

Learning to Belong: The Best and Hardest Work of Learning Communities

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Abstract

Learning communities are structures that offer us opportunities for deep, intentional, and sometimes problematic collaboration across campus. They also have a way of mediating that mismatch between what students are capable of and what our institutions expect of them. If we believe that learning takes place best in the context of community, then learning communities may offer a home community from which students may venture forth onto our campuses, prepared to be active members of the larger community of scholars and educators.

I was at an institute on learning communities on my campus, one that we had put on for our graduate students so they'd know all about learning communities when they go on job interviews. We had a student panel one night, four students from different LCs on our campus. I knew three of them, but one woman, Laura, was unknown to me. She looked, though, like she belonged in Watauga College. For those who might not know Watauga, it has a lot of aspiring hippies with a dose of grunge.

So here's this student, barefooted, long, loose flowing skirt, hair hanging in a less-than-orderly way. She tells the audience, which I'm in, that she was in the Military Science Learning Community her first year. Eyes widen around the room. Our Military Science Learning Community is made up of Army ROTC students who walk our campus in fatigues and can often be seen doing rifle-tossing drills.

Anyway, she explains that yes, she was in this learning community with these ROTC members who planned military careers. She wasn't planning one, though. She went on to talk about the learning community classes, which focused on leadership as well as academics. Yes, she was a bit of an outsider. She said, "I was the only person in the LC who was also a member of High Country Students for Peace and Justice."

"Yeah," she went on, "I wore the fatigues on the days I was supposed to. Sometimes I passed by friends from my other life on campus and I would often just avoid them, because I got tired of explaining how I, a theatre major and peace activist, was in the Military Science Learning Community."

Time for Q and A comes, and the hands shoot up. “How did you end up in this LC?”

“I’m not entirely sure. During orientation, my advisor asked me, ‘Have you ever considered a career in the military?’ ‘Well, yeah, I suppose.’ I think he heard that differently than I said it. Anyway, I showed up at the start of the semester, and someone handed me a pair of boots and said, ‘Here ya go,’ and there I went.”

I caught a glimpse of my colleague who’s often responsible for placing students in learning communities. She had her hand on her forehead, shaking her head slowly.

“How did the others in the learning community treat you?”

“At first, they were a little weirded out. I mean, I’m a theatre major, and most of them had never seen a play. And I dress kind of strange... but after a while, it was fine. They acted like I belonged. And I did.”

“They acted like I belonged, and I did.” What a remarkable statement about the power of learning communities. Somehow, something happened in this linked pair of classes, in these co-curricular activities, that broke down substantial barriers between very different, and typically very unconnected students.

I want to provide a little bit of developmental and theoretical context for what I think learning communities do that create a sense of belonging, and then share some stories from my own experience that I hope illustrate these points.

I’ve been influenced in how I think about learning communities by the work of Robert Kegan, a developmental theorist. I’m particularly intrigued by his concepts of the third and fourth orders of consciousness, and how higher education creates a developmental mismatch between students’ cognitive abilities and what their professors expect of them.

What Kegan means by “orders of consciousness” refers to forms of “meaning-making;” in other words, the ways we make sense of the world (1995: 34). Kegan says there is no meaning in the world apart from what we make of it, and over time, our ways of making meaning change qualitatively. And Kegan says this happens in fairly predictable ways. Right around late adolescence and into early adulthood, we will often find ourselves in Kegan’s third order of consciousness, transitioning (with any luck) to the fourth. The third order is one in which we make meaning relying in large part on the help of other, external sources, and it is difficult to get outside these sources and critique them from a personal point of view (1995: 37–38). These are the students who want to know what others think, and then choose to subscribe to that other’s point of view. What’s key here is that this construction of knowledge is done in conjunction with others, and pleasing those others is crucial to one’s identity. The community, in other words, is the source of authority, and the student is unable to objectively evaluate that authority.

Individuals who are what Kegan would call “fourth order” construct meaning by examining what others have to say and then considering it from a personal perspective that helps them create a meaning unique to themselves. They may buy into a certain theory, may like the work of a particular scholar, but they have the ability to cast a critical eye on the work, to step outside it and consider it, trusting their own ability to judge the work of another. This is a hallmark of what Baxter Magolda (2004) calls “self-authorship,” the ability to own one’s own construction of meaning. The community is a partner in this construction, but not an authority. So to the student, the community, or the professor, or the classroom, is an object they can thoughtfully evaluate, not a subject in which they themselves are embedded.

So, back to this mismatch: Kegan says that most of our students, especially the younger ones, are third-order thinkers, but that our curriculum presupposes fourth order thinking, leaving our young scholars feeling, in Kegan’s words, that they are in over their heads.

I have no doubt he’s right, and I believe this frustration accounts for a significant amount of attrition among our students, or, less visible but perhaps more insidious, the development of academic habits that inhibit learning. I think many of our students learn to play the game of higher education, jumping through small hoops in classes so they can jump through the larger hoops of requirements and then ultimately jump through the big fat hoop of graduation.

I apologize if this sounds cynical. It would be hard not to, being as I am a compulsive reader of every report on the status of, relevance of, and impending disaster of higher education that comes out of every association, working group, blue ribbon panel, and, heck, even the New York Times’ “Education Life” section. I read them all. No one’s telling me I should be optimistic.

Which brings me to learning communities. A while back, I was speaking to a group of faculty at a small university in upstate New York. After patiently listening to my presentation on the value of learning communities in terms of recruitment, retention, learning gains, faculty development, student satisfaction, and just about every darn thing I could throw in, an audience member raised his hand. “But really, why should we restructure our curriculum and create new courses and learn new ways of teaching when the world seems pretty satisfied with what we’re doing? Our classes are full. Our graduation rate is steady.”

Faculty. You have to love them. They will never let you get away without some fast and serious thinking, not when they give you the microphone and 90 minutes of their time. I thought fast and serious, and I said, with as much earnestness as I could muster, “Because learning communities are the antidote to the cynicism that pervades higher education.”

I paused and waited for the laughter, or at least the raised eyebrows. There were none. People actually kind of nodded, like maybe this made sense. Or maybe they were just ready to hear that there is a possible antidote to the cynicism they sometimes feel.

I want to share a bit about the residential learning community that I direct, Watauga College, and try to make a case that there are qualities of Watauga that do indeed respond to the mismatch Kegan describes, which may, in turn, move us beyond that cynicism and teach us something about the sometimes-elusive elegance of our work. And I'd like to share some stories about the students and faculty of Watauga who can attest to both its power and its messiness and this weird way that it both promotes and protects against cynicism.

Watauga College is Appalachian State University's residential college; it was founded in 1972, as one of those "alternative" educational experiments, rooted in the counter-cultural power of the 1960s. It is essentially a two-year program, with students taking a total of 18 semester hours their freshman year in Watauga (and 12 outside of it), and six hours, or two classes in their sophomore year. These courses are small, discussion-focused interdisciplinary classes that fulfill the student's general education requirements in English and history. We are a program within the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, and most of our faculty are tenured within that department. So we have, in essence, our own faculty. We take 120 freshmen each year and about 100 of those continue as sophomores and fulfill the 24-semester-hour requirement. Some are honors-qualified; others are kind of risky admits for ASU. We fill the program on a first-come, first-served basis, so we get a real mix of academic ability. All of our freshmen live in Appalachian's new Living Learning Center, a residential complex built for Watauga College, which houses classrooms and faculty and administrative offices as well as beds for 312 students.

For more than 30 years, the faculty and students of Watauga have been engaged in this grand experiment to create a community in which learning happens, to practice the art of learning in a way that enhances community. I guess that could be considered "fringe."

And in my three years as director of this unique program, I've begun to see that what a learning community needs to do, and Watauga does pretty well, is build a bridge between those orders of consciousness, and then guide students across that bridge. In essence, the best learning communities, and I think Watauga is one of them, mediate that mismatch in a pretty amazing way.

Let me explain what I'm thinking when I say "mediate." We all know what the verb means: to resolve or settle differences, to reconcile two different viewpoints. I recently asked someone on our campus who often mediates between co-workers who find themselves in an intractable dispute what it takes to be an effective mediator. She talked at length about trust, that if you don't have the trust of each party, you might as well give up, because nothing other than some very surface agreements will ever happen.

I believe that trust is an absolutely essential quality of the learning relationship because it frees students up to take risks they would otherwise eschew.

Learning communities, I believe, engender trust because they provide more connection between students and faculty and among students themselves, and such proximity, such connection, is critical to developing trust. We all know the phrase “time-on-task”? I think of this as “time-on-trust.” There is no way to build trust without the element of time. And believe me, I’ve done plenty of those “trust falls” that are supposed to speed this process. Catching someone falling off a tree stump is great, but it’s a lot easier than catching someone as her life is falling apart, or when he is in the throes of a crisis of faith.

Of course, any good professor in any classroom, whether or not it’s part of a learning community, can build trust with her or his students. A good professor can provide a wonderful launching pad for students to take intellectual risks. But learning communities go further, and to understand this, I want to turn for a minute to Sharon Parks’ wonderful book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*.

I loved this book and found it provoked in me a lot of hard thinking about the ways we talk about students and their search for meaning. But perhaps the most important idea that Parks presents is that when we discuss “student development,” or any human development, really, our default metaphor is the “journey.”

This is a wonderful metaphor. I love to think of all the possibilities that await students as they travel this complicated road of education. I love the attendant metaphor, suggested by Baxter Magolda, that much of our work is learning to be “good company for the journey” (2002: 6). This is a metaphor that truly enriches and encourages my work.

But Parks suggests that development is more than just a journey, that it is a return to a familiar place with a new perspective. Like T.S. Eliot tells us in “Little Gidding,” “The end of our exploration will be to arrive where we started and know it for the first time.” She says we do a disservice to those who seem to not “move on” by assuming, incorrectly, that they have not grown very much (2000: 50–52).

Journey and return. Pilgrimage and homecoming. Parks writes that “Men and women alike know that a good life is composed of both venturing and abiding...a good life and the cultivation of wisdom require a balance of home and pilgrimage” (2000: 51).

I think we have the venturing, the pilgrimage, figured out in higher education. We are quite skilled at pushing our fledglings out of the nest at the appropriate times, and if they don’t fly, if they plummet to the ground, done in by an inability to wrestle with those threats to their self-concept, to their belief system, we look down, wistfully, and say, “He wasn’t ready to be in college.” And then we move on. But we’re not so good at the abiding part, providing a place to come home to. And that is critical, Parks says (and I agree), to a truly powerful education. Parks writes, “(W)e experience home as a

familiar center surrounded by a permeable membrane that makes it possible both to sustain and enlarge our sense of self and other, self and world” (2000: 52).

Learning communities like Watauga College, and like many of the ones you are part of, provide, I believe, the other half of that equation. Home, plus the half that we take for granted is an important part of higher education: the journey.

Let me give some examples of how, in a learning community like Watauga, we are, and should be, trying to provide both the venturing and the abiding.

On our website, which is how most of our prospective students get to know us, we say, “Watauga College is not for the weak of mind or the faint of heart. No assumption goes unchallenged, no platitude goes unquestioned, no risk goes unnoticed.” I think in some ways, it’s the tradition of Watauga to dare students to join us. Are you tough enough to have everything you believe up for discussion and debate? And I love this about Watauga. I do think that we fairly portray the kind of intellectual challenge we offer in Watauga, and there may well be students who read that and click the mouse as quickly as they can to find something a little less threatening. This is especially true, I think, of students considering Appalachian, which is in a Bible belt state where Christianity is the common context for most thought.

But we do get students, in part because (and this is kind of ironic) we tell them and their parents, “If you join Watauga, there is nowhere to hide. We will know you, we may talk about you, we will knock on your door if you don’t show up when we’re expecting you. If you are seeking the anonymity of a large university, look elsewhere.”

So from the start, we offer them this sort of paradoxical experience, “challenge and support,” to use the time-honored phrase. And it gets played out in both the classroom and the residence hall.

How it’s played out in the classroom is probably pretty familiar to most faculty. One creates a safe environment and students are more willing to take risks and will share more, will try out new ideas, will put their beliefs on the table. A learning community, though, does these things in spades. The very fact that faculty and students have enlisted in this effort says something about their willingness to engage on a level perhaps a bit deeper than the standard class experience. It is also an environment where people tend to be known better, in large part because there is more time spent together and because students are known by various people with various points of view about them.

We hold a weekly meeting in Watauga. In that meeting, the faculty who are teaching in our core classes — in other words, who between them know every single freshman in our program — meet with me, our academic advisor, and the director of the Living Learning Center. I ask if any of the faculty members are concerned about any student. A name comes up, a student, perhaps, whose performance is dropping off considerably. Another faculty member there, who might have had this student last semester, or has

him or her in a “Tangent,” one of our elective courses, contributes a perspective based on experience. The director of the Living Learning Center (we call it “the House”) might know something, or might be the best person to respond to the student.

Several of us, though usually not all, know our students. We see them from various vantage points, what we call our “three-dimensional view,” and we see them usually over the course of two years, which allows us to make elongated judgments of them. I think sometimes they really resent this, this “being known” thing, especially if they are engaging in activities they would like us to *not* know about. But more often, I think, it gives them some sense of safety and security, of value, because I can say, “I hear you got cast in the Vagina Monologues. How are rehearsals going?” Or a professor can say, “I understand you slept through Kay’s midterm. Are you doing okay?” I’d like to think, and I hope I’m right, that a student who feels that safety in relationship to the classroom and his or her faculty will be the kind of student who is willing to let go of the rope a bit and try on some new and increasingly complex ideas.

Kegan writes that our “evolutionary bridge,” that structure that takes us to the next order of consciousness, must be well-anchored on both ends to provide a student with a path from one side to another (1995: 43–46). I believe that a learning community with a consistent team of faculty is a heck of a lot more anchored than four or five unconnected faculty across campus, with a resident assistant and resident director thrown in who don’t know those faculty, and maybe an academic advisor in general studies who doesn’t know any of them at all, and only connects with the faculty member or RA if the student is tanking spectacularly.

Another way a learning community provides that holding environment in the classroom is to provide standards and hold students to them. A couple of years ago, Watauga implemented what we call our “tough love” policy. You know, Appalachian, like a lot of public universities, doesn’t really have very tough standards in place for freshmen, and you know what happens to some of them: They get busy having fun, fall behind in their work, get overwhelmed right after midterms with how much they have to do, and decide, “I’ll just give up now and have fun, and then start fresh in January.” Except they’re not starting fresh, are they? They have a miserable GPA, which will follow them around, and maybe will ruin their chances of getting into a particular major or even a graduate school later when they finally catch fire for something academically. And they don’t go down the drain alone, do they? They become very effective at persuading others to tank right along with them, because really, that’s what community is all about.

We thought, heck, we don’t have to sit back and let this happen. Maybe if we tell them that they will be kicked out of Watauga College and, perhaps more importantly, the House, if they can’t achieve a 1.5 minimum that first semester, they might find a way to get it in gear and do the work, and maybe end up with a 2.0 instead of a 1.0. And maybe their friends will actually prod them into doing some of that work, not wanting to lose a member of this tight-knit community. This is how I ended up with two students on the couch in my office sharing their concerns about a third student, who

was, by all accounts, tanking in a big way. They had told her they were coming to see me about her because they didn't seem to be getting through to her, and she agreed to let us talk about her. She is wonderful. They love her, I love her, her faculty love her. But she was about to be gone, and they knew it. I told them she owed me a paper for her one-credit-hour class with me, and if I didn't have it by 5, she would fail my class, and, well, I let them figure out the rest. At 4:50 that afternoon, an e-mail came from this student, with a paper attached. I later learned that her two friends rode herd on her, literally standing over her while she typed, ignoring her excuses, until they watched her save and send the paper to me. The paper was fine, by the way. This kid totally has it in her to do great work. She just has motivation issues. But apparently, two people who love her, standing over her, threatening to tie her to the chair, was motivation enough. She is in class with them. She lives with them. They were not going to let her go down without a fight. Now that is a well-anchored bridge. What she learned about friendship and commitment and integrity that day far surpassed anything she learned writing that paper, but I'm okay with that.

Listen to this great idea from Kegan: "A well-schooled culture is a tricky culture. It not only creates environments that are intensely meaningful to the current way its members construct their experience, it also increases the likelihood that interacting with this environment will disturb this very way of constructing reality and promote its transformation" (p. 68). We do that all the time in our learning community classrooms, right? We give our students a connection to you and each other that is intensely meaningful, and then, just when they're getting comfortable, we disturb the daylight out of them. But because they are in this holding environment, this safe place where they trust us and feel a powerful connection to one another, they don't run screaming from the room or withdraw from the university (less dramatic, I know, but more significant in the big picture).

But what about beyond the classroom? That's an area where I think Watauga excels. The very nature of this anti-authoritarian little pocket of liberalism on campus is enough to make some students freak out. Yes, we attract those classic Watauga students, but we also attract students who are more middle-of-the-road, but are drawn by our promise of small, discussion-oriented classes, close ties to faculty, and, to be honest, the nicest residence hall at Appalachian, maybe anywhere. Like the Military Science Learning Community, but in a bigger way, Watauga offers a home to students who are all over the political and social and religious map, and this is the best evidence of it being a fourth-order kind of structure: Students are encouraged to step outside the community and critically, but respectfully, evaluate it and each other.

This is hard work, especially for students who are mostly freshmen and sophomores. We push them, and they push us, to sort out what it means to build a bridge between the place they are, and the place they need to be to act as responsible members of this or any community. Here's an example of a bridge:

We worked for much of last year on developing an in-house judicial process to respond to minor violations, such as first-time underage drinking, and violations of

community standards, such as noise, trash, general disrespect. After weeks of training and discussion, the Community Expectations Circle, or CEC, had its first few hearings. The first couple went well, with students accepting responsibility and the proposed sanctions (usually, because we use the model of reconciliation, several hours of community service). But the third one involved a group of students who had been caught having a party with alcohol in their suite. The students being sanctioned were petulant, which hurt the feelings of the well-meaning CEC members, and the whole thing got kind of ugly in the days following the hearing.

“What exactly is the problem?” I asked them after hearing this topic come up from several of them.

One said, “The CEC is hypocritical. Some of their members do the same things they were accusing others of.”

Another said, “Yeah, and people felt judged. The CEC was being judgmental.”

I almost laughed at the irony of the moment. Instead, I thought about Kegan (okay, not really, but in hindsight it makes sense). “Um, they were being judgmental,” I said. “That’s how it works in a community. You do something that has negative consequences, and if you get caught, you get judged. That’s pretty much how the whole system of justice works.”

“Yeah, but, I just think you shouldn’t be judged for decisions you make...kind of... I mean, when those decisions aren’t really hurting anyone.” This third-order stuff — they were embedded in the process and were having trouble objectively evaluating it — was fascinating to listen to, but I knew that my job was to somehow remind them that we aspire to great things in this, our very own residence hall. The CEC, you see, is a fourth-order kind of structure, asking students, both the CEC members and respondents, to look at behavior more objectively, to remove it from the realm of the personal (i.e., “I don’t want to get hurt, I don’t want to hurt anyone”), and see it in the realm of the community (e.g., “What is best for all of us? How do we uphold the integrity of our community?”).

This sort of thing goes on with most judicial processes on campuses across the country and students will always complain that they are being made an example of or being unfairly judged. But most of those conversations and complaints happen in student rooms or over dinner, where they mostly kvetch without anything very educational taking place. But the conversation that we had about this took place in the context of a *learning community*, where they felt a connection to each other, to the greater good of the House, and, I hoped, to me. They assumed, I think, that my investment in this place, and in Watauga, was equal to theirs, and even though they fussed some more, I have to believe that they heard this response in a different way than they might have heard from a campus judicial officer or a resident director they barely knew. Our trust in one another, our knowledge of one another, allowed us to have this kind of transformative conversation.

I see examples of this sort of bridging all the time as I hear faculty talk with students over lunch about House issues. I see the faculty member who advises the CEC, along with Joe, the House director, really process the work with this group. I see other faculty members who demonstrate their commitment to the community by watering the plants, or organizing an informal library. I see the way “living” issues in the house spill over into the classroom, and even more often, the way their coursework shows up in the House as they study together, paint murals representing class material, and cook dinners with their professors. Time together, time-on-trust.

I see all of this and I know that somehow we have created a place in which they can abide. From there, they can venture. They can take their daily pilgrimage out onto this lonely planet and know that there is a home to which they can return.

Lest one think this kind of work is exclusive to residential learning communities, I assure you it's not. Let's go back to Laura, the student from the Military Science Learning Community, which is not residential. Against the odds, I think, she found a home, a safe home in that learning community, a place from which she could venture forth onto campus, into the community, and sort out her beliefs. As I listened to her that night, I realized that she had the ability to critically evaluate both communities, and I am sure this is, at least in part, because her place in that learning community was assured. She belonged. The bridge was well anchored by the structure of the learning community, by the time-on-trust all of those students experienced. That's the beginning of some powerful fourth-order meaning making.

When our students arrived this fall, we had a banner that hung from the House. It read: “Welcome home.” We need for them to know that that is the case. They are welcome and they are home.

How can anyone remain cynical in the face of such a thing? That is the gift of learning communities, when these well-anchored bridges exist in multiple places. They are in the team-taught classroom, when two faculty members disagree with one another but still act civilly, demonstrating that regard for another person can transcend opinions about the world. They are in the late-night study group, a hallmark of a good learning community, when students learn to first confront the slacker in the group and then find a way to restore his or her sense of connection to the group. The well-anchored bridge is what students travel between two different classes, two different disciplines, as they learn that you cannot understand the present war in Iraq without understanding its history of tribal leadership or the economics of oil in America.

During move-in this year, a few of our upper class students sat out front at a table, an electric skillet in front of them. From 8:30 a.m. until 4 p.m., these four or five guys made grilled cheese-and-tomato sandwiches and handed them out, for free, to new students. It was totally their idea. They bought the cheese. One of the students, Adam, had grown the tomatoes in his yard over the summer. I asked them what possessed them to do this. “We want to make sure the freshmen know this isn't just any residence hall. It's a community,” said Doug. I ate one and thought it was the best

grilled-cheese-and-tomato sandwich I'd ever tasted. It could have been the special Greek-style spice they sprinkled on the bread. Or it could have been the fact that this was more than a sandwich. This was a message in a sandwich for my new students, coming in from outside. It said, "You are crossing a bridge into a community, our community. You'll be known. You'll be trusted. Welcome home."

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