

WE GO TOGETHER: AN INFORMATION LITERACY/ENGLISH COMPOSITION LEARNING COMMUNITY

VAL ONTELL

San Diego Mesa College is one of 109 California community colleges serving over 2.5 million students. It is part of the San Diego Community College District, one of the largest districts in the state. Founded in 1964, it is not only one of the largest community colleges in California, it is also the second largest in San Diego County. Located in the Kearny Mesa area of the City of San Diego, we are serving some 21,375 students in the current semester. We have a very diverse student body as shown below:

| Ethnicity | Percentage | Age | Percentage | Female | 54.0% |
|------------------------|------------|----------|------------|--------|-------|
| American Indian | 0.9% | Under 18 | 2.2% | Male | 46.0 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 14.6% | 18-24 | 55.3% | | |
| African American | 6.2% | 25-29 | 19.2% | | |
| White | 41.7% | 30-34 | 8.5% | | |
| Latino | 18.6% | 35-39 | 4.6% | | |
| Filipino | 4.8% | 40-49 | 6.0% | | |
| Other | 2.6% | 50+ | 4.2% | | |
| Unknown | 10.6% | | | | |

Source: *San Diego Community College District Student Profile Spring 2008*
<http://research.sdccd.edu/pages/126.asp>

With a faculty of 919, supported by administrators, 371 contract classified staff, and additional hourly staff, Mesa offers some 40 academic and vocational programs. In 2007, we awarded 1,061 A/AS Degrees and 297 Certificates of Achievement.

In 2005, the library offered – and still offers - many types of instruction opportunities: walk-in workshops, a one-unit class, individual sessions, and the ever-popular “one-shot.” In Fall 2005, English instructor Ron Israel and I combined our English 101 (Reading and Composition) and Library Science 101 (Information Literacy & Research Skills)

classes into a learning community (LC). We had known each other and worked together for many years – Ron brings his classes for one-shots every semester – and had talked about doing something like this for some time. In 2004, we finally began the process, which took a while to complete, as I will discuss later.

So what is a learning community? The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education web site at Evergreen State College defines it as “*A purposeful restructuring of curriculum to link together courses or coursework so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning and greater interaction with faculty and peers.*” [Italics and boldface are mine.] In 1990, F. Gabelnick, MacGregor, Mathews, and Smith defined it as “*Any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses — or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding of and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise*” (p. 19). [Again, italics and boldface are mine.] Notice that both include the linking of courses and greater interaction with the other students and teacher. These are at the core of learning communities.

According to the Washington Center, there are three basic types of learning communities, each involving a different degree of faculty cooperation: [Again, italics & boldface are mine]

- ***Student Cohorts/Integrative Seminar:*** Structured as programs in which a small cohort of students enrolls in larger classes that **faculty do not coordinate.** Intellectual connections and community-building often take place in an additional integrative seminar.

Ontell (Instruction Librarian)
 San Diego Mesa College [San Diego, CA]

- **Linked Courses/Course Clusters:** May involve two or more classes linked thematically or by content which a cohort of students takes together. **The faculty plan the program collaboratively.**
- **Coordinated Study:** May involve coursework that **faculty members team teach.** The course work is embedded in an integrated program of study.

Mesa's first learning community was offered in the Fall 2003 semester. These are the learning communities we currently provide:

- English 51 (Basic Composition)/Personal Growth 127 (College Success Skills)
- English 51/English 56 (College Reading & Study Skills)
- English 56/Psychology 101
- Math 95 (Elementary Algebra & Geometry) /Personal Growth 127
- English 101/Library Science 101
- English 101/Humanities 101 (Introduction to Humanities)
- Math 35 (Pre-Algebra)/Personal Growth 127

Most reflect the second type of LC listed above, as they involve two separate classes but include collaborative faculty planning on projects, etc. One unique aspect of ours was that it was the first LC to involve neither a pre-college nor Counseling course.

From the beginning, we realized that we wanted to combine our two courses; not have them simply be offered together, but actually integrate the two courses into one cohesive unit. We began with the course descriptions. We took the course descriptions for the individual classes and combined them into one learning community description (I have highlighted the sections relating to IL):

English 101 (Basic Composition)/Library Science 101 (Information Literacy & Research Skills)

(4 credits total)

MW 12:30 - 2:35 PM

This learning community is for transfer-level students or those who want to develop competence in college level **research**, reading and composition. Students gain an **overview of information resources; develop the skills required to use them effectively; and read, analyze, discuss and think critically using a variety of works and sources. Through hands-on work and other methods; students learn how to develop research strategies; use resources;** and write essays, **fully documented** research papers, and other texts, demonstrating effective, logical, and precise expression of ideas. Designated sections may be taught from a specific cultural perspective. You cannot directly register for LIBS 101. You will receive an add code at the first ENG 101 session. You must register for both classes to participate in this learning community. For information, contact Val Ontell, (619) 388-2549, vontell@sdccd.edu, or Ron Israel, (619) 388-2314, risrael@sdccd.edu.

We tried to give students a feel for what it would involve. We also took our individual syllabi and combined them into a single one. For example, we took the course objectives (now Student Learning Outcomes) from each of our classes and combined them into one (again, have highlighted the ones relating to IL):

A student who successfully completes English 101 will be able to:

- write clear and coherent essays on expository and argumentative topics with effective and correct sentences;
- read academic expository and argumentative prose for main points and structure and be able to summarize, interpret, and analyze this prose;
- write college research papers that demonstrate both proper documentation and adequate library research;
- ***develop search strategies in order to locate information effectively;***
- ***locate information in books (including reference), electronic indexes/databases (including periodical articles), and on the World Wide Web;***
- ***compare and contrast different search methodologies;***
- ***search appropriate research tools in order to locate relevant information;***
- ***evaluate retrieved information in order to determine the most appropriate material to use; and***
- ***document utilized information in MLA style in order to communicate where the information was found.***

Perhaps the best way to see how we combined the courses is to look at the combined Calendar of Events, i.e., class schedule (see **Appendix A**). The areas in boldface and and italics are the Library Science components, which have been thoroughly woven into the English curriculum.

One area where our classes already complemented each other was in our required final projects. Ron required a group project he called a Research Dialogue, while I required an annotated working bibliography. By having the students submit their bibliography in segments (i.e., books, periodicals, web sites, etc.), we could see how they were doing as they went along. For their final project, they submitted a combined, corrected list to me. Since I required them to include both the materials they used and those they rejected (to increase their critical thinking skills), for their final dialogue's Works Cited, all they had to do was remove the rejects and all annotations and then alphabetize the list.

Needless to say, we promoted the LC in every way we could think of. There were large posters in the atrium

of the Learning Resource Center (LRC) and other locations around campus, as well as flyers, which we sent out to the entire campus. In addition, we recruited our Counseling Department, providing them with flyers to give out. I can't say enough about our counselors. Not only did they tout the LC during counseling sessions, they also encouraged students in their pre-college classes and LCs to take ours. We also had ads in the class schedule, an article in the student newspaper, and other publicity.

The major problem we had was a technical one. Because we could not get a combined course registration number (CRN) in time for the Fall schedule to be printed, the two courses were listed separately, with separate course numbers and an advisory telling them they had to register for the Library Science class by getting an add code during the first session of the English class. This information also appeared with the course description and on our flyers and posters. It did not work out very well. Many students still thought they were registering only for the English course, so the first day of class involved a lot of change as students decided whether to stay or go. Clearly, we needed one CRN for the combined LC.

Once the class began, we taught both individually and as a team, depending on where we were in the syllabus. However, we were both there for every class session and both participated in discussions. I particularly enjoyed the discussions of the books Ron assigned – and he put his two cents worth in when I was teaching as well. We also used both a regular classroom and the library's electronic classroom, again whichever was needed. Working with Ron was extremely easy because our educational philosophies and teaching styles meshed well. As I said earlier, we have known each other for many years, so this did not surprise me.

Though we had a small class, our retention rate was higher than the norm. Out of 15 students, we retained 13. Perhaps most important is the fact that Ron says the quality of the final dialogue projects was higher than in his other English 101 classes. This seems to be reflected in the grades: 10 of the 13 English grades were A's or B's. One of the Library Science failures was a student who attended class but never turned in her final bibliography or took the final exam, so even in this environment we had to deal with students who thought they didn't need to do the Library Science portion of the work.

In the Spring semester, we offered the Learning Community as an Honors class; we got 20 students - better than Fall, but not as good as we'd have liked. One reason we did better was that Ron and I started trying to recruit students ourselves. Ron, in particular, used opportunities afforded to him as an English teacher to push our LC directly to students. The reason why is long and complicated but, once again, the classes were listed separately, so we faced the same registration problems and the same results. As I said earlier, the answer is one course number for the LC; and we finally got one in Fall 2006 – hallelujah!

So what did we learn from our experience?

- Find someone with a compatible teaching philosophy and style and with whom you get along one-on-one. This was not a problem for us, but it could be disastrous

for both you and the students. Incompatible teaching styles only confuse the students and make learning more difficult.

- Allow plenty of time for planning. Something as seemingly simple as finding time to get together turned out to be much harder than we anticipated. Learn the procedures, requirements, etc. Going through the approval process seemed to take forever. Also, meshing your syllabi, schedules (i.e., timelines), etc. will not be as easy as it may first seem, so allow plenty of time for these nitty-gritty things.
- Expect problems; nothing goes smoothly, particularly with the bureaucracy. If you haven't "translated" the procedures, etc. so that you understand them, well, that's where Murphy's Law comes in.
- Obviate one problem by getting one course registration number for the learning community, if possible. This simply facilitates registration and students know immediately that they've enrolled in both classes when they see it on their programs.
- It's all about compromise; you have to be prepared for give and take – and there will be lots of give and take.
- Get the support of your administration and anyone else you can find. Again, this was not a problem for us, as Mesa is committed to encouraging and increasing its learning communities. Get your counseling folks on board so that they can steer students they think would benefit from your learning community to you. It can reap huge dividends.
- Be prepared for small classes at first. Until the word gets out, you may find that you're not getting as many students as you might expect.

Which leads me to my last point – Publicize! Publicize! Publicize! You won't get students if they don't know you exist and don't see taking your LC as something better than taking a regular class. We really became shameless in asking our current students to "talk us up" to other students. Whatever you do, enjoy the experience, because it is very different from anything else you may have done before, particularly if you do it the way Ron and I did.

So what did our students think of our learning community? Here are some of their responses (the italics are mine):

- *"I enjoyed the whole course overall. I like how the Library Science course is taught in accordance with English 101. It is very effective because it allows me to see the big picture; how the research could be done in the most efficient way."*
- *"I am proud to say that I have learned some pretty good things in this class. ... I also learned some good research skills, and I think I may have become a better researcher."*
- *"I think having knowledge about libraries will help me in other classes, not just English."*

- *“I loved the course. ... Your class showed me many more great ways to be an excellent student. Thank you!!!”* The exclamation points are the student’s.

It’s reactions like these that keep us committed to continuing our Learning Communities: to help students use these communities to enter the world of lifelong learning. We even have another English teacher/Librarian combination ready to go – and we will continue to expand. We owe it to our students.

APPENDIX A (Areas in bold *and italics* are the the Library Science components):

| Calendar of Events | | |
|--|------------|--|
| Unless otherwise noted, class sessions will be in room F-106 | | |
| week | date | activity |
| 01 | 8/29-31 | <i>Intro/Syllabus</i> , Writing Sample; Introduction, What makes an essay; 5 ¶ “McEssay”; Pirsig (handout). |
| 02 | 9/5-7 | <i>Defining a topic</i> In-class draft. Revision vs Editing. NO SCHOOL MONDAY, 9/5, LABOR DAY Friday, 9/9- Last day to Add &/or Drop with no W |
| 03 | 9/12-14 | In-class workshop of typed Essay 1 revised draft, Monday, 9/12 . Essay 1 DUE, Wednesday, 9/14 ; Iron & Silk (to page 100). MONDAY, 9/12—LAST DAY TO DROP <u>AND</u> OBTAIN A REFUND OF FEES. |
| 04 | 9/19-21 | <u>Iron & Silk</u> (read through the end). Monday, 9/19—Term paper topic due |
| 05 | 9/26-28 | <u>Iron & Silk</u> (cont’d). In-class workshop of typed Essay 2 draft, Wednesday, 9/28 . Plagiarism; Database Remote Access; PL Card & Databases Read Chapter 1 in Quaratiello, pp. 295-325 in Hacker; Look at web site on Plagiarism: library.acadiau.ca/tutorials/plagiarism (click Restart) THURSDAY, 9/29—LAST DAY TO FILE FOR CR/NCR OPTION |
| 06 | 10/3-5 | Essay 2 DUE, Monday, 10/3 ; <u>Reading Lolita in Tehran</u> (to page 155). Search Strategies Read Chapter 2 in Quaratiello |
| 07 | 10/10-12 | <u>RLinT</u> (through the end); Research Proposal DUE (topic and working argument/thesis) . Citing; Annotating For Monday, 10/10—read 148-155 in <u>Quaratiello</u> ; 328-348 in Hacker; scan 349-377 in Hacker; Look at this web site on Citing: owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_mla.html symbols) Emailed list of possible search terms and search statements (including any operators and and symbols) due to Prof. Ontell, Monday, 10/10 |
| 08 | 10/17-19 | Library Catalog; Specialized Reference Materials; Searching Other Libraries. Read Chapters 3 & 4 in <u>Quaratiello</u> ; Look at these web sites: 10/17: Library of Congress Call Numbers: www.hcc.hawaii.edu/library/callno.html L of C Subject Headings: www.lib.umd.edu/mck/guides/lcsh.html Controlled vocabulary/keyword searching: www.tacoma.washington.edu/library/instruction/guides/subject-key.htm 10/19: F-106 In-class workshop of typed Essay 3 draft, Wednesday, 10/19 . |
| 09 | 10/24-26 | Essay 3 DUE, Monday, 10/24; BEGIN RESEARCH-DIALOGUE PAPER. Online databases; Indexes Read Chapters 5-7 in <u>Quaratiello</u> ; Look at these web sites: Primary vs. secondary sources: www.library.jcu.edu.au/LibraryGuides/primsrscs.shtml/Examples Types of periodicals/scholarly v. popular: www.lib.utsa.edu/Research/Subject/periodicalsguide.html (also click on “Scholarly Journals v. Popular Magazine” link at bottom of page and read information there) Emailed online catalog search’s annotated results due to Prof. Ontell, Monday, 10/24 |
| 10 | 10/31-11/2 | Research Paper/in-class activity. MIDTERM on Researching, Wednesday, 11/2 FRIDAY, 11/4—LAST DAY TO WITHDRAW—NO DROPS AFTER THIS DATE |

| week | date | activity |
|------|--|---|
| 11 | 11/7-9 11/7: LRC-114 11/9: F-106 | <i>Internet for Research; Specialized & Juried Web Sites; Non-traditional Sources.</i> Read Chapter 8 and pp. 143-147 in Quaratiello; Look at www.lii.org <i>Emailed periodical search's annotated results due to Prof. Ontell, Monday, 11/7</i> Research Paper/in-class activity. NO SCHOOL FRIDAY, 11/11, VETERAN'S DAY |
| 12 | 11/14-16 | Research Paper/in-class activity. <i>Emailed Internet search's annotated results (including site evaluations) due to Prof. Ontell, Monday, 11/14</i> |
| 13 | 11/21-23 | RESEARCH PAPER & "WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY" DUE, Monday, 11/21; <u>The Book</u> (to page 80). NO SCHOOL TH-F, 11/24-25, THANKSGIVING |
| 14 | 11/28-30 | <u>The Book</u> (through the end). |
| 15 | 12/5-7 | In-class workshop of typed Essay 4 draft, Monday, 12/5. Essay 4 DUE, Wednesday, 12/7. Prep for final |
| 16 | 12/12-14 12/12: F-106 12/14: LRC-114 | FINAL EXAM (Essay portion - Monday, 12/12; <i>Research portion, Wednesday, 12/14</i>) xIf you wish to know your grade ASAP, bring in a stamped postcard on Wednesday, 12/14. |

Please Note: The calendar is tentative and, therefore, subject to change.

Dates of readings are "to be done and discussed on" dates.

REFERENCES:

Gabelnick, F., MacGregor, J., Mathews, R., & Smith, B. L.
(1990). *Learning communities: building connections among disciplines, students and faculty*. New Directions in Teaching and Learning No. 41. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

What are learning communities? (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2008, from Evergreen State College, Learning Communities National Resource Center, Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education web site: <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/lcfaq.htm#21>

San Diego Community College District Student Profile: Spring 2008. Retrieved January 31, 2008 from the San Diego Community Collect District web site: http://research.sdccd.edu/enrollment/Formatted%20profile_Spring%202008_census.pdf