

The Foreign Language Learning Community: Content and Collaboration in the University



Denise Overfield, State University of West Georgia

Abstract

This paperⁱ presents a curricular model, proven to be successful in other disciplines, for addressing the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning at the university level. A learning community (LC), focusing on a single theme in a variety of disciplines culled from a university's core curriculum, allows a small group of students, usually first-year students, to explore an issue from a variety of viewpoints. Studies have shown that students in LCs often have higher grade point averages, retention rates, and levels of involvement in campus activities. This paper provides examples from an in-progress LC.

Introductionⁱⁱ

The release of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996, 1999) represented a shift in the conceptualization of language learning and teaching. Instead of starting from the traditional notion that reading, writing, listening, and speaking are the four components of language, the standards begin with a framework of communication modes (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) based on the contexts in which we use language. Depending on our goal in communicating within a mode, we utilize the four language components mentioned above (Phillips & Draper, 1999). The standards of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities draw on the standards' framework and provide a broad blueprint for describing what students should know and be able to do in the target language. This blueprint offers a basis for developing a curriculum that integrates the language system, cultural knowledge, communication strategies, critical thinking skills, learning strategies, content from other disciplines, and more (NSFLEP, 1999).

Maxwell et al. (1999), in a report of the findings of the Language Mission Project that examined the state of language teaching in higher education, flatly stated that "there are compelling indicators that foreign language programs in higher education are in a state of crisis" (p. 46). These indicators include the inability of many foreign language programs to make connections that demonstrate the importance and value of foreign language study, both within and across disciplines. This "weave of curricular elements" is often difficult to achieve at the university level due to constraints of time, money,

and class size. Also, some faculty frequently underutilize applied linguistics research by separating language pedagogy from what is often considered more "substantive" topics such as literature or culture studies.

This split between "content" courses and "language" courses is unnecessary. Phillips and Lafayette (1996) point out that foreign language education is in the unique position of being able to connect very deliberately with other disciplines without losing its core (p. 203). Students learning a foreign language must be able to speak and write *about* something, regardless of their level. The national standards reflect this belief in the way that they have shifted discussion from the four skills to the three modes of communication, a shift that moves away from the mechanics of language production to the nature of language use. This view echoes one developed by Shanker (1994) in which he stated that general educational standards must be grounded in the core disciplines.

However, creating and maintaining the shift to communication skills is sometimes more difficult at the post-secondary level, particularly in mid- to large-size universities where faculty not only teach core courses required of all students, but also must recruit and teach upper-level students while simultaneously pursuing research interests. In order to create connections across disciplines, faculty must be able to collaborate; however, finding opportunities to do so may be difficult.

The learning community concept addresses this notion of connection within the curriculum. It does so, not by offering a radically different pedagogical method, but rather by re-thinking the breadth of courses that characterizes so

many first-year student schedules. It also provides the cohesiveness that too often characterizes only the schedules of students who have already declared a major. Further more, the LC model addresses the issue of faculty reaching across disciplines to examine new ways of approaching traditional core disciplines.

The Learning Community

In its most basic form, a learning community consists of a kind of block scheduling that links two courses together, allowing students to explore similar themes in both. An example might be the linking of a course in African-American history with one in multicultural literature. On a broader scale, an LC might include an entire semester's or quarter's schedule in which a common topic links all of the courses (Tinto, 2000). Figure 1 provides an example of such an LC. Both types of LCs are facilitated by a registration process that allows students interested in exploring the designated theme simply to indicate that desire and register for the entire block by enrolling in the LC.

Sometimes these courses are open only to students in the LC (dedicated sections); at other times the courses might be open to a broader population with a certain number of seats (often 25) reserved for the LC students (non-dedicated sections). This design eliminates the possibility that certain courses might be closed. It also guarantees that the students will take their courses with faculty who have worked together on the planning and organization of the courses in order to ensure that the subject matter addresses the LC's theme.

The LC focusing on language and culture issues differs from the concept of

Figure 1: Sample Learning Community

Individuals vs. Societies: Studies of American and Japanese History, Literature, and Cinema (3 quarters)

"In this program we examine the concepts of individual, society, and the interaction between the two through the critical exploration of American and Japanese history, literature, cinema, as well as popular media."

Credit awarded in Japanese history, Japanese culture, literature, American history, American culture, American literature, psychology, sociology, film criticism, Japanese cinema, and American cinema.

16 credits awarded per quarter

Evergreen College (2002)

Languages Across the Curriculum (LAC) in that it is not purpose-specific. In other words, the language courses in a language/culture-oriented LC do not focus specifically on preparing students to communicate in a certain field (such as business); rather, they are one more approach to learning about the issues and topics that are the focus of the LC. According to Straight (1998), LAC is a means for university students to improve their cross-cultural knowledge and purpose-specific multilingual and intercultural skills. In the LC, students explore a theme from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including that of the foreign language.

Advantages of a Learning Community Format

Most LC programs are still fairly new, so there is not yet a great deal of research fully demonstrating their effectiveness. Still, there are some reports and studies that indicate that the LC format is an especially effective way to deepen the academic and social experiences of university students.

Tinto (2000), for instance, in a five-year study of LCs at the University of Washington, LaGuardia Community College, and Seattle Central Community College, reports that students involved in LCs persisted in their studies at “a substantially higher rate than did comparable students in the traditional curriculum” (p. 12). Reports and self-assessments made by individual institutions reflect this fact as well. At the State University of West Georgia, for example, first-year students participating in five learning communities had a retention rate of 72.07% versus 64.02% for non-LC students (Gagnon, 1999).

Grade point averages among LC students tend to be higher as well. Because LC students spend a great deal of time together, both inside and outside of class, their higher level of interaction appears to contribute positively to their academic performance. Thompson (1998) found that an LC in which courses in anthropology, rhetoric and writing, and speech communication were linked helped the students enrolled in the block to achieve higher grades in their speech communication course. In addition, 88% of the students indicated that it is important to recognize the connections among other courses, and 84% maintained that the LC had helped them to see those connections.

Other outcomes of LC programs, such as a higher degree of involvement in campus leadership and fewer disciplinary problems, have been reported by institutions as diverse as Western Michigan University, Temple University, Daytona Beach Community College, and

the community colleges mentioned previously (Matthews, 1997). Furthermore, these benefits have been reported for all types of students and in all disciplines (Heller, 1998).

Given the results, the cost of setting up a learning community is fairly inexpensive. At the State University of West Georgia, flyers are sent to high schools with information about each of the LCs. This is done in part to recruit students to the university and also to inform students who have already decided to attend that this option is available. The College of Arts and Sciences absorbs the cost of duplication and mailing. It is not the responsibility of individual departments to pay for such efforts unless they choose to do something extra. The faculty involved recruit students during new student orientation when students on campus choose their classes. Individual departments work with the participating faculty to determine which courses may be designated dedicated LC sections (sections with only the 25 participating LC students), and which courses need to be designated as non-dedicated sections (sections that have a mix of LC students and non-LC students and that may reach enrollment caps of higher than 25 students).

There are benefits for faculty and student services personnel, too. In designing LCs, faculty must reach across disciplines and design courses and co-curricular activities with other faculty who are involved in the same LC. At the same time, as they and student services personnel get to know individual students on a more personal basis, they must coordinate the tasks of teaching, advising, and counseling. Tinto has found that such collaboration has a positive effect on the larger culture of the institution by improving channels of communication among the various sectors of a college's or university's organizational structure. Furthermore, it strengthens the democratic goal of faculty governance by placing curricular decisions squarely in the hands of the faculty and staff who must support them. According to Smith (1991), this decentralization of authority and responsibility cultivates and empowers the judgment and creativity of teachers and creates an atmosphere of collaboration and renewal for all involved.

Given research about the benefits students obtain from participation in LCs, as well as the development of the national standards and the corresponding language-specific standards, it is logical to pair the models. As Bragger and Rice (1991) point out, the development of the standards forces a shift from the old paradigm of foreign language instruction

that included a division between “skills courses” and “content courses,” to the new paradigm that emphasizes interdisciplinary approaches and integration of language skills and content (p. 197). However, while some universities have offered LCs that compare and contrast multicultural perspectives, the courses included in those schedules do not include language classes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Currently, however, the State University of West Georgia offers a Hispanic Cultures Learning Community comprised of two semesters of linked courses, including two semesters of Spanish. While it is too soon to know yet what the effects of such a format will be on students' language learning, the design of the LC is an example of how this curricular model that incorporates language study addresses the national standards and includes what has been learned in other studies about LCs in other disciplines. Furthermore, it does so in a way that stems from genuine faculty interest and concerns, as well as from community needs. What follows is a description of how the faculty involved chose the LC theme, organized the schedule, and recruited students.

Designing the Learning Community

One of several important factors in choosing the LC theme is the desired student population. For instance, at the State University of West Georgia, the Department of Nursing wanted to recruit nursing students. To this end, they designed a Nursing LC incorporating such courses as Chemistry I, a nursing survey course, math, and two semesters of English. Another LC, the Making Decisions Learning Community, was designed to help retain and support students who have not yet chosen a major. This particular cluster of courses allows students to work toward completion of their core requirements while giving them opportunities to network with each other and with faculty. This networking is considered a crucial factor in helping students develop a variety of study strategies, thus increasing student retention.

The Hispanic Cultures LC was initially conceived as a way to recruit students into long-term language study. There has been a dramatic increase in the Spanish-speaking population in Georgia, a fact due largely to the state's prolonged economic boom and corresponding labor shortage. Some counties, in fact, have seen an increase of more than 400% in the Spanish-speaking population. The Hispanic Task Force of the Board of Regents (1999) of the state's university system predicts that the state will have a Hispanic population of more than 1,000,000 by 2020. Furthermore,

Latin America represents the largest region for international business investment in Georgia.

Such dramatic growth brings a number of challenges. Among the most important is providing support for Spanish-speaking individuals. Areas in critical need of Spanish-speaking professionals in the state include nursing, law enforcement, social services, construction, and teaching.

Given all of these factors, the Foreign Languages Department at West Georgia decided to recruit more Spanish majors and to re-think recruitment strategies so that potential majors would see language study as an endeavor leading to a variety of both international and domestic careers. To do so, a Hispanic Cultures LC was chosen to use the dramatic demographic changes in Georgia as a stepping-stone for discussion about broader cultural and linguistic issues. First-year students were targeted, because any student at the university who pursues a B.A. must complete the equivalent of the four-semester sequence of lower-level language classes. Targeting a beginning student meant that the faculty could broaden the student's language study from the very outset and, hopefully, recruit the student into a Spanish course of study fairly early in her/his college career, thus expanding the student's opportunities for study abroad and internships.

Following the university's LC guidelines, we designed a two-semester course of study that addresses the core curriculum but does so in a way that supports language and cultural studies. A student enrolling in this Hispanic Cultures LC must sign up for the entire course schedule as seen in Figure 2. Because courses in an LC are structured to increase the students' sense of social and academic connectedness between the disciplines, it is impossible to allow students to enroll for only part of a LC. Therefore, a student who has tested out of English Composition or out of the Math courses included is not eligible for the LC.^{iv}

The next step in structuring the LC was recruiting faculty. This recruitment was done by a member of the Spanish department who served as LC coordinator and student advisor and also taught the LC Spanish course. The only real factor in identifying faculty for participation in the LC was their enthusiasm and willingness to try something new in the context of courses they already taught. The instructor of the American Government course, for example, has no particular expertise in Hispanic studies but uses Emma Sepúlveda's (1998) memoir about her experiences as the first Latina candidate for the Nevada state senate, *From Border*

Figure 2: Hispanic Cultures Learning Community

<i>Fall Semester</i>	<i>Spring Semester</i>
Spanish ^v	Spanish
English Composition I	English Composition II
Math	Survey of National Literature
Anthropology	American Government
What Do You Know About Hispanic Cultures?	Biology
	<i>State University of West Georgia</i>

Crossing to Campaign Trail, as a textbook. This book allows students to see how issues of race, gender, and language may be distorted and/or celebrated in the U.S. political system. The English courses are both taught by the same instructor who uses readings from a variety of Latino authors as the basis for writing assignments and class discussions. The anthropology course draws on the instructor's experiences as a researcher in the Andes to explore issues of family and community. The latter two instructors are particularly good examples of how interdisciplinary connections can be made, even at the beginning language level. The anthropology professor, for example, speaks Spanish and has incorporated the language into the anthropology course, using the Spanish course syllabus as a guide. Such enthusiasm is an excellent example of how faculty collaboration can contribute to the creation of a true community for students and their professors.

Other courses, such as biology, are not directly related to the theme of Hispanic cultures, but they offer the opportunity to address the Connections standard. The lab instructor for the course is a native speaker of Spanish who has expressed a willingness to incorporate the language into class. Furthermore, courses like biology and math in the LC allow students to work together in multiple disciplines, thus making it easier to form study groups. As one student said in an end-of-semester survey, "...it [the LC] has helped my academic transition because of the fact that we all live in the same building and it lets us have study groups." Another student concurred by saying, "my grades are better and my study habits have gotten better."

It must be emphasized that while one of the specific goals of the LC is to recruit students into longer-term Spanish study, their enrollment in this LC does not lock them into it. If a student chooses another major at some point during the course of her/his university career, the credits earned in the LC will have served to help her/him complete 30 credits of core curriculum requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree. These students will have

also participated in a deeper language-learning experience.

Addressing the Standards

We have been able to develop a first-year student schedule that addresses all five Cs of the standards in the following ways:

- *Connections:* Students and faculty together connect academic and cultural content by studying Hispanic cultures in both Spanish and English in a variety of disciplines. Chapter themes and grammatical and vocabulary information from the students' Spanish textbooks (Zayas-Bazán, Bacon, & Fernández, 1997; Long & Macián, 1999) are shared with Spanish-speaking instructors in anthropology and biology in order to increase the amount of time students hear and use the language.
- *Comparisons:* In addition to studying the target language and making comparisons with English, students examine such issues as bilingual education and the works of writers who live in both Spanish and English worlds in order to discuss critically the implications of what it means to know more than one language. In one semester, students read works by Alvarez (1991) and Villaseñor (1992), for instance, in addition to a variety of essays, poems, and interviews compiled by Heyck (1994). Furthermore, they read newspaper articles about the Hispanic population in Georgia and use those readings as a basis for classroom discussions about race and citizenship in the U. S. These readings and discussions form the basis for lessons in Spanish that deal with geography, population, education, and more.
- *Communication:* Students engage in Spanish language study and apply that knowledge in a variety of interpersonal contexts, both within the classroom and in the broader community. By listening to presentations by Spanish-speaking visitors from the outside community, as well as by reading relevant articles, students hone the skills required for the interpretive communication mode. Finally, as students progress through the program, they become more involved in presentational language

use, including oral classroom presentations and the creation of original art in the form of poetry, musical compositions, or collages, among other formats.

- **Communities:** Students use their developing language abilities to engage in communication with members of the local community. In our case, several students volunteered to tutor Spanish-speaking children who live in a Hispanic neighborhood that borders the campus after a member of that community visited a class to talk about his experiences as a Spanish-speaking immigrant in Georgia.
- **Cultures:** Students engage in extended study of the cultures that speak the target language by focusing on both cultural practices (within their own communities and beyond) and cultural products (through study of literature and films, participation in—or observation of—traditions, and other items). Students are able to discuss and reflect on cultural perspectives in a variety of ways due to the interdisciplinary nature of the LC. As noted earlier, students have used journals and classroom discussions in one course to discuss points made in another. The fact that the students have come to know each other well has led to some frank comments about race, religion, and gender, thus allowing students both to examine their own perspectives and to hear the voices of other individuals with different experiences.

Conclusion

This paper presents a detailed approach to the incorporation of the national standards into a university- or college-level core curriculum. While it is impossible, of course, to cover all aspects of all Hispanic cultures, this approach to instruction affords us far more time—and, crucially, support—to use the national standards as a framework for instruction. Faculty are able to combine class periods and refer to topics (and language) covered in other disciplines, while students are able to engage in extended discussion with each other and faculty.

As noted earlier, it is too soon to know what the effects of such an approach will be on students' language learning. The project described here is not a formal study but rather an initial foray into university curriculum design that includes the national standards. Formal studies that specifically measure student achievement in language study in LCs are planned.

At this moment, though, research in other disciplines regarding the effects of LCs that do not include language study indicate that this project will achieve some measure of

success. At the very least, the organizing activities that involve faculty recruitment and course design allow the foreign language department to take a more public role in broader educational issues (GPAs and student retention, for instance) at the university level than it may normally. And this, in turn, addresses some of the concerns raised by Maxwell et al. (1999) in their report of the Language Mission Project. While the national standards are meant to improve foreign language education at all levels, their framework forces language teachers and students to see how language itself is a fundamental part of all learning. The learning community concept provides a model for applying this philosophy at the university level.

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Endnotes

- An early version of this paper was presented at the Northeast Conference on Teaching Foreign Languages in Washington, D.C., in April, 2000.
- I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and extensive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
- Iowa State University, for example, offers a Multicultural Learning Community that includes courses in Women's Studies, Latino Studies, and American Indian Studies. Like the LC seen in Figure 1, it does not include language study.
- Students who test out of these courses frequently have other program options available to them, such as the Honors College. Also, by placing into more advanced courses students have a better chance to enroll in desired classes because they will not be full already, thus eliminating the need for the pre-set schedule presented by the LC.
- Incoming students who enroll in this LC will begin their language study at the second-semester level. Because of the increasing numbers of students who have had more than two years of language study in high school, and because of the increasing quality of that instruction, most incoming students who choose to take Spanish place into the second semester of a four-semester sequence instead of the beginning level. This is an advantage because we are trying to recruit Spanish majors, and most students pre-disposed to such a major have already studied the language.