Otherwise I would have been studying at that point."

Jessie also shared experiences that made her question her work ethic, though from a different perspective than Dan's:

I've gotten the chance to see how other people prepare for like tests, papers, cause you see like, Christie and Julie start on their papers like, you know, a week before it's due when we first get the assignment and they work on them and continue to work on them... It's just so drastically different than me cause I just, I procrastinate like nobody's business. You know I've seen them all work like so hard on everything and I'm like I should start doing that.

In both cases, other students were modeling behaviors for Dan and Jessie. While neither of them admitted to making drastic changes in their behaviors, they both said witnessing the actions of other students had prompted them to examine their own beliefs.

Similarly, Carrie indicated that problems with her roommate had led her to question her beliefs. "I got paired with someone that I didn't know [who is not in the learning community], and we don't have anything in common that I'm aware of. And she's not very friendly, and she tries to push people around." Carrie explained that she had always believed that it was "good to be nice," and that if she was nice to someone, they would be nice back. "I've learned that you have to try to be nice...but you also have to know when to stand up for yourself and know that that person's not going to change just because you want them to."

### *Support Through Living and Working With Others*

The informal support study participants received from other students in the learning community was both academic and social.

*Academic support.* All participants in this study described members of the learning community as sources of information. At times, they could clarify concepts from shared classes. As Laurie explained, "They can point

out something that maybe your professor explained to you but you didn't understand... coming from somebody else sometimes they can like rephrase it and you can understand it more." Learning community students also tended to provide logistical information, such as alerting each other when art class assignments were due.

Jessie explained how the group prepared for their English assignments. "We usually proofread each others papers for English. We get like a whole group of us in one room and just like pass the papers around, when it gets back you have like 10 different colors of ink on it."

Members of the community also studied together, sometimes adopting one another's study techniques as the semester progressed. Students from both interview groups talked about Allison's flash cards used for their art tests. Allison explained, "I always make flash cards for art, and I usually get a few people stop by my room asking if they can look at my flash cards or whatever." Nadina added, "I never used to like make flashcards, and like now...for some classes I make flash cards, not art, because I use Allison's. They're much better than what I would do."

Academic support was not limited to proofreading and collaborative studying. Laurie and Jessie shared a long story about how Jessie encouraged Laurie to talk to a professor about a poor grade she had received and the benefits and sense of confidence that resulted from the experience.

*Social support.* Participants also indicated that they supported each other through roommate problems and were available to walk to class together and to plan evenings out. Dan referred to other members of the learning community as a "safety net," explaining:

If I just want to visit people and I really don't have anyone to see or talk to I can always go downstairs, and the girls are always willing, I mean, everybody downstairs is really, really good to strike up conversations. And the same thing with Ian<sup>2</sup>, he just lives like two doors down from where I live, so. And when you're looking for plans you can always make them impromptu with the learning community.

Laurie also used the term "safety net" when talking about the learning community:

There was always someone you could go to, and like when our roommates didn't turn out good there was someone else that we could be

like, hey, do you want to room together? It was kind of nice to have that safety net...being in such a big school and such a different place than where I'm from.

Nadina simply offered, "at least you won't be lonely or depressed in your room."

The learning community provided other types of social support. For example, Carrie indicated that class attendance among learning community members was very high: high enough for one of their professors to notice. Carrie explained: "To me I'm like, well everyone's already going to be there anyway. And you go because you want to see those people." Allison summed up the informal support offered by the learning community in this way:

I think just the whole, the group as a whole and knowing that we all live by each other and that we're all having the same experiences with our classes and everything, so that we have people to talk to, like complain about English papers or study for tests or go eat lunch after class, it just kind of gives you an automatic group, even if it's not going to be your group of friends that you'd have all four years, it's a group at least for the first semester and into the next semester too a little bit.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Proponents of learning communities often stress their formal and informal advantages with much of the research focused on the formal. This emphasis can overlook the informal learning that may occur among students who live and attend school together. This study contributes to the understanding of informal learning in learning communities.

Overall, the findings suggest that learning community students learn from each other in a number of ways. The students watched both the social and academic behaviors of others in the learning community, compared them to their own behaviors, and occasionally questioned their own beliefs in light of what others were doing. At times, witnessing other students' behaviors and consequences of those behaviors reinforced the student's own beliefs. On other occasions, it inspired a consideration to change.

Some learning community participants formed strong friendships with each other, while others drew on these relationships for informal academic support. At varying levels of intensity they studied together, socialized

together, ate together, and attended class together. The lines between social and academic support were occasionally blurred. Learning community participants learned about diversity and expressed their belief in the value of working with those who were different from them. On the other hand, at times the strong bonds that developed between some of the students served to exclude others.

While past research supports the notion that learning communities offer both formal and informal benefits to students (Huba et al., 2000; Lindblad, 2000; Stassen, 2003; Tinto & Goodsell-Love, 1993), the negative phenomenon of “hyperbonding” among students is receiving increasing attention on learning community electronic listservs (Dixon, 2004). Hyperbonding can manifest itself in several ways, from one group of students building relationships that exclude other learning community members to an entire learning community isolating itself from other students in the same residence hall or “ganging up” on a professor to protest class structure, assignments, or grading. Findings of this study suggest that the phenomenon of hyperbonding among learning community students does exist and deserves further exploration.

Future individual and group interview studies can increase understanding of individual and collective aspects of informal learning in learning communities. Observational studies of students working and living together could investigate actual interactions, in contrast to reports of interactions. Findings from this and other studies may increase faculty and administrator awareness of the issues students face outside the classroom and help instructors in learning communities maximize the potential of these programs. Peer educators and academic advisors involved in learning communities may also be better equipped to anticipate and alleviate the effects of problems that may arise.

## Author’s Note

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Nadina might have used the term *informal learning* here for my benefit. I had explained my interest in informal learning when I initially recruited them to participate, and again at the beginning of the interview.

<sup>2</sup>The only other male in the education learning community.

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