2020

Student success in Psychology-English learning communities.

Jillian Grose-Fifer
CUNY John Jay College

Kimberly A. Helmer

Chapter 22: Student Success in Psychology-English (Thinking, Feeling, Doing: Psychology, Literature, and Life) Learning Communities

Jillian Grose-Fifer[1] and Kimberly Adilia Helmer[2]

[1]John Jay College of Criminal Justice and The Graduate Center, City University of New York

[2]University of California, Santa Cruz (previously at John Jay College)

ABSTRACT

Participation in a learning community has been widely recognized as a high impact educational practice. Here, we focus on a highly successful partnership between a psychology professor (JG-F) and an English professor (KAH), who codesigned and cotaught a first-year cocurricular (Psychology/English Composition) learning community (LC) course for multiple semesters at a large public Minority/Hispanic Serving Institution in the Northeast. We describe how we created co-curricular links between our courses, which hinged in part on a collaborative podcast assignment based on psychology-themed books. We detail how we built a strong sense of community, designed scaffolded assignments targeting skills, such as information literacy and cooperation, and describe the impact that participation in the learning community had on student success.

What is a learning community?

In this chapter, we describe a psychology professor's (JG-F) experiences of teaching for several years in first-year cocurricular (Psychology/English Composition) learning communities (LCs) at a large public Minority/Hispanic Serving Institution in the Northeast, the most successful of which were taught with the same English professor (KAH). There are many different kinds of LCs in higher education institutions across the country (Henscheid, 2015), but those at our college adhered to the widely accepted definition provided by Washington Center at Evergreen State College, who are recognized leaders in this field. Washington Center defines an LC as a cohort of students who are coenrolled in two or more linked courses (http://wacenter.evergreen.edu/what-is-an-lc). Participation in a cocurricular learning community has long been identified as a high impact educational practice (HIP; Kuh, 2008), and LC participation has been linked to mutiple positive outcomes, including increased student retention (Andrade, 2007; Lichtenstein, 2005; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013; Weiss et al., 2015), academic success (Grose-Fifer, Helmer, & Zottoli, 2014; Hegler, 2004; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), engagement and satisfaction (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Ideally, LC instructors collaborate to integrate their curricula and use cooperative and active learning to foster interdisciplinary critical thinking,

Correspondence to: Jill Grose-Fifer, Ph.D., jgrose-fifer@jjay.cuny.edu, Psychology Department, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 524 West 59th Street, New York, NY, 10019.

while creating a strong sense of community among students and between students and faculty (Cross, 1998; Tinto, 2000; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Thus, LCs are designed to be inclusive, safe learning spaces where students learn to work collaboratively, and can grow both personally and academically (VanOra, 2019). Henscheid (2015) estimated that hundreds of higher education institutions across the US offer a variety of cocurricular LCs, and recently, the National Survey of Student Engagement (2019) reported that 12-13 % of first-years and 20-24 % of seniors surveyed nationally had participated in an LC.

Why our college adopted LCs?

Our college introduced first-year LCs in 2007 to help improve student retention, which was problematically low compared to other institutions across the country. There are several factors that might have contributed to this institutional challenge. First, most of the students at our college live at home and commute to campus, with an average commute time of 9 hours per week, and the vast majority have multiple responsibilities in addition to attending college (https://www.jjay.cuny.edu/fast-facts), and so only come to campus for classes. Thus, our administration worried that students felt disconnected from the college and their peers, a phenomenon that has been shown to be associated with decreased persistence in college (Kellogg, 1999; Tinto, 1993, 2000). Secondly, 47% of students are the first in their family to attend college (https://www.jjay.cuny.edu/fast-fact), and so are more likely to struggle when making the transition from high school (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Also, many students graduate from underserved public high schools, and often feel overwhelmed by the rigor of college-level work (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Lastly, the majority of the campus's diverse student body are members of collectivistic cultures: 47% identify as Latino/a (henceforth referred to as Latinx), 17% as Black, and 10% as Asian/Pacific Islanders (https://www.jjay.cuny.edu/fast-facts). Thus, adapting to a college environment that stresses the importance of independence and individualism frequently poses additional stressors.

Our college was hopeful that establishing first-year LCs would help to improve student success. This decision was predicated in part on evidence suggesting that LC students feel more connected and receive greater support from both peers and faculty than non-LC students (Andrade, 2007; Crissman, 2001; Kellogg, 1999; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Tinto, 2000; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), a factor that predicts better student retention (Braxton, Shaw Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Robbins et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993, 2000).

Psychology/English Composition LC structure and Learning Objectives

In all of her LCs, JG-F taught Introductory Psychology with a partner from the English Department, who taught English Composition. LC classes were scheduled back to back in the same classroom (two 75 minute periods separated by a ten minute break) and met twice a week. After working with multiple LC partners, JG-F learned that it takes a great deal of effort and time for LC faculty to create and enact a truly integrative curriculum. Her earliest LC partnerships were not particularly successful in establishing intercurricular links and had little impact on her students' academic success in their introductory Psychology course (Grose-Fifer, et al., 2014).

However, after our college recognized that LC faculty needed better guidance on effective collaboration, she benefitted tremendously from professional development training sessions led by the Student Academic Success Program Director, Dr. Kate Szur. JG-F also acknowledges her great fortune in partnering with Dr. Kimberly Adilia Helmer (KAH) from the English Department, and we taught together successfully for four years.

We called our LC, *Thinking, Feeling, Doing: Psychology, Literature, and Life*, with the idea that students would apply psychological theories and concepts to their everday lives, as well as to those of characters they read about in books and articles in their English classes. The professional development sessions helped JG-F to expand her course learning outcomes to acknowledge the importance of self-reflection and effective collaboration among students. Moreover, JG-F believes that it was KAH's creativity and her unwavering belief that our students would be able to rise to any challenge we set, that helped us to create LCs that fostered transformative learning. Furthermore, KAH's professional training in pedagogy helped JG-F to better understand how KAH applied her theoretical knowledge of learning to our specific learning outcomes. KAH believes that JG-F's commitment to students and openness to try new learning strategies made their collaborative LCs more successful than her previous partnering. We both felt that our LCs enriched both of us as faculty, as well as the students. Finally, our fulltime status as instructors also played a role in our LC's success. Although we both had a heavy (3:4; 3:3) teaching load and active research agendas, we felt we could devote the needed time to create and enact a strongly linked interdisciplinary LC, unlike other contingent faculty who often piece together work across many campuses. We spend the remainder of this chapter focusing on the details of these jointly taught LCs.

Each time we (JG-F and KAH) taught an LC together, we spent a considerable amount of time planning (perhaps double that for a regular course in the LC's first iteration) to ensure we had created cohesive interdisciplinary links across our two courses, and with each iteration, it became less time consuming.We each had different learning objectives for our individual courses, however, we also had some overarching LC learning objectives, comprising the following:

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- *Apply knowledge and think critically across the disciplines of Psychology and English*
- *Collaborate with peers from diverse social and academic backgrounds*
- *Use written and oral communication strategies effectively and appropriately in both disciplines*
- *Relate psychological concepts to personal experiences and themes in literature introduced in English 101 and develop an appreciation of the practical value of psychology.*

Connecting readings in the English course to theories and concepts in the Psychology course proved to be quite effective because students in our first LC together scored significantly higher on their Psychology tests than students from JG-F's previous LCs where the courses were only weakly linked (Grose-Fifer, et al., 2014). In particular, our first LC together had a heavy emphasis on readings that focused on race, prejudice and discrimination, and our LC students performed better on test items relating to these topics than to others (Grose-Fifer, et al., 2014).

Podcast Project

In each LC we taught together, we used assessment data to "tweak" our courses in order to help students achieve our LC objectives more effectively. However, one consistent assignment across all the LCs we taught together was a ten-week podcast project that students worked on in small groups, which counted towards their English course grade. To motivate our students to read we wanted to provide ample choices (Bernadowski, 2013), so we created a list of fifty potential books with short blurbs alongside the psychology topic to which the book related (see Table 1 for a list of books that students from our LCs actually selected). Many of our students told us that they did not read very much, and so we tried hard to find popular books we thought our students would find interesting and enjoyable. For some, this assignment set them on a path of reading for pleasure. This was an important outcome as sustained pleasure reading helps develop writing and reading proficiencies that are important for academic success (Paulson, 2006). After reading the list, students ranked their four top book choices on an index card and we used these to create book groups of three to five students. Using a format similar to that of a literature circle (Bernadowski, 2013), students discussed the major themes with their book group partners, with the aim of creating what KAH liked to call a "juicy question" that psychological science could help them to answer. We carefully scaffolded the assignment so that students would ultimately create a 5-minute podcast that contextualized their juicy question based on events in their chosen book and provided reasonable answers based on psychological science. Students found the idea of producing a podcast challenging, but exciting. The complexity of the task was likely to discourage social loafing ─not putting forward enough effort because they found that the project too easy (Karau & Williams, 1993), and increase positive interdependency (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; Slavin, 2011) because students needed to help each other and work together in order to create a successful final product. For example, some students had good technical skills and so felt more comfortable getting to grips with the software, some had good time management skills and helped to keep their team on task, while others felt more comfortable with creating a script or working on the production quality. Students had varying levels of academic preparedness, but because we spent a lot of class time working in small groups, they created zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) in which they helped each other to acquire new skills, such as pulling out the main idea from the abstract of a research article. Thus, the social nature of the project allowed for greater learner gains for all students.

We also implemented "working lunches" in the faculty dining room during the College community hour (when no classes were scheduled) to help guide students with their podcast questions. Our College provided funding for the meals, and both JG-F and KAH were present allowing us to meet with multiple groups at the same time. In addition, KAH brainstormed with students in English and JG-F assigned homework early in the semester asking students to write 250–500 words explaining why they had picked their chosen book. JG-F asked students to include why they found the psychology topic that was connected to their book interesting and what they already knew about the topic and how they acquired that information. JG-F often went to the English class (which followed hers) so that we could have more collaborative discussions about the students' questions. Both KAH and JG-F gave carefully scaffolded instruction (demonstrations followed by many opportunities to practice) on how to look for reliable sources of information to help answer their questions (see Making Cocurricular Links to Improve Information Literacy below). KAH brought our students to a workshop on library database

searching, led by a college librarian, and JG-F often went to the English class to assist students in their book groups as they evaluated whether the sources they had found were really pertinent for answering the questions they posed.

Table 1.

Podcast Books Chosen By Students over Four Semesters and The Related Psychology Topic

Podcast books	Psychology Topic
Huxley, A. (2006/1932). *Brave new world*. Cutchogue, New York: Buccaneer Books.	Learning and Memory/Social psychology
Thompson-Cannino, J., Cotton, R., & Torneo, E. (2009). Picking cotton: Our memoir of injustice and redemption. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.	Learning and Memory (false memory)/Social Psychology
Watson, S. J. (2011). Before I go to sleep. London, UK: Random House.	Amnesia (though this is a fictional account that students can critique)
Borowski, T. (2003). *This way for the gas, ladies and gentlemen* (B. Vedder & M. Kandel, Trans.). New York, New York: Penguin Twentieth Century Classics.	Social Psychology
Layton, D. (1999). Seductive poison: A Jonestown survivor's story of life and death in the Peoples Temple. New York, New York: Anchor Books.	Social Psychology
Slater, L. (2002). Love Works Like This: moving from one kind of life to another. New York, NY: Random House Inc.	Human Development/Health and Psychology
Schein, E., & Bernstein, P. (2008). Identical strangers: A memoir of twins separated and reunited. New York, NY: Random House Inc.	Human Development
Keyes, D. (2004). *Flowers for Algernon*. New York, NY: Harcourt.	Intelligence
Kaysen, S. (1994). *Girl, interrupted.* New York, BY: Vintage Books.	Health and Psychology
Klein, S. (2009). *Moose: A memoir of fat camp*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.	Health and Psychology
Morrison, T. (1970). The bluest eye. New York, NY: Vintage Books.	Health and Psychology/Social Psychology/Human Development
	Health and Psychology/Ethics
	Health and Psychology

Nathan, D. (2011). Sybil exposed: The extraordinary story behind the famous multiple personality case. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.	Health and Psychology/Brain and Behavior
Plath, S. (2008). The bell jar. London, UK: Faber & Faber.	Health and Psychology/Brain and Behavior
Sheff, D. (2009). *Beautiful boy: A father's journey through his son's addiction*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.	Health and Psychology
Sheff, N. (2008). *Tweak: Growing up on methamphetamines*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.	
Vonnegut, M., & Vonnegut, K. (2002). The Eden express: A memoir of insanity. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.	

Note: Some books were selected more than once across LCs.

As students were researching their topic, KAH also began to teach students about creating a podcast. She asked students to model their podcasts on two public radio podcast series: *This American Life* (https://www.thisamericanlife.org), and *RadioLab* (https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab). To familiarize students with this specific genre of podcasts, they listened to and discussed both the content and production values of several of these podcasts in their English classes. The podcasts related to topics in the psychology curriculum. Once students completed their podcast book research, they created scripts; most of these featured an interviewer talking to various characters from the book along with an "expert," who helped to provide answers to their question. There are now many different videos on how to record multi-track podcasts available on YouTube, but this technology was relatively new at the time and so KAH invited a colleague from the Information Technology department to her English class to teach students how to use Apple's Garage Band software to create enhanced podcasts (podcasts with still images that complement the audio). Students used College Apple laptops to podcast, which were available for daily loan whenever they were needed. Another colleague with a doctorate in theatre, gave a lesson on improvisation to help our students voice the characters in their podcasts.

In week 11 of a 16 week semester, all student groups (6-8 per course) introduced and played their finished 5-minute podcasts to the rest of the class, which KAH had posted onto a class website that included podcast abstracts, and then fielded questions. Afterwards, KAH and JG-F graded their presentations and podcasts (using a rubric, see Table 2) in the relative comfort of one of our offices; it was very helpful to be able to replay each one and discuss them in detail at our own pace. The in-class presentations served as practice for a First-Year Showcase with other first-year LC students (another one of KAH's innovations), that was held at the end of the semester. At the Showcase, we had several stations with College loaner laptops and headphones so that visitors could sit and enjoy the podcasts. Our students wore "business" attire and interacted very professionally with administrators, faculty, and other students, who showered them with praise for their novel and interesting projects. The group podcasts were also used as a launching pad for students to work independently on a final 7-10 page research paper (English

class assignment), in which they developed their podcast question into a more extended thesis. Students had four weeks to write their paper, and by this point in the semester they were relatively comfortable in finding and adding reliable sources to back up their claims. KAH also scaffolded the assignment by asking them to produce an annotated bibliography for their papers partway through the semester. Thus, the podcast, a collaborative and "fun" activity, paved the way for the more intimidating formal research paper, by building students' self-efficacy necessary for academic success.

Table 2.

Podcast Rubric

Each of the eight items was scored according to the following scale:

Excellent (30 points); Good (24 points); Average (21 points); Needs work (18 points); Poor (15 points)

1. The podcast presents an accurate portrayal of a central book theme.
2. Podcast's research question is appropriate and clearly expressed.
3. Podcasts's research question is developed and answered.
4. Psychology content is accurate.
5. Psychology content is appropriate.
6. Podcast production values (voice quality, timing, sound effects).
7. Podcast script (storyline, characterization, pacing, tone, correctly formatted).
8. Teamwork is apparent.

Using Co-curricular Links to Improve Information Literacy

JG-F used a series of scaffolded homework assignments in the Psychology courses (worth 27% of Psychology course grade) that were strongly linked to the course content in both English and Psychology. Many of these were designed to build our students' information literacy skills and deepen their understanding of some important concepts in psychology. These assignments evolved each year that we taught the LC, and here we describe the details of our most recent (and we think the best) iteration to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of our LC and to emphasize the importance of scaffolding and repeated practice for skill building. Although most of our interdisciplinary connections in our first LC together focused on race and prejudice, in our last LC these connections cut across multiple psychology topics, including ethics, eyewitness testimony, clinical/biological psychology, race, prejudice and stereotypes. JG-F's goal was for these assignments to provide students practice with answering questions in their own words and to reflect on the reliability of the evidence they found to support their claims, in the hope of fostering a deeper appreciation of why college students often need to use scholarly research in their assignments. Each assignment built on the last by introducing a new way of finding information. JG-F encouraged students to learn from their mistakes and redo their homework (when appropriate) for a higher grade. She used this strategy to try and promote growth mindsets

in our students, a disposition that has been strongly linked to student success (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

All of the information literacy psychology homework assignments followed a related in-class activity, many of which KAH and JG-F cofacilitated. In the first assignment, students reflected about an in-class role-play based on the Tuskegee study (Grose-Fifer, 2017). Students answered questions about the details of the study and then searched for an example of another unethical study in the field of psychology. They reported on where they had found the information, and whether they thought it was reliable and why? This was followed by an assignment relating to the book, *Picking Cotton* (Thompson-Cannino, Cotton, & Torneo, 2009), the story of the wrongful conviction of Ronald Cotton based on the eyewitness testimony of Jennifer Thompson, a rape victim. We discussed one of the chapters KAH had assigned for homework and introduced research on eyewitness testimony carried out at the Innocence Project (https://www.innocenceproject.org). In the next Psychology class, we discussed the differences between scholarly and non-scholarly publications and between Googling information and using Google Scholar, and when it might be preferable to use scholarly sources to support claims. Students then worked in small groups and practiced using key terms to find articles about eyewitness research with Google Scholar, as well as writing citations in APA format. For the associated homework assignment, students first described some the factors that contributed to the erroenous eyewitness identification of Ronald Cotton, and then found an article using Google Scholar that helped to support their statements. In addition to providing the citation in APA style, students reflected on the format and purpose of a scholarly article and why they thought that using such an article was reliable.

JG-F asked students to do a similar assignment after they had listened to and discussed a *RadioLab* podcast in their English class with KAH. The podcast, *Unraveling Bolero* (https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/unraveling-bolero) featured the story of a woman with frontotemporal dementia (FTD), who had lost her facilility to work with numbers but began creating amazing works of art as she listened over and over to Ravel's orchestral piece, *Bolero*. In their psychology homework assignment, students answered questions about the woman's disorder and found (and cited in APA format) articles using Google Scholar relating to FTD and creativity. Again, they reflected about the reliability of the information paying careful attention to the credentials of the authors of the article.

After students had become somewhat familiar with Google Scholar, JG-F introduced them to PsycINFO. By this point in the semester, students had already decided on their podcast themes and so after JG-F gave a demonstration students practiced with their book group partners creating key terms to find articles that could help answer their juicy questions. For homework, every student in each book group identified a different peer-reviewed journal article that they had found using PsycINFO, which they thought best helped to answer their question. In addition to providing the search terms and the citation in APA format, they briefly summarized how the source helped them to answer their question. They also described why they thought it was important to use peer-reviewed journal articles for their podcasts.

The following assignment connected to a reading that students had discussed in their English class "How to date a white girl, brown girl, halfie"(Díaz, 1996), a short story about internalized

racism. For their psychology homework, students considered this story in the context of the research by Maime Phipps Clark and Kenneth Clark, who conducted an influential study relating to the effects racial disparities in the USA on children during the 1940s (Kenneth & Clark, 1947), which helped to end segregation in schools (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). Students wrote about why they thought the children in the Clark study viewed white dolls more favorably than black ones, and how this study might help them to better understand Yunior's (the boy in the reading) feelings about the race of the girl he would like to date. Students then used PsycINFO to find an article about stereotype threat and academic performance, and reported their keywords and citation. Again, students reflected about the reliability of the information. The final psychology homework assignment of the semester was designed to promote metacognitive awareness in our students about their learning gains related to information literacy. Students wrote 250–500 words about the ways in which their ideas about their podcast psychology topic had developed or changed as a result of their research, reading and discussion. Students reflected on whether they felt that they were a more critical consumer of knowledge now and why?

We assessed the perceived efficacy of the homework assignments and podcast assignment in an online survey that students from three of our LC courses[35] completed at the end of the semester (67 students responded). Students rated the helpfulness of the psychology homework and podcasts assignments on a five point scale (no help, little help, moderate help, much help, great help). Figure 1 shows the percentage of students who perceived the podcast and psychology homework assignments as at least moderately helpful across multiple domains. The majority of students thought that both were helpful. More students thought the podcasts were helpful for formulating a research question (94%) compared to the psychology homework assignments (83%), whereas more students thought the Psychology homeworks (93%) were helpful for evaluating source reliability learning, compared to the podcasts (88%). 90.7% of students also found the psychology homework assignments helpful for learning APA citation style.[36]

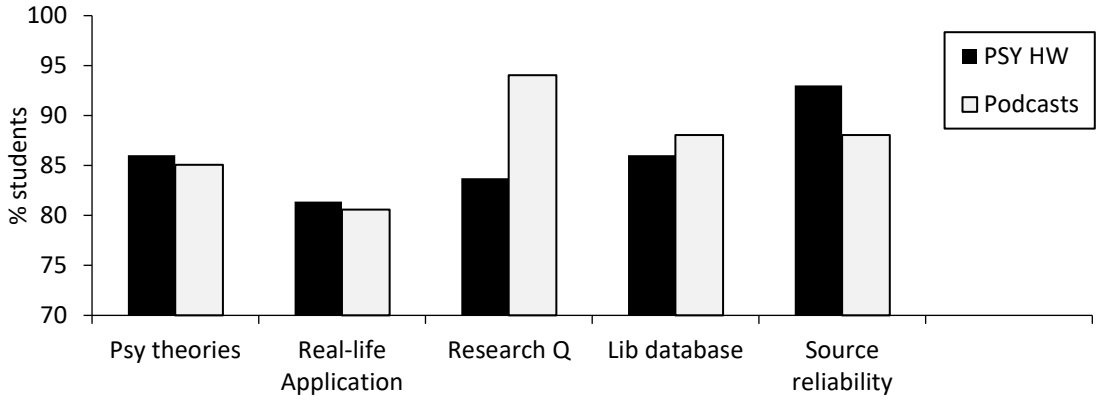

Figure 1. Percentage of students who agreed that the Psychology homework and podcast assignments were at least moderately helpful across the following categories: understanding

[35] We collected data from students in the four Grose-Fifer/Helmer LCs but there was a technical problem accessing the data from one LC and so those responses were lost.
[36] Note we did not ask this question about the podcasts because we did not think it was relevant

psychological theories, applying psychology to real-life, formulating a research question, using library databases, and evaluating source reliability.

Creating Feelings of Connectedness in an LC

A major goal in our LCs was to build community among students and to establish a strong sense of connection between them and us (their instructors). Several studies have shown that positive faculty-student interactions are associated with greater student academic motivation (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Trolian, Jach, Hanson, & Pascarella, 2016), academic achievement and personal growth (Kim & Sax, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; van der Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen, & Meijer, 2018), as well as greater satisfaction with college (Astin, 1997). However, we were mindful that the demographic profiles of our first-year students predict that many were likely to feel uncomfortable talking with their professors. Students from lower socioeconomic groups and first-generation students are less likely to communicate with faculty both in and outside of class than other students (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009), and some find faculty to be intimidating (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Relatedly, Latinx students, who are in the majority at our college, are more likely to seek help from family members than from faculty when they are concerned about their grades (Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004). Although, family members of first-generation students very often provide important emotional support, they do not always know how best to navigate the college environment. Positive relationships with faculty have been shown to be particularly beneficial for the success of Latinx students (Anaya & Cole, 2001).

We began the process of rapport-building with our students before the semester began, by cowriting a welcome letter (mailed by the First Year Experience Office) telling students about our goals for the LC and conveying our excitement about meeting them soon. We combined our first classes of the semester creating a double period that we taught together. We first introduced ourselves and asked students to call us by our first names because we felt it helped to make the power differential seem less apparent. To our knowledge, there are no studies investigating the effect of using instructors' first names in undergraduate courses, but McDowell and Westman (2005) found that when graduate students used their instructors' first names, it increased students' perceptions of faculty warmth and approachability. After going over our syllabi and answering students' questions, we then "quizzed" our students about their perceptions of us. We asked questions such as, *Where do you think we grew up? What kind of school do you think we went to – public or private? What kind of cars do we drive? Are we married? Do we have kids?* After they had written down their answers to each question, we then asked students to share their thoughts as we went back through each question in turn and provided the answers. This activity generated a lot of laughter because students were often wildly inaccurate in their guesses, but it also gave us a chance to reveal information about ourselves that both helped to humanize us and may have challenged our students' stereotypes about us as professors. For example, JG-F comes from a working-class family but because she has an English accent her students often incorrectly assume that she comes from a wealthy family and went to a private school. The activity also gave us a chance to discuss how we make judgments about people, a useful segue for introducing the concept of social psychology. More importantly, we were able to show that we shared commonalities with our students; JG-F is a first-generation college student and KAH is Latina, and a heritage Spanish-speaker. Students from minoritized groups are more likely to build trust

with faculty with whom they share common ground (Museus & Neville, 2012). Even when instructors do not share the same cultural/educational background as their students, they could still use the exercise we describe above to demonstrate that they share common experiences with their students, this can also be effective in establishing trust (Museus & Neville, 2012). For example, you might reveal that you got a poor grade on a paper in college, or struggled with math or writing as a student, or that you have/used to have a hard time getting up in the morning, etc. Gebauer (2019) has suggested that establishing a culture of trust is particularly important for preventing underserved students from engaging in self-handicapping behaviors, such as not asking for help for fear that the professor may think they are not intelligent enough for college. Appropriate instructor self-disclosure can improve the classroom environment by increasing students' willingness to participate in class discussions (Cayanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009).

To help break the ice further, we also played Human Bingo (https://futuresinitiative.org/teachingpsychology/2017/05/24/ice-breakers/). We distributed identical bingo cards and then everyone tried to find classmates (or professors) who fit the various categories on the card (e.g., has more than four brothers and sisters, speaks more than two languages, etc). The game got students out of their seats and talking to each other (and to us). After someone won, we went through each item on the card asking students to stand up if they fit the description. This part of the activity helped students to see that they shared similarities with other LC students, an important first step in fostering feelings of belongingness, a predictor of persistence among Latinx undergraduates (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

In some respects, teaching in an LC was a bit like being parents of a very large family. We constantly gave reminders about due dates for assignments (we also provided a linked course calendar with due dates conspicuously marked), closely monitored our students' attendance and reached out to them if they missed a class or were struggling with assignments. We passed this information onto the Student Success Coach from the First Year Experience Office, who also contacted students for more extensive counseling as early in the semester as possible. Early alert systems like this, have been shown to be successful in reducing course failures and making students aware that someone in the college cares about them (Hudson, 2005; Tampke, 2013).

We frequently used the 10 minute break between our two classes to update each other about students who were absent, had failed to do their homework, or were exhibiting problematic behavior in class; if needed, we continued the discussion often via email or phone after class. We sometimes made recommendations to individual students (e.g., advising them to go to the Writing Center for additional support, or assisting them to seek counseling through campus health services). We also fostered a culture of communication by making our classes as interactive as possible through discussions, small group work, and role play (all of which are also likely to increase critical thinking; for review see Grose-Fifer, Brooks, & O'Connor, 2019). To help ease our students' transition to college, at the beginning of the semester they completed the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich, Smith, & McKeachie, 1991). JG-F provided feedback to students about their responses and used the MSLQ manual (Pintrich, et al., 1991) to make suggestions about ways that they might be able to change their motivation, learning skills and study habits to better adapt to college life. In another homework assignment, students took a quiz on research relating to effective study habits, in the hope that they would adopt these techniques themselves.

We took advantage of college funding to take our LC students on field trips (e.g., dinner combined with a talk about artists and mental illness at another University or a visit to an art gallery devoted to supporting artists with mental illnesses) and to eat lunch with them in small groups in our faculty dining room, mentioned above. These activities allowed us to engage in more extensive conversations with our students. In addition to asking about coping with college, we also asked them about their lives outside of school, and their future aspirations. In learning about their jobs, families, and interests, we were often able to open the discussion as to how students balanced their family and job responsibilities with their school work. This not only gave us the opportunity to validate their cultural values, an important factor in enhancing retention among students from minoritized groups (Barnett, 2011), but it also allowed us and other students to offer practical advice when someone was having problems. These interactions allowed us to demonstrate our personal investment in our students, one of the key features of a culturally engaging campus environment (Museus, 2014) that has been shown to support students of color (Guiffrida, 2005; Museus & Neville, 2012). We believe these interactions helped to lessen the faculty/student power dynamic and helped us to build trust and to create a culture of communication. Relatedly, because the podcast assignment required that we read the same books alongside our students, we discovered them together like peers. This created authentic dialogue about ideas, which may have helped to lessen the power imbalance.

Personal connections with faculty and other students also often serve as a catalyst for academic engagement (Beckowski, Gebauer, & Arminio, 2018), which may explain why multiple studies have shown that positive interactions with faculty are associated with higher GPAs (for review see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Indeed, a path analysis by Rocconi (2011) revealed that academic gains in learning communities were largely attributable to improved student engagement. Our strategies to foster strong bonds with our LC students appear to have been somewhat successful; when we surveyed two of our LCs about their course perceptions (44 responded) we found that the majority (70%) agreed that they felt more connected to us (their LC professors) compared to professors in their other courses; the majority also agreed that we had contributed to their personal/social (65.9% agreed) and academic development (72.7% agreed) more than their non-LC professors.

In addition to bonding with us, we also wanted students to form strong relationships with their LC peers. Positive relationships with peers within an LC has been associated with increased student motivation (Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002), more collaborative active learning (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Smith, MacGregor, & Matthews, 2004; Tinto, 2000; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and greater interdisciplinary critical thinking and academic risk-taking in the classroom (VanOra, 2019). We tried to foster a sense of community among students by using discussions and small group work in our classes. In particular, the podcast project required students to work cooperatively, but having two class periods back-to-back also helped our students to forge friendships. Past experience had taught us that we had to devote multiple class periods working on the podcast project (perhaps one fifth of the semester), because it is often difficult for students at a commuter school to collaborate outside the classroom. Furthermore, it also gave us the chance to observe the interactions between our students and to intervene when needed (McKendall, 2000).

Institutional structures also aided the community building strategies described above that helped to foster positive peer relationships. On our campus, LCs were smaller than most other standard Introductory Psychology courses in our college (a maximum of 25 students cf. 36–120 students). Thus, LC students had ample opportunities to co-construct knowledge with their peers in zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2000). At the end of the semester, we surveyed students from two of our LC courses (44 responses) about their perceptions of their LC peer relationships and the structure of the course. The majority (82%) agreed that they had formed stronger connections with their LC peers than peers in other courses. 75% agreed that working collaboratively with peers created a more positive learning environment in their LC than in their non-LC courses; the majority also agreed that LC peers contributed more to their personal/social (65% agreed) and academic (62% agreed) development than non-LC peers. It is likely that these differences may stem in part from the structure of our LC courses compared to their non-LC courses; 77.3% of students agreed that they did more group work and 70.3% agreed they had more discussion in the LC than their non-LC courses. Lastly, it seems that the podcast project was particularly effective in fostering positive peer interactions; 94% of 67 students surveyed agreed that the podcast assignment helped them to work cooperatively with their peers.

Efficacy of LCs on improving student success

Our college has found that students who earn Ds, Fs, withdraw (W) or take an incomplete in a course (I) in two or more of their courses in their first year are at considerable risk of dropping out from college, and so this has become an important metric for us. We found that fewer students earned a DFW or I grade in Introductory Psychology in the four Fall LC courses that JG-F partnered with KAH (8.3%) compared to students in non-LC sections of Psychology that JG-F taught in the following Spring of each year (25.4%), χ^2 (1, 465) = 13.07, $p < .001$. Admittedly, these Spring sections were larger (36 to 120 students) than the LC courses, which consisted of 21 to 25 students, and Spring classes contained a mix of students at different levels from first-years to seniors. However, these data were nevertheless encouraging and validated the extra time and effort we devoted to planning and teaching our LCs. Moreover across the college, LCs were shown to be effective in increasing second semester retention, GPAs and the number of earned credits (http://doitapps.jjay.cuny.edu/middlestates/docs/2011-2012%20Annual%20Report_FYE.pdf), as well as increasing feelings of connectedness between students (Grose-Fifer, et al., 2014).

Despite these positive outcomes for our students, scheduling multiple LCs across the college has proven to be very difficult logistically, and there were relatively few faculty who were willing to commit the extra time needed to plan and teach courses with strong interdisciplinary connections, a crucial feature for LC-related improvements in academic success (Grose-Fifer, et al., 2014) and student retention (Lichtenstein, 2005). As a result, LCs at our college have been replaced with First-Year Experience seminars, small classes that are designed to help students transition to college. However, many of these use best practices that were developed and tested by LC faculty and so the fruits of our glorious experiment with LCs continue to flourish.

References

Anaya, G., & Cole, D. G. (2001). Latina/o student achievement: Exploring the influence of student-faculty interactions on college grades. *Journal of College Student Development, 42*, 3-14.

Andrade, M. S. (2007). Learning communities: Examining positive outcomes *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice, 9*, 1-20.

Astin, A. W. (1997). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Barnett, E. A. (2011). Validation experiences and persistence among community college students. *The Review of Higher Education, 34*(2), 193-230.

Bernadowski, C. (2013). Improving the reading attitudes of college students: Using literature circles to learn about content reading. *Journal on English Language Teaching, 3*(3), 16-24.

Bielaczyc, K., & Collins, A. (1999). Learning communities in classrooms: A reconceptualization of educational practice. *Instructional-design theories and models: A new paradigm of instructional theory* (Vol. 2, pp. 269-292). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Braxton, J. M., Shaw Sullivan, A. V., & Johnson, R. M. (1997). Appraising Tinto's theory of college student departure. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 12, pp. 107-164). New York, NY: Agathon Press.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

Cayanus, J. L., Martin, M. M., & Goodboy, A. K. (2009). The relation between teacher self-disclosure and student motives to communicate. *Communication Research Reports, 26*, 105-113.

Chiang, L., Hunter, C. D., & Yeh, C. J. (2004). Coping attitudes, sources, and practices among Black and Latino college students. *Adolescence, 39*, 793-815.

Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2008). "Is that paper really due today?" Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education, 55*, 425-446.

Crissman, J. (2001). Clustered and nonclustered first-year seminars: New students' first-semester experiences. *Journal of The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 13*(1), 69-88.

Cross, K. P. (1998). Why learning communities? Why now? *About Campus, 3*(3), 4-11.

Díaz, J. (1996). How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie. *Drown* (pp. 143-149). New York, NY: River Head Books.

Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review, 95*, 256-273.

Gebauer, R. (2019). The critical nature of intentionality when supporting academically underprepared students through learning communities. *Learning Communities Research and Practice, 7*(1), 3. Retrieved from https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol7/iss1/3

Grose-Fifer, J. (2017). Using role play to enhance critical thinking about ethics in psychology. In R. Obeid, A. M. Schwartz, C. Shane-Simpson & P. J. Brooks (Eds.), *How we teach now: The GSTA guide to student-centered teaching.* (pp. 213-223). Retrieved from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) website: http://teachpsych.org/ebooks/howweteachnow.

Grose-Fifer, J., Brooks, P. J., & O'Connor, M. (2019). *Teaching psychology: An evidence-based approach*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Grose-Fifer, J., Helmer, K. A., & Zottoli, T. M. (2014). Interdisciplinary connections and academic performance in Psychology–English learning communities. *Teaching of Psychology, 41*, 57-62.

Guiffrida, D. (2005). Othermothering as a framework for understanding African American students' definitions of student-centered faculty. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76*, 701-723.

Hegler, K. L. (2004). Assessing learning communities. *Assessment Update, 16*(6), 1-8.

Henscheid, J. M. (2015). It is time to count learning communities. *Learning Communities: Research and Practice, 3*(2), 9. Retrieved from https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol3/iss2/9

Hudson, W. E. (2005). Can an early alert excessive absenteeism warning system be effective in retaining freshman students? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice, 7*, 217-226.

Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education, 70*, 324-345.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, F. P., & Smith, K. A. (1998). Cooperative learning returns to college what evidence is there that it works? *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 30*(4), 26-35.

Karau, S. J., & Williams, K. D. (1993). Social loafing: A meta-analytic review and theoretical integration. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65*, 681-706.

Kellogg, K. (1999). Learning communities (Report No. EDO-HE-1999-1). *Washington, DC. ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development*.

Kenneth, B., & Clark, M. P. (1947). Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children. In E. L. Hartley (Ed.), *Readings in Social Psychology* (pp. 602-611). New York, NY: Holt and Company.

Kim, Y. K., & Sax, L. J. (2009). Student–faculty interaction in research universities: Differences by student gender, race, social class, and first-generation status. *Research in Higher Education, 50*, 437-459.

Komarraju, M., Musulkin, S., & Bhattacharya, G. (2010). Role of student–faculty interactions in developing college students' academic self-concept, motivation, and achievement. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*, 332-342.

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.

Lichtenstein, M. (2005). The importance of classroom environments in the assessment of learning community outcomes. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*, 341-356.

McDowell, J. E., & Westman, A. S. (2005). Exploring the use of first name to address faculty members in graduate programs. *College Student Journal, 39*, 353-357.

McKendall, M. (2000). Teaching groups to become teams. *Journal of Education for Business, 75*, 277-282.

Museus, S. D. (2014). The culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model: A new theory of success among racially diverse college student populations *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 189-227). Berlin, Germany: Springer.

Museus, S. D., & Neville, K. M. (2012). Delineating the ways that key institutional agents provide racial minority students with access to social capital in college. *Journal of College Student Development, 53*, 436-452.

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). (2019). High impact practices. Retrieved from http://nsse.indiana.edu/2019_institutional_report/pdf/HIPTables/HIP.pdf

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students (Volume 2): A third decade of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Paulson, E. J. (2006). Self-selected reading for enjoyment as a college developmental reading approach. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 36*, 51-58.

Pintrich, P. R., Smith, D. G., & McKeachie, W. (1991). *A manual for the use of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Reid, M. J., & Moore III, J. L. (2008). College readiness and academic preparation for postsecondary education: Oral histories of first-generation urban college students. *Urban Education, 43*, 240-261.

Robbins, S. B., Lauver, K., Le, H., Davis, D., Langley, R., & Carlstrom, A. (2004). Do psychosocial and study skill factors predict college outcomes? A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 130*, 261-288.

Rocconi, L. M. (2011). The impact of learning communities on first year students' growth and development in college. *Research in Higher Education, 52*, 178-193.

Saenz, V. B., Hurtado, S., Barrera, D., Wolf, D., & Yeung, F. (2007). *First in my family: A profile of first-generation college students at four-year institutions since 1971*. Retrieved from https://www.heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/TFS/Special/Monographs/FirstInMyFamily.pdf

Slavin, R. E. (2011). Cooperative learning. In E. G. Aukrust (Ed.), *Learning and cognition in education* (pp. 160-166). Boston, MA: Academic Press.

Smith, B., MacGregor, J., & Matthews, R. (2004). *Learning communities: Reforming undergraduate education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Soldner, L., Lee, Y., & Duby, P. (1999). Welcome to the block: Developing freshman learning communities that work. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice, 1*, 115-129.

Stefanou, C. R., & Salisbury-Glennon, J. D. (2002). Developing motivation and cognitive learning strategies through an undergraduate learning community. *Learning Environments Research, 5*, 77-97.

Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: how American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102*, 1178-1197.

Tampke, D. R. (2013). Developing, implementing, and assessing an early alert system. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice, 14*, 523-532.

Tampke, D. R., & Durodoye, R. (2013). Improving academic success for undecided students: A first-year seminar/learning community approach. *Learning Communities: Research and Practice, 1*(2), 3. Retrieved from https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol1/iss2/3/

Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education, 37*, 1-22.

Thompson-Cannino, J., Cotton, R., & Torneo, E. (2009). *Picking cotton: Our memoir of injustice and redemption*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition (2nd ed.)*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2000). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success in higher education. *Journal of Institutional Research, 9*, 48–53.

Trolian, T. L., Jach, E. A., Hanson, J. M., & Pascarella, E. T. (2016). Influencing academic motivation: The effects of student–faculty interaction. *Journal of College Student Development, 57*, 810-826.

van der Zanden, P. J., Denessen, E., Cillessen, A. H., & Meijer, P. C. (2018). Domains and predictors of first-year student success: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review, 23*, 57-77.

VanOra, J. P. (2019). The impact of learning communities on the experiences of developmental students in community college: A qualitative study. *Learning Communities: Research and Practice, 7*(1), 2. Retrieved from https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol7/iss1/2/

Venezia, A., & Jaeger, L. (2013). Transitions from high school to college. *The Future of Children, 23*, 117-136.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society. In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner & E. Souberman (Eds.): Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weiss, M. J., Mayer, A. K., Cullinan, D., Ratledge, A., Sommo, C., & Diamond, J. (2015). A random assignment evaluation of learning communities at Kingsborough Community College—seven years later. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 8*, 189-217.

Wells, G. (2000). Dialogic inquiry in education. In C. D. Lee & P. Smagorinsky (Eds.), *Vygotskian perspectives on literacy research* (pp. 51-85). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Zhao, C.-M., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education, 45*, 115-138. doi: 10.1023/B:RIHE.0000015692.88534.de