Learning Communities Creating Master Teachers

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by

Brenda L. Schnebel Schiermeyer

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We hereby certify that this dissertation, submitted by Brenda L. Schnebel Schiermeyer, conforms to acceptable standards and fully fulfills the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor in Education from College of Saint Mary

Lois Linden, Ed.D., M.S., R.N.
Chair

Christy Hutchison, J.D.
Committee Member

Martha Brown, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful daughters, Jane and Molly. I wish to instill in you a high value of lifelong learning. I never envisioned my own education would go this far. Please believe that you really can accomplish "anything you set your mind to." Thank you for sharing me with this very time-consuming project and always know that I love you both very much.

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Abstract

The purpose of this descriptive, phenomenographic qualitative case study is to analyze facilitator perceptions of a model for a non-traditional graduate degree in education delivered in the form of integrated, seamless instruction, in a learning community setting, emphasizing social constructivism. Much has been written about the irony of ineffective traditional instructional methods taught currently in the vast majority of classrooms. This paper will examine several issues surrounding the nearly one hundred-year-old concept of the learning community and how it is implemented in one Midwestern state college. Major concepts of social constructivism learning theory, learning community format, integrated curriculum, adult learning theory and the role of the facilitator will be addressed. The five emergent themes included – facilitators perceived that: it is important for learners to personalize concepts, teacher-learners need to be self-directed, learning in a group community setting is a priority, learners need large concepts rather than small details, and best practice strategies are whatever the learners need. Recommendations for additional studies examining other areas within this non-traditional venue will also be offered.

Keywords: Learning community, social constructivism, non-traditional education, adult learning theory, integrated curriculum, facilitation, best practices, teaching strategies

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter one will include background information, the significance of the study to teaching, the purpose of the study, the research question, and an explanation of the program being investigated. A listing of terms will be provided, along with their definitions as they relate to the scope and context of the study.

Background

Educators at all levels are well aware of the need for students to become proficient in learning with a deep understanding so that whatever they learn is retained and contributes to useful, practical, meaningful knowledge (Chee, 1997). They also recognize that simply learning facts is not what matters most in an era where information explosion has become the norm – in part due to technological advancements that move too quickly for items in print to keep up. Instead, what matters most should be learning to learn, acquiring the skills of independent thinking and reasoning, and instilling appreciation for lifelong learning (Chee, 1997).

Recognizing that problems with traditional teacher-dominated elementary and secondary classrooms currently exist in the quest to get students to think independently, educators are increasingly frustrated as to how to resolve these issues while at the same time honoring the requirements and constraints of standardized testing. Rassuli and Manzer (2005) pointed out that the creative and problem-solving abilities of the learners are suppressed within traditional pedagogy in higher education. As a result, colleges and universities are beginning to listen to these concerns, look into their own teacher education courses and programs, and modify curricula for graduate level programs. In order to address some of these issues, a state college in the rural Midwest has been

offering non-traditional masters degrees in education and administration since 2002 in the form of integrated, seamless instruction, within learning community settings, emphasizing social constructivism theory utilizing a unique delivery model.

Price (2005) believed that learning communities are the place for the experimental and cooperative learning that empowers adult classroom teachers as learners. Within this environment, adult-learners of all ages, varied years of teaching experience, and diverse content expertise come together one weekend a month to collaboratively undergo a two-year teaching-style transformation. The college represented in this dissertation study is a model using a non-traditional, learning community style format within its graduate level, Master of Science in Education program.

Using the non-traditional graduate level program structure is not consistent with the concept that instruction and learning are typically thought of as occurring in the classroom, which is the basic unit of the typical, traditional curriculum. Brooks and Brooks (1993) identified five problems that arise in conventional classroom settings. First, the predominant direction of communication flow in the typical kindergarten through college classroom generally goes from the teacher to the students. Student-initiated questions and peer / student interactions are not the norm. Second, teachers tend to over-rely on textbooks and simply disseminate the contained information. Third, the structure of most classrooms actually discourages students from working collaboratively. Emphasis in the described classrooms is placed on individual accomplishment and assessment on isolated tasks requiring low-level skills rather than higher-order thinking. Fourth, student thinking is obviously undervalued. In general, the goal of the teacher is merely to determine whether students know the one “right” answer to a question. Fifth,

schooling is premised on the notion that there exists a fixed, objective world based on conventional, predetermined understandings that the student must come to know.

In schools fitting the above traditional, teacher-led, conventional description – from pre-kindergarten through upper college levels – students are viewed as successful when lofty test scores are achieved rather than in the understanding and learning of concepts. The emphasis on performance encourages them to stress the learning of techniques, rules, and rote memorization in order to regurgitate facts onto standardized tests. The result leads to very low retention of concepts over time, very little long-term understanding, and low ability to apply what has been learned in situations where such learning could be usefully applied (Chee, 1997). Even when schools appear successful, students exhibiting all the signs of this traditional "success" typically do not display an adequate understanding or retention of the material and concepts which they have supposedly mastered (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Gardner, 1991; Littky, 2004; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Senge et al., 2000).

At the opposite end of this spectrum lies the student-directed, interest-driven, social constructivist classroom. In the schools where these components are combined to focus on student learning, more effective and sustained student achievement is shown (Bredeson & Scribner, 2000; Louis, Toole, & Hargreaves, 1999). This concept is very different from traditional teacher-directed pedagogy. Recreating and sustaining these changes happen, not by force or command, but rather by taking a deliberate approach to opportunities for improvement in schools (Senge et al., 2000).

The specific viewpoint of social constructivism can be described as based upon Dewey's Theory of Learning. Ambiguity, instability, and confusion occur with new

situations and concepts. Following a contextual progression involving interaction with the environment, learners struggle to make connections and meaning prevail over the instability of everyday, real-world events (Dewey, 1925/1981). The state of uncertainty associated with reality cannot be completely alleviated. It can only be interrupted temporarily as individuals attempt to create small pieces of meaning in their daily existence (Prawat & Floden, 1994). For the purpose of this study, "learning" will be referred to as a developmental process (Hung, Chen, & Lim, 2009, p. 3).

Within this social constructivist learning-theory approach, learners are strongly encouraged to ask questions of themselves as well as of others, let their voices be heard, make inquiries through dialogue with group members, formulate initial, tentative ideas and patterns rather than absolute, closed statements, keep an open mind that there may be more than one "right" answer, and handle disagreements and differences through discussion, more inquiry, and verbal clarification (Antonacci & Colasacco, 1995). In participating in this type of shared problem solving, students participate in a community of learners, or learning community. A major goal of learning communities is to advance collective knowledge by supporting growth of individual knowledge (Snyder, 2009).

Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning occurs first interpsychologically (outside of oneself) before concepts are understood and internalized intrapsychologically (within oneself). Therefore, it is necessary that the instructor respond to student comments, raise questions, and make observations to move discussions in a desired direction. This keeps dialogue moving efficiently, drawing out inactive students, and limiting the voice of dominating learners when they become detrimental to the learning of the group (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

Due to the constructivist nature of a non-traditional learning community program, lessons are applicable to each graduate student's personal classroom. Portions of the assignments require the learners to take the concepts from the weekend class and adapt them to each individual classroom. Teacher-learners are then responsible for reflecting on the lessons to further internalize the information. Action research is encouraged from the beginning of the program so that learners become comfortable in making their classrooms better learning environments for their own students. Curriculum concepts are presented as general, whole-concept ideas; and graduate students are guided into comprehension of the materials presented through discussion within a number of diverse collaborative groups (G. Garbe, personal communication, October 19, 2008).

Within this teaching model, groups of learners work on problems in the collaborative, social constructivist environment. The goal is to share many alternative viewpoints and challenges as well as help develop each alternative point of view (Cunningham, Duffy, & Knuth, 1993; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Sharan & Sharan, 1992). A practical, problem-based learning approach such as this involves the students in authentic educational problems that are currently occurring in their own classrooms. Since learning occurs naturally and comfortably through social-dialogical processes, the reason for using groups is to promote dialogue (allowing every member's voice to be heard), exchange perspectives, and continue reflection for deeper understanding of the content material (Mondi, Woods, & Rafi, 2007; Tinto, 1997). Good learning environments fit the needs of the learners, assuring that each individual makes meaningful connections to the concepts (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009). Striking this balance within the learning environment requires the continual cooperation of all participants.

Getting colleges and universities to employ non-traditional curriculum as part of educational practice would be an extremely difficult task. The motivations for and theory behind a social constructivist learning community model, most would agree, are well-founded. Attempting to realize and adapt such learning in the higher education setting would be quite a formidable challenge. This would require a deeper and lasting cultural change in learning and teaching practice that is understandably difficult to achieve (Honawar, 2008).

Non-traditional approaches in graduate degree programs will require more time, effort, and persistence to be widespread, accepted, and adopted in traditional colleges and universities. Adult-learners with preconceived ideas of college courses enter into non-traditional learning community programs with skepticism, frustration, and fear. Therefore, a reasonable amount of optimism, shifts in paradigms, word-of-mouth success, and a greater emphasis placed on the importance of incorporating the use of best practices in education would be necessary.

It has been nearly 100 years since John Dewey proposed the kind of change in education that would move schools away from teacher-directed, controlling classrooms with abstract concepts to environments in which learning is achieved through hands-on experimentation, dialogue, inquiry, and exposure to the real world. Learning should be approached as a constructive, self-regulated, inclusive, cooperative, and individually different process. It should be evident that learning driven by the theory of social constructivism is better suited to the attainment of deep understanding and retention of knowledge within students (Chee, 1997). The challenge, however, is for educators at all levels to take the time to create purposeful learning situations driven by content,

meaningfully guide and facilitate the creation of deep understanding, and allow the learners to uncover subject material in ways that are thoroughly understood by each individual. It is a juggling act for the teacher to undertake this challenge while balancing time, content, mandated testing, and student learning differences. Many instructors are unwilling to give up total control of their classrooms to make this happen. A variety of barriers may initially need to be faced and overcome before college facilitators can experience the learning outcomes inherent of a constructivist learning community model.

Context of the study

The college represented in this study has a long, rich, and established tradition of diverse teacher education programs ranging from undergraduate to masters level. One of these programs is a Masters of Science in Education with an emphasis in Curriculum and Instruction delivered in a learning community format which is the subject of this study. The learning community delivery model was purposefully designed to provide area kindergarten through twelfth (K-12) grade teachers opportunities to reflect about their profession as a group and engage each other in a learner-directed environment. The communities are typically made up of between 20 to 70 teacher-learners. These non-traditional graduate programs usually draw members from a geographical area of a 50 to 100 mile radius from the off-campus site. The teacher-learners attend either as individuals or as persons comprising a group from a school, district, or building.

Learning community members meet together at the off-campus class site one weekend a month over a two-year period with the purpose of improving their professional practice while obtaining a masters degree. Members of the community, along with the guidance of a two or three person facilitation team, together develop and

share a common vision, establish values, create standards for learning, devise and implement individual professional development plans (PDPs), and ultimately formulate and conduct action research projects as a culminating program capstone project. All the while, they document their professional growth through continuous reflection in portfolios (Brown & Benson, 2005). Key to the learning community format is the varied and diverse purposeful grouping arrangement created for the function of providing many types of learner support and encouragement. Although the teacher-learners enroll in individual college graduate courses, the experience of the learning is through an integrated, seamless, process driven by learner choice.

The learning community delivery format curriculum contains 30 credit hours. Requirements for completion of the program dictate that 36 credit hours are necessary for graduation. Learners must obtain an additional six hours of graduate credits before the degree is awarded. Classes specific to the content the learners teach in their own classrooms are highly encouraged to enrich and enhance individual practices of the learners. The impact of the learning community experience on the teacher-learners indicated that the capstone action research projects they chose focused on their individual content areas. Learners, through their capstones, all illustrate personal stories of classroom teachers implementing what they learned while enrolled as members of the masters program delivered in the learning community format.

Purpose of study

This phenomenographic, qualitative case study has a threefold purpose. It seeks to research, depict, and define the role of the facilitator of the learning community model as represented in this study.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used for the purpose of this study. They represent the best "fit" from the literature when considering the context of this study.

Adult education. "activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults" (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 8)

Adult learning. "the process of adults gaining knowledge and expertise" (Knowles, Holton, III, & Swanson, 2005, p. 174)

Adult learning theory. "seeks to explain how the process of learning as an adult differs from learning as a child" (Snyder, 2009, p. 49)

Andragogy. theory of adult learning based on the assumption that adult-learners learn differently from child learners (Knowles, 1990); hypothesizes that adult learners are self-directed and have been expected to take responsibility for personal decisions; "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980, p. 24)

Collaboration. described by Barojas (2004) as a problem-solving pursuit of common goals; collaborative groups create their own direction and sources (Berry, 2008)

Constructivism theory. philosophy of learning founded on the theory that learners have constructed their own understanding of the world they live in by reflecting on their prior experiences and adjusting mental models to accommodate new experiences into existing schema (Boud & Lee, 2005; Chee, 1997; Hartnell-Young, 2006; Windschitl, 1999)

Facilitation. a pedagogical term that applies to student-centered approaches to learning as opposed to teacher-driven; the teacher's role moving from expert to one of facilitation – 'sage-on-the-stage' to 'guide-on-the-side' (Tinto, 1997)

Integrated curriculum. described by Shoemaker (1995) as "Education that is organized in such a way that it cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association to focus upon broad areas of study. It views learning and teaching in a holistic way and reflects the real world, which is interactive" (as cited in Walker, 1995, p. 1)

Learning activities. "thinking activities that people employ to learn" (Vermunt, 1996, p. 25)

Learning community. a group of "experts and novices, all learners, working together to build knowledge across various domains" (Hartnell-Young, 2006, p. 1) who have interests and needs in common

Learning strategies. patterns or series of learning activities used by students naturally (Vermunt, 1996)

Learning style. a coherent whole of learning activities that students usually employ, including their learning orientation and their mental model of learning; a whole that is characteristic of them at a certain period (Vermunt, 1996)

Self-directed learning. occurs when students are active participants in their own learning, learning at their own pace and using their own strategies; they are more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated; and learning is more individualized than standardized; an essential part of the maturation process (Knowles, 1975)

Social constructivism theory. talking through the new ideas and information with others as a way of negotiating meaning (Fosnot, 1996)

Significance of study to teaching

One significance of this study to teaching was to provide research on and a better understanding of the role of the facilitator in the Midwestern state college's learning community delivery model represented in this study. Another significance was to examine strategies that may influence teachers in the pursuit of a constructivist, non-traditional Masters of Science in Education program. Presenting information that may contribute to the development of teachers who will create student-led classrooms will be an additional benefit. Moreover, this knowledge could help institutions that are delivering or considering implementing a non-traditional, learning community format delivery in their graduate courses, to attract, train, and retain talented facilitators so they might more effectively assist teacher-learners.

Research Question

In order to complete this phenomenographic, qualitative case study, the following research question was addressed:

> What structural components, methods, and best practice strategies do facilitators perceive they need to use when engaging in the learning community delivery model represented in this study?

This study investigated which learning community structural components were utilized when facilitators engaged in the delivery format model represented in this dissertation study. By analyzing and then describing the integral elements of this particular learning community format, knowledge of non-traditional adult graduate

programs in education may be increased as a result of the findings. This study will outline which methods facilitators need to use when engaging in this type of learning community model. This study will include findings in regard to cohort learning in an integrated graduate teacher education setting. Furthermore, the findings will show which best practice strategies facilitators believe they need to use when engaging in a learning community model such as the model represented in this study. This research may offer insight into the use of effective strategies for cohort education programs. Another benefit may include adding testimony to the research on what constitutes effective instructional practice in reference to adult learning.

Summary

This chapter set forth the introduction, purpose of the study, research question, definitions of terminology, and background of the program being studied that will be used throughout this dissertation. Chapter two will be a review of literature related to social constructivism theory, adult learning theory, and learning community format. The subjects of integrated curriculum and the role of facilitator will also be addressed. Each topic frames the study.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

Chapter two will include a compilation of relevant literature to explain and frame elements of the program being studied. The areas of research to be included in this study will be social constructivism theory, adult learning theory, learning community format, integrated curriculum, and role of facilitator.

Framework

Social constructivism theory.

The basic premise of constructivism theory is simple: individuals *construct* their own understanding of the world around them (Chee, 1997; Boud & Lee, 2005; Dewey, 1925/1981; Hartnell-Young, 2006; Windschitl, 1999). The general view is that 1) learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge, and 2) instruction is a process of supporting that construction rather than communicating knowledge. Weaknesses in traditional schools stem from a lack of appreciation that to be effective, human learning is based not so much on knowing, but rather understanding (Bruner, 1990). To learn with understanding, students must make sense of what they are studying by synthesizing and connecting new information and experiences into existing intellectual schema (Harrington & Enochs, 2009). Learners at any level also need to come to accept and appreciate uncertainty and ambiguity, while learning to inquire. The process of questioning is very time-consuming to instill in learners.

Constructivism should not be viewed as a theory of instruction; it is a theory of knowledge and of learning (Fosnot, 1996). It defines knowledge as being "temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated, and thus, non-objective. Learning from this perspective is understood as a self-regulated process of resolving inner cognitive

conflicts that often become apparent through concrete experience, collaborative discourse, and reflection" (Fosnot in Preface to Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. vii). Because it puts forward such a different relationship between knowledge and what takes place in the traditional classroom, von Glaserfeld (1993) suggested that constructivism is better viewed as a theory of knowing than as a theory of knowledge.

Constructivism is not reduced to mechanical memorization for fact recall as with some of the traditional educational models. One reason for the resurgence of constructivism is its compatibility with technology. In addition, the evaluation of comprehension and understanding cannot be based on what students are able to repeat. Rather, it must be based on what they can generate, demonstrate, and exhibit (Andrew, 2007; Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Gardner, 1991; Tinto, 1997). Information is processed in this manner according to the social constructivist principle regardless of age or educational level of the student, and goes hand-in-hand with the learning community model. In describing social constructivism, Tsang summed the process as, "when someone doesn't understand something, it bothers them internally – this nagging is resolved when one has the chance to experiment by doing, share the experience with others, and have time to think about the confusion" (2004, p. 1). Within the fostering of dialogue, students are assisted in drawing connections. Further group discussion helps them to incorporate these connections into higher-level themes (Weller, 2007).

In a setting of collaborative learning, graduate level teacher-learners can safely criticize their own and fellow students' contributions, ask for clarification / explanations, and give counter-arguments. In this way they are stimulating themselves and the other learners in an attempt to make sense of the knowledge (Delaat & Lally, 2003; Wells,

2008). Initially, the facilitation must create a safe and welcoming environment that allows for validation of learner input and opinion (Meyers, 2008). Motivation occurs naturally as a result of this, as learners help each other finish tasks. Individual cognition occurring between individuals in this social learning environment is an essential part of educational experiences (Maor, 2003). Unfortunately, many traditional, non-constructivist educators do their best to stifle it. Constructivism fosters creative, more autonomous, inquiring thinkers who are able to convey their thoughts effectively in a variety of different situations (Prefume, 2007).

A potential weakness with the social constructivist learning theory is the implication that only the learner can know what he or she has constructed. Only the student can "know" completely what he has learned. Therefore, a certain amount of subjectivism is always present in the learning community environment. Judging the validity of someone's knowledge, understanding, explanation, or action is relative to whether or not it provides a viable, workable, acceptable action relevant to potential alternatives (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996).

Adult learning theory.

In order for educators to better understand how adults learn, adult learning theories have been derived to assist in explaining this learning process and create learning environments most suitable to adults' unique needs (Snyder, 2009). As adults mature mentally, they become increasingly more responsible for their own actions and are more apt to be motivated to solve their own problems as they arise. Adults also have an increasing need to be self-directed as the level of maturation progresses. Traditional teaching models which are teacher-directed do not account for these developmental

changes in adults, and as a result, produce resistance, resentment, and tension on the part of the adult-learner (Knowles, 1980).

Perceived differences in the way adults learn should drive the instruction of adults. Imel (1989) found that teachers believe adults to be

> significantly more intellectually curious, motivated to learn, willing to take responsibility for their learning, willing to work hard at learning, clear about what they want to learn, and concerned with the practical applications and implications of learning than were children and adolescents. (What the Research Says section, para. 2)

Lessons for adult-learners must include combinations of curriculum integration, dialogue, reflection, and quality (Lawler, 2003; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). Adults often have additional life pressures outside of college which must be taken into account (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

Andragogy is a relatively new and increasingly popular adult learning theory. Knowles (1990) suggested the following six assumptions and offered that they differ from accepted, traditional pedagogical models. Following are the bases for the adult learning theory model:

1. Adults need to know why they need to learn something before making the decision to learn it.
2. Adults have a self-concept of responsibility. Being responsible for their own decisions and for their own lives is a priority. Once they have matured enough to arrive at this self-concept, they develop a deep

psychological need to be acknowledged and treated by others as capable of self-direction.

3. Adults enter into educational activities with both a greater volume and a completely different perspective of life experience than adolescents.
4. Adults become ready to learn the things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively and combine the learning with their real-life situation.
5. Adults are life-centered (or task-centered, or problem-centered) in their orientation to learning. This contrasts the subject-centered orientation to formal learning children have in school.
6. While adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, etc.) initially, the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, etc.).

If adults do, indeed, learn differently from children, it makes perfect sense that adults should be taught differently. Knowles believed that learning is continuous and lifelong. Even though there is a great deal of emphasis placed on self-directed learners, they cannot exist and learn sealed off from human contact. Adult students need to be surrounded by other mature learners and carefully grouped in a manner through which they are able to learn new perspectives from learners with different, diverse, but applicable experiences. In this manner, self-initiating learners work in concert with peers to constructively create meaning (Hord, 2009).

Out of the assumptions underlying adult learning, four principles address the needs of mature learners:

1. Adults have a need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their own instruction.
2. Experiences (including mistakes) must provide the foundation for all learning activities.
3. Adults are interested most in learning about subjects that have immediate relevance and application to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented. (Knowles, 1980)

The content material must also be very learner-centered due to the self-directedness of mature adults. Developing lessons for adults requires that the instructor "involve learners in as many aspects of their education as possible and in the creation of a climate in which they can most fruitfully learn" (Merriam, 2001, p. 7). Problems arise, however, when learner maturity levels are not commensurate in courses of higher learning. Biological and psychological development must be considered in the planning and implementation of curriculum.

Depending upon the situation or lesson, not all teacher-learners are necessarily going to be self-directed at all times. Some learners lacking in maturity are likely to become easily distracted by their own needs, lacking confidence, independence, and the resources to learn with deep understanding in such a setting. The lesson or activity must also have meaning for the adult-learner and be applicable to his or her individual

situation. For the benefit of teaching and learning, teachers must be able to transcend ambiguity and make connections to real situations (Palmer, 2007).

Deliberate care is a requirement when considering prior knowledge and factors that affect the learning experience. Understanding background knowledge of learners is paramount, as each graduate student brings unique perspectives purely as a result of life experience alone (Kim, Bonk, & Teng, 2009). Learners need "support and guidance to foster the development of self-directed, lifelong learning" (Miflin, 2000, p. 300). Being placed into a social constructivist learning community environment seems to be the perfect fit.

Learning community format

While there is no universal definition of "learning community" (participation in collective socio-cultural experience), true cohorts or communities of learners appear to share five key qualities: "shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, professional collaboration, and promotion of group and individual learning" (Stoll, as cited in Williams, Brien, Sprague, & Sullivan, 2008, p. 1; Brooks-Young, 2007). Also known as "community of practice", "community of inquiry", "democratic community", "cohort learning", "collaborative learning", or "community of learners", learning communities are generally defined as a group of "experts and novices, all learners, working together to build knowledge across various domains" (Hartnell-Young, 2006, p.1). These definitions all describe and link the notion that community is a shared experience among members of a group (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Zimitat explained that within a "community of practice, through social mechanisms, novices are

inducted into expert ways of knowing, thinking, and reasoning in their professional circle" (2007, p. 322).

Another way to view this concept is that it is knowledge that is socially constructed rather than discovered (Cross, 1998; Dewey, 1925/1981; Price, 2005). Promoting dialogue among group members, sharing alternative viewpoints, challenging each other (Cunningham et al., 1993; Knight, Hakel & Gromko, 2006; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Sharan & Sharan, 1992), building trust, asking questions, and creating knowledge together (Kunkel, 2007; Sax & Fisher, 2001) is what these social constructivist learning communities are all about. Having a cohort status establishes a feeling of safety and removes the "fear of looking foolish", allowing the essential, knowledge-building dialogue to occur. It is critical to remember that in order for the group to become an established, true learning community, patience and time must be given to allow relationships to form. "Without the authentic, sincere, and true engagement of the stakeholders, any dialogue is bound to fail" (Laouris et al., 2009, pp. 364-365). For successful implementation of long-term educational reform, active participation by all is required (Naoko, 2002).

The *Community of Inquiry Framework* developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) is one way to explain the concept of learning community. The triadic structure of the model emerged from educational literature and personal experiences of its authors. They described teaching presence as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. Cognitive presence is described as "the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry

are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer as cited in Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009, p. 67). Social presence is achieved through dialogue with peers by making internalized connections, exchanging perspectives, and creating knowledge. Shea and Bidjerano (2009) warned that care must be taken as these social processes evolve, taking care, so should different subgroups of students emerge, they all work together as one community of learners.

McDonald (1998) addressed need for balance in the community when he stated, "A healthy community is one in which essential but often competing values are maintained in tensioned balance" (p. 3). Without the balance McDonald referred to, he reported that the community would degenerate. He elaborated that it is the balancing of cooperation, competition, and "other impulses that is essential in the construction of community" (3). The belief is the sum of the whole community is greater than its individual members (Parker, 2007). Members of the community must go through a fundamental change in values and norms to internalize behavioral patterns that comprise the makeup of the community (Lim, Dannels, & Watkins, 2008).

Several learning community models currently exist. Many institutions find choosing a single model is not as beneficial as using an eclectic approach combining selected elements of two or three models. Each institution has its own mission and can design the learning communities that best fit that mission (G. Garbe, personal communication, October 18, 2008). The curriculum design is comprised of a learning environment that fosters active, constructive, contextual, cooperative, and goal-directed learning. Constructivist learning principles such as the need for activation of prior knowledge, the importance of cognitive elaboration, learning in context, ownership of

learning issues, structuring and restructuring of information, fostering intrinsic motivation, and stimulating cooperative learning have a prominent place in the design of the learning community (Norman & Schmidt, 1992). The emphasis in providing guidance on the use of groups is how to promote interchange of dialogue and inquiry among group members. Supporting collaborative informal reasoning about problems and reflectivity on the learning process is paramount.

One of the barriers to establishing the learning community format is the time needed to implement it (Janusik & Wolvin, 2007; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). The time to build relationships and secure the trust that is required is not a piece that can be forced or minimized – in fact, it is essential in a learning community delivery format. Content and andragogy are both at risk of melding into a one-size-fits-all curriculum if relationships are not initially fostered. Cognitive styles are just as different in adults as they are in children. Attention to affective needs and varying adult learning strategies - as well as choice opportunities - allow for individualized and interest-driven activities in planning lessons.

Along with community-building, these teacher-learners will be exposed to ambiguity, holistic content, and authentic assessment. When participants from diverse backgrounds and scattered locations organize to learn together, useable, retained knowledge is the byproduct (Leh, Kouba, & Davis, 2005). Facilitators feel that if learning is making connections and in the performance of the activity itself, then learning is the test (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996) and retention is the end result. This takes them out of the conventional educational setting they have been comfortable with in their own instructional practices since obtaining certification to teach. Cochran-Smith described

this confusion by stating, “unlearning is also a significant part of the process of inquiry…the word unlearning, signifies both growth and the undoing, or reversing of that growth” (2003, p. 25). This contradiction in cognition may be indicative of the complexity of the cognitive process.

Social constructivism at the graduate level through the learning community format is a viable way for teachers enrolled in the classes to experiment in their own individual classrooms while implementing action research and reflecting about how to execute lessons full of necessary eclectic learning strategies to suit all students. Teacher-learners, because they are educators themselves, know what they need to succeed in the classroom, and the vast majority of graduates from learning community programs recommend this model to their colleagues as a means of professional advancement and efficacy (J. Curtiss, personal communication, October 20, 2008). With the cost of tuition the same, static locations close to the learners, it seems a worthy option for consideration when compared to the traditional graduate class format. Facilitating takes a concerted effort and much pre-planning, but the overall goal is pre-kindergarten through high school teachers using best practices in their classrooms for the benefit of their own students’ learning.

The learning community format is neither new nor trendy. Due to its effectiveness, graduates of this program give feedback that is universally positive, affirming the validity of its merit (Tinto, 1997). Not only does it continue to flourish, but many colleges and universities are also expanding their venues by offering learning communities in other content areas. However, “reinventing the wheel” pedagogically is not something instructors are very willing to undertake. Ironically, some college

professors are, in many cases, unwilling to accept anything but traditional teaching pedagogy, even though the aforementioned research proves it is often not necessarily in the best interests of the students. Classical teacher-led lessons are what they are customarily most comfortable delivering. Curriculum guides and plans also need to be readily accessible in the event questions arise regarding the validity of the learning community format. Van den Berg and Ros (as cited in Naoko, 2002) pointed out such concerns as long-lasting questions, uncertainties, and resistances that educators may have in response to new situations and changing demands.

Senge (1990) described learning organizations as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). Sparks (2002) defined learning communities as cohorts of collaboration and practice "where staff members provide meaningful and sustained assistance to one another to improve teaching and student learning" (p. 62). The purpose of a learning community has been "to create sustained professional learning and collaboration in schools for the benefit of all students" (Sparks, 2002, p. 62). Peck (1987) wrote that each member of the group is responsible for the success of the community as a whole. Because participants go through the program together, the experiences are shared as a group (Hung, Ng, Koh & Lim, 2009; Kukulsa-Hulme & Pettit, 2008). These shared experiences "build program identification; create cohesiveness; and help learners develop productive and collegial relationships with one another and with faculty members… all of which serve as an aid to student success" (Brittenham et al., 2003, p. 18). In this manner, all of the learners are

responsible for the growth of every member of the community (Engstrom, Santo, & Yost, 2008).

Integrated curriculum

Several terms exist for the educational approach of integrated curriculum. "Interdisciplinary teaching", "synergistic teaching", "thematic teaching", "thematic units", and "continuum of integration" to name a few (Lake 1994). Shoemaker (as cited in Walker, 1995) defined this concept as education that is organized in such a way that it "cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association to focus upon broad areas of study. It views learning and teaching in a holistic way and reflects the real world, which is interactive" (p. 1). This interdisciplinary definition supports the view that integrated curriculum is an educational approach preparing students at all levels for lifelong learning (DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; McPhail, McKusick, & Starr, 2006). It also allows for teacher-learners to engage in learning activities that will help them develop deeper understandings of subject matter (Windschitl, 1999). Using this educational approach promotes uncovering ideas and concepts for individualized, internalized understanding, processed and investigated in the manner that makes sense only to the learner (Clemons, 2006; Marzano, 2001). At the graduate level, learning community models can be utilized to produce better educators (the graduate teacher-learners). Integrated curriculum is a means, not the end result (Lake, 1994). Achieving the ideal atmosphere for this model to be successful so constructivism can flourish involves a very fragile balance that can be difficult to achieve.

When teachers as learners are actively involved in planning their own learning

and given choices, they are more motivated and have a renewed sense of purpose. Activities are varied and innovative change through study groups allows learners to cut across curriculum lines as they process concepts and "big ideas" (Hsu & Sharma, 2008). Jacobs (1989) also reported that an integrated curriculum is associated with better student self-direction, higher attendance, higher levels of homework completion, and better attitudes toward school. These adult students are engaged in their learning as they make connections across disciplines that they can immediately implement in their own classrooms.

When asked, the teacher-learners, as well as the facilitators (college faculty) involved in the learning community format, preferred continuing with the integrated program, rather than returning to the traditional curriculum (Price, 2005). Price also found that facilitators appreciate the social support of working together as a team and feel they are able to teach more effectively when they integrate across subjects and courses (2005). They discover new interests and teaching techniques that revitalize their teaching. Because both facilitators and learners have experiences to be shared, questioning and risk-taking allows participants to witness and participate in one another's' thinking (Windschitl, 1999).

Role of facilitator

Within a learning community, patient and deliberate care must be taken to allow the process to produce the intended outcomes. Possibilities of both constructivist and non-constructivist instruction might exist if not facilitated properly. For example, reciprocal teaching (Palinscar, 1998) is often cited as a constructivist teaching strategy; yet if not delivered in the manner intended, it is very much teacher-directed. Similarly,

group problem-based learning interventions (Savery & Duffy, 1995) might focus on the individual achievement of prescribed learning outcomes rather than on any sort of pattern of constructivist, collective dialogue, and participation. In order for it to be successful, ongoing facilitator development is necessary so instructors hold as a priority the inquiry-based, collaborative, integrated curriculum of the program. Facilitators are then allowed to collaborate and share lessons along with best practices (Buffum & Hinman, 2006).

Talking through new ideas and sharing information with others is a way of negotiating meaning (Fosnot, 1996). This student-directed approach to learning occurs when the teaching staff backs down, takes on the role of facilitator, and allows the learners to engage in peer-learning (Maor, 2003). Examination of issues in "much greater depth" from "highly fruitful discussions" occurs naturally within a strong community of teacher-learners (Skinner, 2007, p. 381). The focus is on the learner and individual ownership of the learning activity, as in the design of problem-based learning curriculum (Buffum & Hinman, 2006; Savery & Duffy, 1995), in using student query as a mechanism for defining curriculum, or any of the variety of other learner-centered approaches (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

A fixed group of teachers should guide each learning community. Throughout the entirety of the program, the facilitator (sometimes known as a "learning coach") models higher-order thinking by asking questions that probe students' knowledge deeply (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002). To do this, the facilitator constantly asks such mediated questions as, for example - "Why?" "What do you mean?" "How do you know that's true?" in order to assist the learners in further examining concepts and ideas. Waiting for learners to process the question after it has been posed, and more importantly, after the

first answer is given, allows learners to more deeply process the concept and formulate or "wrap their minds around" other perspectives on the subject. The facilitator's interactions with the students remain at a metacognitive level, and he or she avoids expressing an opinion or giving information to the students (Kang & Printy, 2009). Therefore, learners and facilitators are more able to discuss the ways information has been processed and any advantages or disadvantages of activities offered, assuring the learners will feel safe to share thoughts and beliefs that may be different from the majority of the community (Price, 2005). In a constructivist lesson, objectives are only guidelines. If adult-learners show interest in learning something more, they should be encouraged to pursue additional research, as constructivism promotes a flexible, interactive curriculum (Graham, 2007; Prefume, 2007).

A second facilitator role is to challenge the learners' thinking. The facilitator (and hopefully other learners in this collaborative environment) will constantly ask additional mediated questions such as - "Do you know what that means?" "What are the implications of that?" "Is there anything else?" Superficial thinking and vague notions do not go unchallenged. At the beginning, the facilitator challenges both the level of understanding and the relevance and completeness of the issues studied (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2007). Gradually, however, the teacher-learners take over this role themselves, as they become confident, self-directed learners. It is up to the facilitator to offer student-centered learning with an emphasis on experiences, knowledge construction, and learning process (Ali, 2004).

Instructors need to be aware of how to motivate adult students and have thorough background content knowledge, which is an essential foundation for facilitating effective

reasoning (based on the social constructivist view). Therefore, these graduate facilitators need to grasp (usually through training, trial, and error) the optimum point between inspiring thinking and providing sufficient background knowledge to the students (G. Garbe, personal communication, October 19, 2008). These are some potential roadblocks that patient, constructivist facilitators may need to confront. Such challenges are more likely to occur in the early stages of implementation. One reason some traditional higher-level institutions avoid the learning community delivery format is that the majority of college-educators will not take the time to lay the groundwork necessary to establish an effective community foundation.

Another area of concern is in the mediation of class discussion. Each educator brings real-life phenomena and schema to the classroom that could involve alternative interpretations or entail multiple variables, which may be beyond the teachers' anticipation. This may increase the complexity of facilitation while reviewing the teacher-learners' answers. Windschitl (1999) described this facilitator trait as "intellectually agile" (p. 753). Meanwhile, verbal interpretations of real world phenomena could be more profound than what the lesson entails, and could make the information more difficult for the teacher-learners to understand. Therefore, facilitators need to be aware that adopting everyday life examples in order to help the learners make connections greatly increases the teaching demands of both content knowledge and instruction skills (Windschitl, 1999). It takes a certain skill to avoid directly rejecting adult-students' responses when their answers are unfavorable. Being aware of and planning for the potential challenges that occur in the implementation of the learning community model, facilitators guide the learning of the graduate students, giving them

the tools they need to become better classroom teachers.

Faculty must make it a priority to continue to meet and discuss ideas, issues, new developments, and thoughts regarding the courses they teach, and the methodologies they employ. This is critical so they do not run the risk of gradually reverting to the same habits they were used to when teaching in a traditional learning environment where the teacher lectures, the students memorize the correct answer, "spit it out" on a test, and never practice it. Workshops in the summer, new faculty hiring, and regular meetings with other facilitators and mentors offer additional assurances that the program operates as intended. As instructors are more involved in integrated teaching, they find that they see connections they had not seen initially (Lake, 1994). This understanding leads to more successful team-teaching and curriculum creation.

The facilitator does not teach learners what they should do or know and when they should do or know it. Rather, the facilitator is there to support the students in developing their critical thinking skills, self-directed learning skills, and content knowledge in relation to the problem. Using a learning community delivery model does not lower standards, ignore necessary content, or allow the students to work less. On the contrary, with this format, the standards are higher, the content is more in-depth, and the student work is actually more involved and intense while learning is more comprehensive (Marlowe & Page, 2005). The facilitator must honor, challenge, and support the learners' thinking rather than impose structure upon it. It can be somewhat of an undertaking from a planning standpoint, assessment perspective, and for accountability. Within the plan of the learning community, the program of study is integrated, which complements the constructivist theory. By experiencing the program through the learning community

delivery format, at the very minimum, seeds are planted in hopes of substantial change (Wood, 2007).

Summary

A review of related literature was presented in this chapter in order to provide a framework for the study. Chapter three presents the research methodology that will be employed in this study. Specific information about the design, procedures, participants, data sources, data analysis, and ethics will be included.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter three will include details of the methods used in the study. Components consist of the research design, methodology, modes of data collection and data analysis, validation with ethical considerations, limitations, and delimitations. Specific details under each topic will be provided.

Research design

This descriptive, qualitative case study sought to research, explore, and define the role of facilitators when engaged in learning community delivery models at a rural state college in the Midwest. The focus of this phenomenographic study was on the "relation between the experiences of the individuals (within the group and as a group of individuals) and their perceptions of the phenomenon" (Marton as cited in Ireland, 2009, p. 6). An analysis of written interviews, followed by the examination of institutional documentation and archived data, along with field notes from on-site observations were examined to provide an understanding of the role of the learning community facilitator as represented in this study. Triangulation of data collection methods provided a richer understanding of the phenomena in question (Creswell, 2007). The research question was formulated to investigate topics related to and exploration of the role of facilitators as represented in this study. One question guided this research. The question focused on participants comprised of past and present facilitators of learning community delivery models from the same rural Midwestern state college. Of the 21 invited to participate, 15 chose to accept the offer to contribute to this study.

Methodology

Qualitative methods were used in this case study to explore interactions related to the common experiences of facilitators teaching non-traditional, Masters of Science in Education courses, in an integrated, learning community format, to understand factors that contribute to the role of these faculty members. Qualitative methods were the best choice for this research because these methods allowed the researcher to listen to the views of the research participants, while focusing on the natural setting or context, such as the program format or classroom site dynamics, in which participants express their views. Qualitative research methods are unsurpassed for research problems where the variables are unknown and need to be explored (Creswell, 2007). These methods also allowed the researcher to approach the fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis, and allowed the researcher to study the selected issue in depth and detail, which contributed to the depth, openness, and detail of the qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007).

Research question.

The research question investigated during this study:

> What structural components, methods, and best practice strategies do facilitators perceive they need to use when engaging in the learning community delivery model represented in this study?

Methods

Participants.

Participants were past and present facilitators of the learning community delivery model used for some of the Masters in Science in Education; Curriculum and Instruction

degrees at the rural Midwestern state college represented in this case study. It was necessary to obtain assistance from the college to identify potential participants. These included adjunct faculty through full professors of the college who were current facilitators of its learning community delivery model or have been facilitators of its learning community delivery model with varied and diverse teaching and life experiences. They were given the option to participate or not to participate. The group included both males and females. A total of 15 current and former facilitators of the 21 invited to participate chose to contribute to this study.

Recruitment.

After obtaining permission from the Midwestern state college represented in this study (Appendix A: Consent Form of College Represented in this Study), the staff of the College of Education was utilized for assistance in recruiting the participants needed for the research. The staff was sent an e-mail that they addressed and forwarded to the prospective participants. These adult college faculty members were not required to participate, and there was no connection between individuals and their responses to the questionnaires. The e-mail instructed willing potential participants to contact the researcher via e-mail, if interested (Appendix C: E-mail Consent Form).

Protection of human subjects.

Questionnaires did not collect names and care was taken to ensure participant privacy. Faculty members were identified as instructors of learning communities. There was no connection between individual faculty members and their individual responses because pseudonyms were used for all participants. Confidentiality of the participants was additionally maintained by storing the hard copy questionnaires in a locked cabinet

at the investigator's residence. All questionnaires were destroyed following data analysis.

The research data from the hard copies were stored on a personal laptop computer belonging to the researcher and a backup was stored on a flash drive in the same locked file cabinet as the hard copies. The investigator was the only person with access to the password-protected data on the computer and the only person with the key to the file cabinet. All information was combined so only summary information was released in the conclusions.

Consent was obtained from all participants prior to any research (Appendix C: E-Mail Consent Form). Participant e-mail addresses were used only in the collection and member checking of data. The written questionnaire was administered through e-mail and participants were afforded a member check of their responses in the same manner. All participants responded back to the researcher in reference to the member check. After the completion of data analysis, e-mail contact information was erased from the researcher address book. (Appendix D: Rights of Research Participants Form)

Modes of data collection

Interview questions.

The first part of the questionnaire collected general categorical demographical information about the study participants such as contact information, gender, age, highest level of education, teaching experience, years teaching, current position (outside of learning community), number of years teaching (excluding learning community), and number of years as a learning community facilitator. The second part of the questionnaire protocol included semi-structured, open-ended questions requiring written

explanations. These included 12 questions about the participant's role as a facilitator and perceptions of the learning community itself. It then explored possible learner perceptions, then characteristics of facilitators, and finally, methods or strategies used by facilitators. The survey concluded by asking for a metaphor to describe the participant's facilitation style (Appendix E: Schiermeyer CSM Research Questionnaire). The questions were all purposefully crafted with the research question in mind. Questionnaires were collected beginning August 17, 2009. Responses were collected until October 20, 2009 and are included in a summary (Appendix I: Facilitator E-Mail Survey Results).

Institutional documentation.

Various forms of documentation pertinent and relevant to the institution's learning communities are located at the Midwestern state college. The documents included syllabi, textbook lists, agendas, capstone topics, graduation requirements, and other information used in the facilitation of the learning community. These were collected, analyzed, and categorized as a part of the data triangulation of the study as they related to the research question.

Archival data.

Archived data were collected from the college represented in this study in the form of data applicable to the learning community facilitators' role. The documents included 15-hour interviews (questionnaires completed by the learner after the first year or half-way through the 30 hour program), facilitator evaluations completed by the learners at the end of each semester, learner self-evaluation validations, collective student demographics, and other information limited to the scope of the study. This material did

not contain names or any identifying information and was only used if it directly connected to the research question.

Field notes.

The on-site observations with field notes were taken as another method of data collection with the intent to generate much data. Field observation was done during the same period in which the interviews were conducted. Participants agreed to be observed for up to four hours at a time. Observation began on July 14, 2009 and ended November 17, 2009. A total of four learning communities in two different cities were observed for up to four hours at a time (one community four times, one community once, two communities twice). Observation notes were also kept on three days of facilitator development training (two days off-campus and one day on-campus) as well as three 90-minute facilitator training session conference calls. Field notes were then entered into QSR NVivo® version 8 for organization until they were analyzed. The field notes did not contain names or other identifying information, but included a graphical description and portrayal of the layout of the classroom site (Appendix G: Classroom Diagrams) along with a description of the environment. Questionnaires, institutional as well as archival documentation, and field notes helped to ensure credibility between the data and any researcher bias.

Modes of data analysis

Data analysis.

The written questionnaire e-mail answers and field notes were imported into QSR NVivo® 8 qualitative data analysis software. Data were coded and grouped into logical, meaningful categories and emergent themes. Each code was continually compared to all

other codes to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns. The data were organized relevant to the research question in order to provide a way of managing the data and allowing for a way to initiate the data analysis process. The researcher, along with other research peers not involved in this study reviewed all data, categories, and themes for accuracy, offering perspectives in an effort to increase the overall credibility of findings. Outside peers were also utilized for guidance and assistance in using the NVivo® software for data management. Using NVivo® provided a visible path other researchers could follow to replicate the data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

To insure reliability of the findings and minimize possible distortions that may result from the researcher's presence, sustained engagement with the research participants to the point of data saturation was carried out and observations were recorded in field notes. Data saturation occurs when the researcher no longer sees or hears new information (Creswell, 2007). Observations were conducted until nothing new was noted. Guba and Lincoln (1985) utilized the term "prolonged engagement" (p. 301) to address this aspect of rigor. To address possible distortions that could arise from involvement with the research participants, peer debriefing was utilized with disinterested peers and an audit trail within researcher notes was maintained where thoughts, decisions, questions, and insights related to the research were recorded. An audit was performed by the researcher's Committee Chair.

Member checks were also conducted beginning December 2, 2009; the participants were re-contacted via e-mail to verify the validity of their answers to written questionnaires as well as the researcher's perspective of their intent (Appendix F:

Member Check Form). The final member check was e-mailed back on December 4, 2009. Throughout this research, the peer-debriefers reviewed data generation techniques, procedures, and data analysis; which included confirming or disconfirming emergent themes and provided editing suggestions for the final research report. To address distortions that could arise from employment of data-gathering techniques, data were carefully recorded and continually scrutinized for consistency within the technique of "triangulation" (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 283) (using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding). Triangulation is a means of corroboration, which in this study consisted of written interviews, observations, and institutional documentation, all scrutinized to establish credibility. Credibility refers to confidence in the truth of the findings (Creswell, 2007).

In reference to using e-mail as a data collection tool, McAuliffe (2003) learned through conducting a study that "E-mail-Facilitated Reflective Dialogue could prove a useful tool for generation of quality data" (p. 62). Meho (2006) discovered that participants were more thoughtful and careful with their responses with each other because they were able to take more time which "provided more reflectively dense accounts" (p. 1291) with more focus. Consent was still necessary and was obtained "by replying via e-mail affirmatively to an invitation to participate by stating in the message that the consent form was read and agreed to" (p. 1288).

Delimitations and limitations

An obvious delimitation was that this was a case study of one Midwestern state college's learning community delivery model. This research was conducted without manipulation or control variables, in order to study the role of the facilitators as it

naturally occurred. Therefore, the context of this case study limited the generalizability of the findings. The qualitative researcher utilized the descriptive, qualitative case study format to provide a thick, rich description of the phenomena encountered in the process of research. This thick description allows the readers to judge the information and make their own decisions about whether the themes that emerge from the research can be transferred to their own situations (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher's bias was a limitation. Peshkin (1988) suggested that it is important to be aware of the "subjective self" and the role that this "subjective self" plays in research because being aware of bias and prejudice is better than assuming one can be rid of subjectivity. Being aware of this "subjective self" means being aware of the qualities that will enhance research as well as the beliefs about the topic that could potentially skew interpretation and analysis of the data if not aware of them. Eisner (1998) suggested each person's history and personal makeup is unlike anyone else's. This means the way in which a situation is seen, responded to, and how the event is interpreted, will bear an individual signature. This unique signature is not a liability but a way of providing and explaining individual insight into any given situation. In order to acknowledge this limitation, bracketing was utilized; setting aside preconceived notions enables one to objectively describe the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2007).

In addressing limitations, it is necessary for the researcher to declare her background. She is a graduate as well as a current facilitator of the learning community delivery format model represented in this study. However, she is not a participant. The protections provided for human subjects have minimized this limitation. This study was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair (Appendix B:

IRB Approval Letter). In addition, participants in this study have vast and extremely diverse life experiences that have influenced them in very different ways, which certainly should not have been manipulated by the researcher's e-mail questionnaire or observational presence. The facilitators were made aware of the background and capacity of the researcher when in their presence.

Another *limitation* was that the respondents could have said what they thought the researcher wanted to hear and painted positive pictures of situations that are not altogether positive. This was reduced by triangulation. The field observations were with non-participants as well as participants. Documentation also corroborated the emergent themes. Every effort was made to ensure that facilitator perceptions were depicted as accurately as possible.

Summary

This chapter described the methods that were used to gather and analyze the data. The data were obtained from open-ended, semi-structured written e-mail questionnaires, institutional documentation, archived data, and field notes from on-site observations. The described procedures were grounded in established research techniques. Credibility of the study and ethical considerations were priorities at all times. Chapter four will describe the data analysis and emergent themes from the qualitative research conducted.

Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter four will describe the data analysis and emergent themes along with relevant sub-categories of each as answering the research question. E-mail questionnaire responses, institutional documentation, archival data, and observational field notes were categorized into emergent themes as they related and responded to the research question.

Data analysis

The research question investigated facilitator perceptions of which structural components, methods, and best practice strategies are needed when engaging in the learning community delivery model represented in this descriptive case study. Questionnaires, observational field notes, institutional documentation, and archival documentation were analyzed using QSR NVivo® version 8 data analysis software along with member checks and unbiased peer review for validity. The review of the key words and ideas taken from the collected data yielded main themes that ran consistently throughout the results (Appendix H: Word Frequency List). Demographic background on the participants is included for additional perspective.

Participants

A total of 21 present and past facilitators of the learning community delivery format were invited to take part in this study. Of the original 21, nine chose to complete the e-mail questionnaire-survey and an additional six agreed to be observed while facilitating. Of these fifteen, the number of facilitators that were observed was nine. The participants were observed in a number of different settings and situations throughout summer training and one college semester. This included facilitator development training at an off-campus site, training on campus, ongoing training while on three development

session conference calls, and in the classroom while actively facilitating in a learning community delivery format. Consent forms were obtained (Appendix C: E-Mail Consent Form) and data were collected and analyzed using QSR NVivo® version 8 software along with member checks and unbiased peer review. Those participating in this study were diverse; however, they were representational of the entirety of the facilitators and mentors of the program. General demographics in reference to the fifteen facilitators studied were collected and are included in table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Facilitator Participant Demographics

	Gender	Age	Education	Years as Facilitator	Current Position	Years of Teaching Experience
Facilitator 1	M	64	PhD	6	Retired, Professor	42
Facilitator 2	F	37	PhD	5	Mom	8
Facilitator 3	F	40	2 Masters	2	Hs SpEd	18
Facilitator 4	F	42	ABD	4	Hs English	19
Facilitator 5	F	50+	MAE	6	4th grade	30+
Facilitator 6	F	49	MSE	5	Prof Development Coordinator	26
Facilitator 7	F	50	MS	5	Guidance / Teacher	21
Facilitator 8	F	39	MSE	2	7-12 English	15
Facilitator 9	F	35	MSE	1	Hs Spanish	12
Facilitator 10	F	55	MSE	5	Student Teacher Supervisor	24
Facilitator 11	F	50+	Masters	1	Guidance	30+
Facilitator 12	F	32	MSE	1	3rd Grade	8
Facilitator 13	F	40+	MSE	2	Elementary Principal	20
Facilitator 14	M	33	MSE	3	2nd Grade	8
Facilitator 15	F	50+	MSE +36	5	6th Grade	30

The relationships of the facilitators who participated in this study represent several different current and former facilitation team combinations. Some of the participants began the program as learners and then became facilitators. A few of the participants started out in the learning community delivery model as facilitators and later evolved into mentors, serving as liaisons between the facilitators, teacher-learners, and the college as needed.

Question 12 on the e-mail survey was: *What metaphor describes your style of facilitation and why?* (Appendix E: Schiermeyer CSM Research Questionnaire). Seven of the facilitators responded to this question. Those choosing to reply to the question were Facilitators 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9 from demographic table 1. These metaphors very succinctly summed up the entirety of the program. The participants each answered differently, but with very similar meaning. The metaphors allowed the facilitators to describe their position within the learning community delivery program through symbolic depiction.

These seven metaphors are all included in their entirety to demonstrate the complexity of the program and to further illustrate the non-traditional aspect of the carefully pre-scripted format:

Facilitator 6 stated:

> A fishing guide. He provides an opportunity for the fisherman to have the most success but does not catch the fish for them. In other words, as a Learning Community facilitator, I want to provide the experiences that will yield the best results for the learner. He/she trusts that I will take them on a journey that leads to success. If they have questions, they ask

> and I share insight. However, I don't often answer without asking a question in return. This encourages the learners *to think for themselves* and trust their "gut", building confidence along the way. When the learner is successful, I feel satisfaction, knowing I helped create the conditions that led to this. That's also the aim of the fishing guide.

Facilitator 8 wrote:

> I'm a farmer. I gamble with the weather and God (trusting the process) in hopes that my crop (my learners) will get "it" but I do everything in my power to ensure that "it" happens by irrigating, fertilizing, etc. (The irrigating, fertilizing, etc. is like the planning.)

Facilitator 9 added:

> I feel like a leisurely tour guide. There's a clear beginning and a clear end. I know all the cool places to see. I have a strong background knowledge of the material. I walk with the learners on their journey, but what they take from and make of the experience is theirs.

The response from Facilitator 4 was, "I am a key because I open minds and doors to opportunities for learning." Facilitator 7 stated, "My style of facilitation is like a warm bath; inviting and soothing but yet invigorated when it comes to an end." Facilitator 3 noted, "I feel like an assistant coach. The students are the ones making the plays but I help drive them in the right areas to further their learning."

Facilitator 2 described her metaphor as:

> I think I am a see-saw as a facilitator with one side of the see-saw being learner-directed and one side being facilitator-directed. My see-saw leans

> greatly toward the learner-directed side, but I also believe that if I can create disequilibrium through questions, stories, and planned experiences the learners will construct knowledge. So, I am a see-saw who goes back and forth between pushing the learners and letting them think and reflect. It is a back and forth if you will.

Facilitator 7 described the instructional position a bit more in depth,

> Facilitating is being able to demonstrate knowledge to self and others, respect each others' diversity within the community, demonstrate active listening, willing to change, accept making mistakes and learn by them, encourage others to walk the talk, trust the process, collaborate, value shared leadership.

The metaphors allowed the researcher to better understand the role of the learning community facilitator.

Emergent themes

Five themes emerged from examining the data. When engaged in facilitating the learning community delivery format as represented in this study, participants' perceptions were as follows:

1. *Facilitators perceived that it is important for learners to personalize concepts.*
2. *Facilitators perceived that teacher-learners need to be self-directed.*
3. *Facilitators perceived that learning in a group community setting is a priority.*
4. *Facilitators perceived that learners need large concepts rather than small details.*

5. *Facilitators perceived that best practice strategies are whatever the learners need.*

After the themes were identified, they were all scrutinized concerning how they related to the research question. This resulted in sub-categories under each theme which allow for a deeper and richer clarification of the reasoning behind the emergent theme. In order to present the findings in a logical manner, the themes were organized along with their sub-categories including the data sources that contained the information. Table 4.2 is representational of this information.

Table 4.2

Findings Organization Matrix

Themes	Sub-Categories	Data
Facilitators perceived that it is important for learners to personalize concepts.	Allowing for learner choice Relationship building	Questionnaire #2, 5, 7, 10, 11 Observational Field Notes Institutional Documentation
Facilitators perceived that teacher-learners need to be self-directed.	Motivation Lifelong learning	Questionnaire #2, 4, 10, 11 Observational Field Notes
Facilitators perceived that learning in a group community setting is a priority.	Facilitators as community members	Questionnaire #3, 6, 8, 9, 10 Observational Field Notes Institutional Documentation Room Diagrams
Facilitators perceived that learners need large concepts rather than small details.		Questionnaire #2, 4, 7, 10, 11 Observational Field Notes Institutional Documentation
Facilitators perceived that best practice strategies are whatever the learners need.	Giving feedback Adding flexibility Listening Modeling Creating ambiguity Providing opportunities for action research Guiding questions Making time for reflection	Questionnaire #1, 5, 7, 10, 11 Observational Field Notes Institutional Documentation Archival Documentation

Analysis of themes

Facilitators perceived that it is important for learners to personalize concepts.

Within this theme, it was also necessary to acknowledge ideas that emerged which assist in explaining the phenomena of personalizing concepts while learning together to make sense and meaning. Sub-themes were identified as allowing for learner choice and building relationships. Each will provide descriptive information and meaning to the theme.

The participants felt when the learners processed unknown information and new concepts, it was essential for them to personalize the ideas individually. The personal connection aspect comprised a necessary key structural component when they were engaging in the learning community delivery model represented in this study. In explaining the importance of learning and making meaning together as a group within the learning community format, Facilitator 1 wrote, "The weekends consist of activities and discussion designed to enhance learner understanding and allow for learners' individual construction of that meaning and understanding. This hopefully leads to an artful and thoughtful application of the concepts to the actual practice of teaching". Facilitator 3's questionnaire yielded, "There is no lecturing, but time to present a topic, discuss, discover, and file learning in a way that it can be retrieved again."

The hope for the facilitation teams is that teacher-learners will develop ways to take ideas and materials from their class weekend and make them applicable to their own classroom and students. Facilitator 8 described this as,

> A lot of new concepts are introduced via a formative book. Learners see the big picture of the concept first and delve into the ambiguity of the concept. Facilitators then let the learners 'play around' with ideas at weekend and in so doing, help learners clarify content of the book in relation to concept. After the weekend, learners are encouraged to experiment with the concept during the next month and write a reflection connecting and reflecting it at a personal level.

There were also reminders in the graduate classroom to use information in ways that made sense to the individual teacher-learners. Facilitator 2 advised her learners, "Sounds like you guys shared some good stuff. Just make sure to make it your own." Another example of this was represented when Facilitator 11 reminded her group of learners to

> …read this article and find examples of your definition of constructivism. Read it also for the concept or idea and try to tie it to what we have been talking about this morning. Which parts can you take back to your own classroom?

In addition to making the material applicable to the teacher-learners' personal classrooms, dialogue is a critical component in learning community and used to assist in the processing of information as a whole class. Participating Facilitator 1 summed this up in his questionnaire by describing, "Group processing of ideas is accompanied by a lot of discussion as to their implementation. A relaxed and collegial atmosphere is key to this social and cooperative learning process." From observation field notes this was obviously important, such as when Facilitator 14 explained to his learners, "Discussion is

important. It's part of the process. Like a group reflection. And it's good to generalize it; it will help teach students how to think."

Facilitator 1 challenged his group of teacher-learners by inquiring of them,

> Is there any way you can fit in direct instruction and still facilitate constructivism? Is that possible? Is there a way to leave a little time to take the concept and go a little bit further, allow your students to go a little bit deeper in their own way to make it more personal for them? Make those connections! You know, challenge them and go a little bit further by going in a more constructivist way?

The conversation that followed this large group questioning allowed the learners to think about, discuss, and process how they could assist their own students in making meaning with deeper understanding of the content of any of their current lessons.

Allowing for learner choice.

Teacher-learners are able to choose the ways that they best construct their own knowledge. Facilitator 1 commented in his questionnaire, "There is a good deal of choice involved in the knowledge that is constructed in the program. Learners are encouraged to set their own learning and teaching goals and the topics of their inquiry." By giving the learners choices not only in how they learn information, but also in how they "show what they know", they are able to challenge themselves as well as each other to take their understanding to a deeper level. This process also applies to the facilitators as a group.

Facilitator 2 recounted a story on her questionnaire that described learner choice:

> During one of our first weekends, we asked the learners to come up with things they wanted to learn more about during our two years together.

> One of the learners just sat and kind of stared into space. I went over to her and asked her if she was okay. She said, "No one has ever asked me what I wanted to learn before." Yikes! Teachers teach the way they were taught and that is really difficult to overcome. The learners in learning community must experience for themselves the power of collaboration and construction of knowledge if we want them to do similar things in their classrooms. In short, I think everything we do is meant to support collaboration and construction of knowledge.

The facilitators were all of the same opinion. Written on Facilitator 5's questionnaire, "Learners often share that they have never been asked for their opinions or thoughts on a topic, nor have they been called on before to share their talents."

During a development training session, facilitators and their mentors practiced constructivist activities, given choice in the method of presentation. They were instructed by Facilitator 13, "In groups of three, create something to depict the facilitation/ community connection with one member of the group in the role of 'process observer'." One group created a spider web with the center being a learning community. All of the strands leading out portrayed different values. Two groups created games – one a crossword, and the other a scrabble type game. They used words such as: participation, listening, respect, commitment, trust, community, communication, honesty, sharing, and caring. Another group spelled out words that looked like they had been woven into a spider web. Although depictions from each group varied greatly, all of them portrayed the same concepts and messages. In this manner, the instructor very easily could ascertain the groups' depth of understanding by their presentations.

Teacher-learner interests purposefully drive the course of lesson planning for the facilitators. During one of the monthly telephone conference calls, facilitators shared. Facilitator 10 stated, "In my first year learning community, we asked the learners what they wanted to learn, and to write it down so that we made sure that it would get addressed." Facilitator 15 added, "We have the learners write down what they want to learn and always keep it with us as we plan our lessons." It is evident that it is very critical throughout the program that facilitators pay attention to the interests of the teacher-learners. Choice is an additional avenue for the instructors to demonstrate and allow the learners to practice in creating meaning.

Relationship building.

Learning requires the building of relationships when engaging in a learning community. If comfortable relationships are not in place before the introduction of new concepts, the teacher-learners will not be in a mental position to feel safe enough to enter into genuine, sincere discourse. Without discourse, the ability to have discussions, and working through the ambiguity as a group, deep understanding is difficult to achieve. In describing the learning community, a questionnaire response from Facilitator 3 included, "This is a user friendly model that allows friendships and collegiality to build over a two year process."

As the teacher-learners relate to each other, they need also to develop relationships with the facilitation team. A former facilitator (4) believes very strongly in fostering trust. Her questionnaire explained:

> The most important thing to remember when relating to students is the root of that word "relate" – as in "relationship". The learning community

> format is unique and achieves much of its success because one of the critical differences between it and a traditional graduate format is the effort and time invested in building community. People are unwilling to collaborate with strangers. In order to collaborate, there must be a personal and professional trust. Why would you take the advice of a stranger, or worse yet, someone you deem untrustworthy or ineffective at their job? I relate to the graduate students by sharing my stories – successes, failures, things I dearly wish I had done differently. I get to know them by having them tell me about their families, dreams, what's going on in their lives. I let them know I care and I am interested in them as people first; teachers second. I don't want them to see me as the model for what a teacher should be.

The importance of this key piece of the program cannot be understated. Facilitators voiced that they take a great deal of time assisting the fostering of relationships. Facilitator 6 described, "I build a caring relationship with each of them. I do this by connecting with each of them throughout the weekend and/or between weekends through e-mails, phone calls, etc. Know them as people, not just students," answered another facilitator on the questionnaire.

Facilitators perceived that it is important for learners to personalize concepts. As long as teacher-learners are able to take a new piece of information and manipulate it to their own situation or classroom, a deeper understanding of that concept should result. Along with this theme, facilitators believe that allowing learner choice and building relationships are key components that cannot be ignored.

Facilitators perceived that teacher-learners need to be self-directed.

Within this self-direction theme, sub-themes were also identified that give additional support to the topic. Each lends merit and describes specific learner tendencies with examples. The sub-categories include motivation and lifelong learning.

Adults who are more self-directed display maturity. Facilitators assume that because the graduate students are professional teachers, and therefore, adults, they will arrive into the program as mature self-directed learners. Maturity of the teacher-learners is paramount for the facilitators to consider when designing lessons and activities for these adult-learners. Self-directed learning increases along with maturation and must be taken into account in understanding the way adults learn. As the learners grow within the program and become accustomed to the format of the two-year long learning community delivery model, they begin to develop and refine the tools required to become more self-directed. The transformation is explained by Facilitator 4 in her questionnaire, "They seek research, read books and journals, discuss them, reflect on them, debate them, and slowly begin to change the climate of their classrooms."

Facilitator 4 also responded in the questionnaire that, in her opinion, the most common misconception concerns the rigor of the program.

> Most of these teacher-learners begin by thinking this is going to be a cake walk because there are no "formal" tests. WRONG! It doesn't take long for them to realize they will be working just as hard – if not harder – than many graduate students in traditional programs. The difference is they are willing to do the hard work because all of it is immediately applicable to what they do in their classrooms. They can implement what they learn

right away and see the results, making adjustments as needed.

The framework for the entirety of the program prescribes carefully planned activities for the purpose of assisting the learners to become self-directed, lifelong learners that set individual goals within their profession and strive to achieve them. The program objective is to create unique experiences for each individual so by the end of the program, the teacher-learners' classrooms are more conducive to success for their students. As noted from a monthly facilitator development conference call by Facilitator 13, "We try to get them to pick up on what works for them as learners – reflections, trying to graduate, the outcomes, whatever it is – and cultivate it for and in them." Another comment from the same conference call conversation by Facilitator 11 was, "Throughout the professional development plan, learners set learning goals for themselves." Facilitator 5 also elaborated on the reasoning behind this in her questionnaire, "To deepen and broaden their knowledge level of the educational setting as it relates to them."

Self-directedness may be somewhat lacking in graduate students entering the learning community due to level of maturity, age, or teaching experience. Because of the structure of the program, facilitators assume that teacher-learners come to class prepared to grow, learn, and experience in their own way. In some cases, activities and lessons initially need to be modified in order for the learners' levels of maturity to attain a more uniform state. Written on a questionnaire, Facilitator 9 put it bluntly, "Initially, self-accountability is a little daunting to some of them as well."

Due to the non-traditional nature of the program, learners need the thought processes, viewpoints, and opinions of all of the teacher-learner class members in

discussions to be heard in order for it to be of true value. Facilitator 8 penned in her questionnaire, "If a learner is absent, it not only affects that learner, but also other learners miss his or her voice and insight. So, the misconception is the maturity of a learner—thinking that graduate students should be more dedicated."

Motivation.

Also a bit different for adult-learners are the motivations and intrinsic rationale that compel them to undertake graduate classes. As learners decide to further their educational goals, a factor weighing heavily is the cost of the degree. On the other side of the degree, for most teachers is an increased salary. Facilitator e-mail questionnaires provided insight into this notion. Facilitator 1 explained, "The goal is professional development and better educational opportunities for the students in the region. They also get a raise." However, in most cases, these feelings are transformed and enhanced before the end of the program. As stated on Facilitator 4's questionnaire:

> I believe most of them start the program initially to get a pay increase (teacher wages need all the boost they can get). Many also admit to having long-time personal goals of achieving a masters degree. What I enjoy most about the program, is watching their goals change. Before the end of the first semester, most of them have emerged as passionate teachers who had previously been beaten down by the system – a system that doesn't always value them as they deserve, nor equip them to do their jobs in an exemplary way. They begin to develop confidence as they share success stories from their classrooms.

The institution represented in this study is a state college with fairly low tuition compared to other facilities in the state offering similar degrees. Depending upon the individual reasons teacher-learners enter the learning community delivery format for the attainment of their Masters in Science Degrees in Curriculum and Instruction, they have their own unique needs and life experiences. A comment from a monthly facilitator development conference call discussed learner input. Facilitator 14 inquired, "Maybe we should ask them more often 'are you learning what you need/want to learn?' They might be more motivated – they would own the planning, experiences, etc." Therefore, the knowledge would be useable, practical, and immediately applicable to individual classrooms.

Lifelong learning.

A critical piece to growth while in learning community is the fostering of and commitment to lifelong learning. Because teacher-learners are all in different stages in reference to maturation, very diverse in teaching experience, and vastly different in life experience, learning communities not only need to recognize, but also encourage and embrace, the uniqueness of each learner. Facilitators are also committed to this ideal. As Facilitator 2 articulated in her questionnaire response:

> I would like the students to gain a language and ability to communicate their ideas about teaching and learning, gain an ability to try new ideas as well as the ability to assess the implementation of those ideas, gain an ability to read and conduct research, gain the ability to question themselves as well as their students, gain the ability to understand and get

> to know their own students at deep levels, and gain a renewed attitude towards their own students and teaching itself.

Another facilitator (4) responded in the questionnaire, "I model lifelong learning and strive to be a motivational force for the teacher-learners." As a portion of the professional development objective of the learning community curriculum, facilitators strive to include activities that encourage teacher-learners to read, ask questions, and never stop thinking deeply about issues and problems that arise in their own classrooms. Becoming a stagnant, close-minded leader of a teacher-directed classroom is absolutely what the learning community delivery model facilitators discourage. In fact, as written on a questionnaire, one goal of the program according to Facilitator 3 is to, "create master teachers that are designing learning to meet the needs of their own students. The teachers are current on education issues, can do action research in their classrooms, and know how to look at research as a tool."

Facilitators perceived that teacher-learners need to be self-directed. Along with this theme, motivation and lifelong learning follow closely behind. Adults tend to be more intrinsically motivated and self-directed the more mature they become. Lifelong learning is an evolving concept also coming from within as learners become more confident in their goals.

Facilitators perceived that learning in a group community setting is a priority.

A recurring theme that emerged was the concept of learning in a group community setting. The delivery method of this non-traditional graduate degree is unique and quite a process for the learners to experience. Facilitators as members of the

community emerged as a sub-category that is included and kept separate from the main theme. Facilitators are considered community members; however, they are experts in the content areas, guiding discussion and crafting activities in order to lead the learners in the direction of the content.

Facilitators responded with enthusiasm to the concept of community. Questionnaire respondent (Facilitator 2) wrote about the cohort format, “It is about providing support to and opportunities for fun and relationship building for the learners throughout the process.” Lesson plans include time for the learners to reconnect a little bit deeper at each monthly class gathering. In “opening circle everyone shares a personal classroom success story they experienced since their last meeting” was written in Facilitator 5’s questionnaire as a response to a favorite activity.

Having a facilitation team is advantageous for the learners. It also allows for a better facilitator-learner ratio, objectivity in problem solving, and enhanced planning of lessons using learner-directed ideas within each content objective. Facilitator 7 commented on the notion, “As a member of the team, I also deal with lots of other issues like assessing learners’ commitment to program and community values and often having uncomfortable conversations (but necessary).”

In addressing learner misconceptions of the non-traditional format of the program, Facilitator 8 reported on her questionnaire, “Oh boy... one of the biggest I’ve encountered was commitment to program of study and the community values. This particular learner didn’t appreciate the core value of learning community was ‘community’ and was absent or tardy a lot.” Learners come to expect to hear the voices and opinions of their

classmates as they process new information together. If one is missing, it does not go unnoticed.

Some teacher-learners have a difficult time adjusting to the format and ambiguity of the constructivist, integrated, non-traditional delivery format. From a questionnaire (Facilitator 9) that addressed the program, "…Some have to really work to want to be a part of a community…" Activities are created to encourage community building. An example of such an activity was found while observing a learning community. Facilitator 11 directed the learners,

> Thinking about all of these things, get with a partner or trio – and make a poster to hang up to remind us why our community feels that the FISH philosophy [from a motivational video shown earlier in the day] is so important for learning – give us reminders. You will have 15-20 minutes, the chart paper and supplies are on the cart. When you are finished, hang your creation on the wall.

Particular care is taken in creating the group dynamic balance so important to the process before actual learning takes place. Values are created. Trust between the teacher-learners, and trust between the facilitators and the learners must be in place before learning with deep understanding can occur. *Figure 4.1* displays a section taken from a handout that shows an example of the values one community developed together.

Figure 4.1. Learner-Created Values Sample. This figure is an example of one learning community's values, created as a group.

There also needs to be cohesion within the facilitation team. Teams are selected very purposefully in the summer before the two-year masters program begins and remains for the duration. The team consists of three, or for smaller communities, two very diverse members committed to each other and to the learners for the duration of the program. Facilitation teams are generally not allowed to remain together to serve new communities; once their community graduates, teams are restructured, again with purpose. Teams use prior personal experiences as facilitators to guide the communities.

A questionnaire response from Facilitator 9 explained the importance of the group dynamic concept:

> I feel that it's very important to give learners an opportunity to get to know each other, and to build a foundation for a strong community. The trust that develops is so important in helping them to think about my questions as opportunities to think more deeply. Humor is important to me as well, as I believe it helps us not take ourselves too seriously in an academic setting.

Several examples of group cohesion were recorded, "The opening circle begins with a facilitator asking for announcements or celebrations from members since their last meeting in May. All of the learners were engaged and respectful of the speaker. The day then begins with a version of musical chairs." Another second year community displaying community and concern for a member was also seen, "One advisory group is calling a missing member to see if he is safe." "Overall, the groups are very engaged, 'catching up'." Later in the morning…Facilitator 3 told the group, "we also welcome back our late student, he made it!" Claps and cheers. The student told the group that he

is in a new position at a different school. The learners celebrate." The group appears to be committed to each other. They care for one another as a group and a supportive social unit.

The way chairs in the room are set up for the learning weekend is also very purposeful. The chairs in each of the seven observation sites were all formed into either an oval or a circle so learning members could all be equal, see and hear each other, and take ownership in their own learning. The classrooms all contained the same components and features, each one geared toward creating a comfortable, safe location conducive to maximum potential for learner success. Appendix G contains room diagram illustrations from the other observation sites for comparison purposes. It was noted that, "The chairs were arranged in a circle/oval in the center of the room. There were tables with four chairs around them at the west side and long tables without chairs lined up north-to-south on the east side."

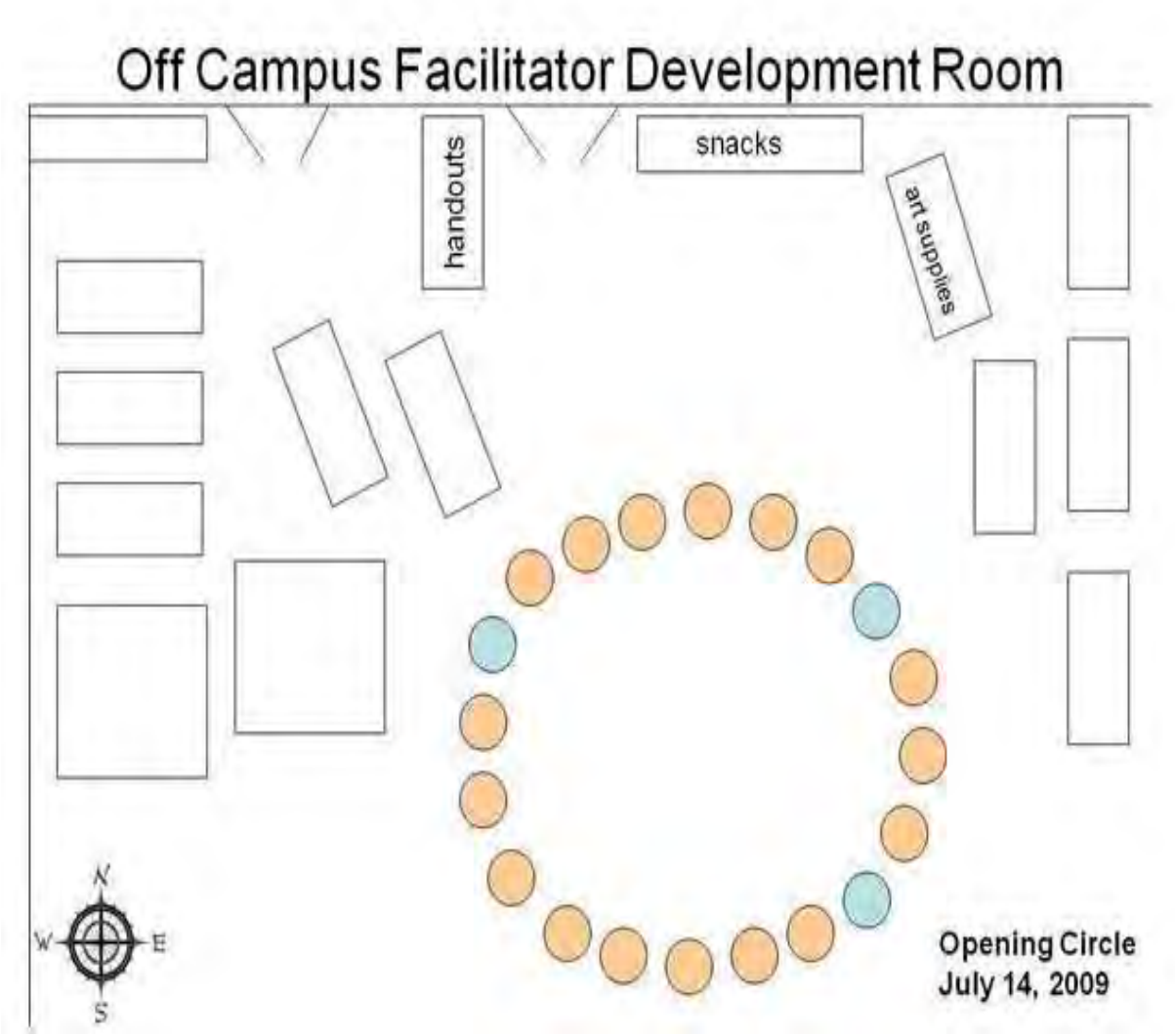


Figure 4.2. Diagram of a Classroom. The purposeful layout of the room adds to the feeling that all members have an equal voice.

An interesting observation was also included in reference to the seating during the training session, “Whenever the whole group came back into the big circle, everyone took a different seat and sat next to someone they hadn’t sat by before.” By not sitting next to the same person all of the time, there is a greater opportunity for relationships to develop with others. It also makes the group feel more whole, with not as many “cliques.”

Facilitators also go through the same types of community-building activities as the teacher-learners enrolled in the program:

> The Mentor-Facilitator (13) explained that the hands she asked everyone to make are for introductions. The facilitators each took turns going around the circle introducing themselves and explaining what they wrote on their “fingers” before placing the “hands” in the center of the circle. There was silence after the activity for everyone to look at the area of multi-colored paper hands on the floor. One female commented on how different and unique they all were, but how nice they all looked together. Another said how they complimented each other. The rest of the group nodded in agreement.

The opening of the summer facilitator development training day included an activity describing community through metaphors. Facilitators commented:

> It’s like a safety zone, it’s a personal experience, you just have to step back and let it happen, you can’t force it, it must be in balance, it’s all about listening, above all, be a listener, give everyone a voice, be “aware”,

> have knowledge, celebrate the differences, it's like a hammock – to feel safe and comfortable in, take what you need.

Another activity included a large ball of red yarn. The mentor (Facilitator 6) tossed the yarn across open center circle of facilitators and asked of them to think of connections between "facilitation" and "community". The facilitators took turns throwing the yarn around the circle. After everyone had a turn, the group made random comments about the tangle of yarn that was made, "it's stronger as a web than just a single strand," "it's a safety net," "some are pulled tighter than others," "everyone needs each other to make it work," "the web will catch you if you fall," "it looks like weaving," and "it's a pretty pattern". Envisioning the snarled mess of red yarn within the perspective of the comments was interesting and enlightening.

Community was the topic of the session for that day. Facilitators were instructed by their mentors to, "Connect and share these experiences/comments with community and the activities of the morning so far. The facilitators said: "there is strength in numbers", "we believed in each other", "honest, helpful, had each others' back", "tight, we knew what each other needed", and "there for each other." In another activity from the same day, Facilitator 5 challenged the rest of the facilitators and mentors:

> Ok, now find two people and describe a time when you were in total community. The groups of three were all very animated and seemed very adamant about the concept of community. All of the groups were engaged and on task. Some of the comments describing this concept included: "the stars were lined up for us", "we were like a family", "we all met after 30 years again and picked up where we left off", "we are all there for each

> other, no matter what", "we loved each other and hated each other", and "we felt as if we could accomplish anything together." This activity took about ten minutes, and then the members were asked to come back to the circle.

The second day of the summer facilitator training, the topic of discussion was the diversity and makeup of the teams. Occasionally, facilitators feel as if the teams are not equal and this temporarily throws the balance of the team off until the discrepancy can be worked though and resolved. As written in the observational field notes:

> It is obvious that Facilitator 2 was upset at the direction of the conversation, and felt that a "hierarchy" comment was pointed at her. She explained, "Some things you just know as a result of learning and experience – you can't unring a bell." She had facilitated several communities and was being perceived by the other two on one of her current teams as the "leader" because of her vast experience. One of the current team members (Facilitator 10) commented that she felt as if she had "earned" her "own" community and that she was waiting for the day when she would get to lead a team. The mentor stated that the premise of the program was that all of the facilitators are equal with no clear leader and that each team was diverse (as diverse as possible), and a great deal of thought was put into the creation of the teams so they would complement each other on many levels.

Some of the reasoning behind the purposeful creation of the facilitation teams was explained by one of the facilitators (6), "…everyone doesn't bring the same knowledge

and experience to the team so each facilitator will be in a different place. That is why the teams are created with such diversity." Throughout the training session, the concepts of community and facilitation were compared by a mentor:

> Next look at community vs. facilitation… reflect and connect the two. Facilitation is intentional – that is, you know where you want to end up. Build caring relationships with all of the learners; this makes it safe for learners. Listening is a very valuable skill for the facilitator. It takes practice to step back, wait, and not force ideas/concepts onto the learners. Wait-time is a very important factor and ties into patience and the belief in trusting the process. Allow it to work. Be able to modify and adjust to where the learners are taking you. A calculated "fly by the seat of your pants" concept produces facilitators that are flexible and "intellectually agile".

Facilitators next were placed into their facilitation teams and asked:

> …as a team, think about some questions… What do you need? What do you bring? What do you need from the rest of your team? What do you need from your mentors? What do you need from facilitator development? What does your team bring to this community? Answers to these questions could be heard coming from the different areas of the room. Some included: "make sure that your backs are covered", "double-checking with each other to make sure that the team is prepared for the class weekend", "constructive feedback from the others", "resources", "different ways to process the concepts and reach the objectives",

"encouragement", "physical connections", "reflection", "camaraderie", "commitment", "caring", "humor", "open to progress", "different life experiences", and "another way of learning" to name a few.

Facilitators perceived that it is critical to be members of the community themselves.

A response from Facilitator 1 was, "Facilitators are, by definition, members of the community, members who possess a knowledge of the process and a certain amount of knowledge of the learning process and teaching in general." In describing qualities of facilitation team members, Facilitator 1 also elucidated that a facilitator is, "… a member of the community who leads but learns alongside the other members." Facilitator 1 went on to explain that facilitators need "an open mind, empathy, questioning skills, a belief in the goodness of people and the ability of people to chart their own courses, a thirst for knowledge, honesty, respect, and all the values that usually are identified in learning communities."

One very unique and non-traditional description or her role was described by Facilitator 3 as, "The facilitator is allowed to be a leader and a student at the same time." Facilitator 4 stated, "I don't want them to see me as the model for what a teacher should be. I want them to see me as one of them – a teacher, in the trenches just like them, facing the same obstacles, and finding solutions to them so students can excel."

The facilitators all seemed to overwhelmingly believe in the value of being members of the community themselves as indicated in their various responses. Former Facilitator 4 explained, "It offered facilitation teams and teacher-learners unrestricted avenues for learning opportunities." "I am a co-learner in the process", stated Facilitator

9. Facilitator 6 expounded, “Being a learning community facilitator is a personally gratifying and awe-inspiring experience. I have the opportunity to learn alongside my co-facilitators, as well as the learners.” Facilitator 4 stated, “I want to relate to them at this level – teachers working together with students’ needs at the forefront.” Facilitator 6 continued, “In addition, the facilitators are co-learners with the members; this enables all involved to become reflective practitioners who teach and/or work differently based on their experiences in the two-year program.”

Roles of the facilitators depend upon the experiences and diversity of team members. This was indicated in a questionnaire response by Facilitator 6, “Often, the college-connected facilitator is skilled in the constructivist philosophy, and the one or two ‘in the field’ facilitators are learning ‘constructivism’ as they facilitate.” One of the “in the trenches” Facilitators (9) wrote, “When the learner is successful, I feel satisfaction, knowing I helped create the conditions that led to this.”

There were examples of facilitators taking part in activities mentioned in the notes, as indicated thus,

> the facilitators participated in the lesson (the learners taught a prepared lesson to demonstrate how to constructively facilitate) another instructor operated the music for the learners and also photographed the assignment delivery for the community scrapbook. The teacher-learners were in their “job alike” groups. After each “lesson,” the learners processed information while discussing the assignment as a whole group.

Facilitator 14 explained it another way to his group of learners, “In learning community, we are all here to learn. Same with facilitators, we move into different teams

and grow with each other." He was describing to the teacher-learners the diversity of the facilitation teams along with the fact that facilitators never stop learning – both from each other as well as from the members of the communities they facilitate.

Despite concerted efforts to build true community within the large group, facilitation teams do not always function in cohesive manner within their groups, causing ripples to the entire group. Sometimes facilitators are perceived as failing to uphold the qualities of the large community as pointed out by Facilitator 4:

> The main issue includes the hypocrisy of facilitators and mentors who profess the value of true community, but fail to walk the walk. In the past two years, I have witnessed facilitators gossiping behind each others' backs, squabbling about power issues instead of acting like team members, and refusing to communicate openly with each other. In many instances, I have sent e-mails that have been entirely ignored by my teams. It is hard to convincingly preach about building community among teacher-learners when you cannot even manage to do it among facilitation teams.

Facilitators perceived that learning in a group community setting is a priority for the learners. This concept emerged as very important to the learning community delivery format. An interesting sub-theme involved the notion of facilitators as community members. This sub-category has a double meaning. Facilitators are members of the facilitation team community as well as the learning community they facilitate. Learning in a group allows for collaborative learning opportunities.

Facilitators perceived that learners need large concepts rather than small details.

Facilitators perceived that large concepts rather than small details are better suited to the learning community delivery format. The facilitators seek to connect these larger concepts to provide teacher-learners opportunities to utilize the ideas within their own classroom environments.

In describing the integration properties of the learning community on his questionnaire, Facilitator 1 explained,

> The program calls for three major products the learners develop individually. These are the professional development plan (PDP), the portfolio, and the action research project. No one of these is more important than the others. They all inter-connect, the PDP including elements of inquiry, the gathering of artifacts of development, etc.

Facilitator 2 explained on a questionnaire that "It is an integrated program that brings together concepts from traditional curriculum and instruction masters degree programs, learner needs and interests, and the idea of the importance of community." Learning communities, according to Facilitator 9's questionnaire response provided that:

> All course concepts (big ideas) are integrated throughout the two-year program, so that learners can make connections among all the big ideas. The educators are given several opportunities to synthesize what it means to become a Master Teacher through the five propositions set forth by the National Board of Teacher Certification. Additionally, they experience

> academic literature review, and write a scholarly article to be submitted for publication.

The following entry was made from field notes during an observation when the class was being guided in discussion about blended curriculum by Facilitator 9: "Why do we use big ideas? Any suggestions? How about integration? Class brainstorming. Cross-curricular. Standards? Curriculum? We must follow what our school expects of us. Direct instruction? Transition? How do we blend all of these concepts?"

Facilitators shared some ideas for combining the large concepts as explained by Facilitator 7 at a training session, "As learners read – we have them connect to prior books. Bring these ideas to learning community to share with the entire community. For example, next month, they will be reading about diversity, they must connect it to prior month's book and so on…" Another idea from Facilitator 8 followed,

> We list all of the program concepts, books, courses, and outcomes at the top of each agenda and highlight those that are being connected for the class meeting. In this way we are always looking at them and connecting them to the questions, activities, concepts, etc.

The facilitators continued sharing ways to incorporate and connect the large concepts into the curriculum over the course of the meeting. Facilitator 12 provided, "We track the books each time, connecting them to the concepts being stressed for the weekend so that the facilitators can see the book lists and help them make connections." An additional facilitator (10) stated the methods her team uses for blending the concepts,

> We list all of the classes for the entire two years, then the books we've read so far, activities, concepts, etc. so that they can see the integration –

> they are actually getting way more content than just the three or four courses they are signed up for."

And later, Facilitator 2 commented, "They can cover so much more through integration. This way they can SEE the connections."

In explaining the notion of connected concepts, Facilitator 1 answered in his questionnaire that when creating the curriculum,

> The courses themselves are less important than are a set of conceptual understandings that have been derived from graduate outcomes prescribed by the college and the literature on professional development. A book list of required readings has been developed with these principal concepts in mind. The books are not normal texts but education literature probably mostly designed with individual professional development in mind.

Facilitators believe referring to large, connected ideas is, according to Facilitator 2, "Useful and utilitarian, and must have conceptualization and understanding of the CONCEPTS and threading those concepts make us accountable to the process, us, and the college." Questions were also raised by facilitators, "In looking at the 30 hours – and the concepts – do we pull the concepts from the courses? The masters degree is curriculum and instruction DELIVERED through the integrated learning community model." The conversation in reference to the integrated concepts was enhanced by a definition of the manner in which the college represented in this study facilitates the curriculum, "The courses were chosen as a way of distributing the credits for curriculum and instruction. It's not just a collection of courses. It's a collection of concepts

organized around outcomes in a curriculum and instruction paradigm", stated Facilitator 1.

This theme emerged to explain the facilitators' perceptions of how learners process big ideas and concepts. Facilitators believe learners internalize and retain these large concepts easier and with deeper understanding than small details. A better way to practice these big ideas is by connecting them together through integration.

Facilitators perceived that best practice strategies are whatever the learners need.

Facilitators believed in using a multitude of teaching strategies when instructing in a learning community delivery model. Reasons for this were plentiful. In short, teaching strategies were used and deemed successful if they created an opportunity within the individual graduate learners for producing understanding. Facilitators perceived that best practice strategies were whatever the learners needed. Several examples were seen and given in the questionnaires. Sub-categories to assist in explaining this emergent theme included giving feedback, adding flexibility, listening, modeling, creating ambiguity, providing opportunities for action research, guiding questions, and making time for reflection.

When observed, facilitators used a wide range of teaching strategies. All were geared to assist the adult-learners with making their own meaning of the large concepts. The instructors also encouraged learners to share knowledge, but to use others' information in a way that would be applicable in their own classrooms. Written in the observational field notes, while watching the classroom process, Facilitator 2 guided her learners:

> We've talked about community and creating an environment that is conducive to learning. Get into your job-alike groups and brainstorm/share ideas. Think about how to take someone else's ideas and make them your own – change them to make them work in your classroom. Steal and make 'em yours. Figure out ways to make (or keep) your classroom positive. What is one thing that you're going to do to help your students choose their attitudes? You have until noon – then come back to the circle.

Encouraging the learners to use ideas from their graduate classmates, Facilitator 10 advised the learners, "for the next 25 minutes, stop at noon, go around and find titles, authors, quotes, etc., and steal (share) from each other. Pair up, or triple up with similar topics." Back in the larger circle, the facilitators asked the learners for examples of some ideas they were able to "steal", and how they were going to personalize them for use in their own classroom setting. The learners were able to go around the room sharing even more uses for the same concepts. In this manner, a vast amount of information was shared along with just as many extremely different, unique ways to deliver them. Without directly stating it, the facilitators were teaching the learners how to personalize any concept for use in their situation.

Activities or strategies that were constructivist in nature were prevalent throughout the observations. An example of a small group activity was seen when Facilitator 9 instructed, "This month you were assigned to read the book *Constructivist Classrooms* and write a definition - your personal definition - of constructivism. I gave you an index card to write the definition on. Don't show anyone else your card. Get into

four groups and share the definition, and as a group, come up with a cohesive group definition of constructivism." Then later, to allow the whole group to read all of the other definitions, Facilitator 11 explained, "We are going to play a version of Musical Chairs. When the music stops, find an empty outside chair. Whoever doesn't have a chair must talk to a facilitator about the definitions. Visit with your 'same-shoulder neighbor' about the definitions until the music starts up again… Now, this time – when the music stops, add to a definition or change it. So when the music stops, go to a table." Ongoing modification throughout the activity to include all learners and obtain as much input and reflection was obviously very carefully orchestrated.

The same small group processing activity was used in yet a different way as Facilitator 14 described an activity to his learners:

> We read chapters 1 and 7 from the reflection book for this class meeting. We are now going to number off and read the rest of the book by becoming an expert of one of chapters 2-6. So, number off from 1-5 and get with like-numbers. Group 1 will read chapter 2, group 2 – chapter 3… and so on. Please discuss, formulate, synthesize, and process your assigned chapter to chapters 1 and 7 of the book. Make some notes; be on the "same page" with the rest of your group. We will give you 45 minutes… Now, re-group so that there is someone from each group in a new group. Someone from chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 will form a new group and discuss, formulate, synthesize, and process the entire book – making connections to each chapter. You will have 30-40 minutes to discuss.

As the teams create meaningful activities for the teacher-learners, teacher-learner interest is always at the forefront. The topic arose in a facilitator conversation as Facilitator 10 stated, "We identify the outcomes the learners want to get from learning community, and try always to incorporate them into the activities/agenda." Other ideas for processing the concepts were also discussed by Facilitator 11, "We have a continuous theme for the class meeting. For example, if it's reflection, we keep that concept at the forefront for the weekend." Yet another facilitator (15) shared, "We start out each agenda with a 'big question' and then branch out from there with more specific guiding questions to get the learners to make their own connections."

Other ideas from the facilitator conference call training session emerged as the discussion continued (Facilitator 2), "We use scaffolding from weekend to weekend along with most of the things already mentioned." And (Facilitator 8), "We use big questions – to focus the semester. Sort of planting seeds so that they know what to expect." Also imparted by Facilitator 9 was:

> We focus – tie everything together when it's time to celebrate at the end of the semester. We have the learners connect all of the concepts, books, objectives, etc. to the courses. We have them write a reflection piece and celebrate the learning. It also lets them see that EVERY activity has meaning and is connected with a purpose to the lessons.

By discussing the concepts as a large group immediately after the activity, the facilitators are allowing for timely feedback as well as for the voices of the learners to be heard. This affords other perspectives and an opportunity for deeper understanding of the concepts.

Giving feedback.

During a community observational session, learner reflections were given to the researcher to read. Facilitator feedback was very thought-provoking and generally encouraging in nature. This allowed the learners to continue to reflect on the topic as they read the remarks from their instructors. Some of the written facilitator feedback comments to the learners included: "There's more than one right answer sometimes." "Hang in there." "Great reflection." "Good connections." "Meaningful connections are being made – great!"

A few other comments written to the learners contained a bit of insight and support: "I hope you are proud of your goals." "Sometimes there are right answers and fast procedures; however we must remember that the learning is in the process and not the answer." "A right answer doesn't help us do it again or understand it."

Adding flexibility.

A very important facet the facilitation team uses with activities takes into consideration the interests of the learners. Through the predetermined course concepts, learners are allowed to "bird walk" a bit if it assists in processing the connections for deeper understanding. As described on Facilitator 6's questionnaire, an option with the agenda allows for "changing activities 'mid-stream' if that's what's needed during the weekend to help the learners be successful."

Discussing the learning community delivery format, one questionnaire response by Facilitator 8 included:

> It is difficult to describe the whole process, but initially, facilitators go through facilitator training during summer and usually once a month

> throughout the school year. Next, teams are chosen with mentors. This team works together to generate a "big picture" for the two years as well as creating monthly agendas — all flexible and subject to change depending on the needs of the community.

An example of a display of flexibility within an activity was prevalent throughout all of the communities, "Facilitator 1 interrupts the game briefly and modifies the instructions – 'just grab an open chair, don't count them, just run to any open chair.'" Also during the same learning session, "Back in the big circle, a Facilitator 2 has the learners number off from 1-6 and states that she decided to change the agenda of the class a bit – they will change the order of the activities." Included in the field notes from a class meeting were researcher observations, "The facilitators really use breaks wisely to talk about upcoming activities, brainstorm about subsequent months' lessons, to enhance discussion, etc. They are constantly monitoring the lessons and adjusting the agenda and activities to fit the learner needs."

Facilitator 10 felt that the learners needed additional background information and further direction in a lesson. The observational field notes had this as an entry:

> Writing down what you see, feel, hear (use your senses) versus analyzing. I saw, felt, heard – is what data collection about. Data are I believe, and I found are the conclusions… There is a big difference… Now we are TOTALLY off track and need to get back to the agenda!

The facilitator knew that the learners needed further clarification of the current concept in order to continue in the activity, so she took the opportunity to explain and answer questions until she was satisfied that the next activity could take place.

Occasionally, facilitation teams find themselves up against situations that are completely out of their control. For example:

> After arriving at the commons area used for the learning community, a Facilitators 2 and 11 wondered where the tables went. Facilitator 2 remarked that it's a different environment every meeting weekend. She said that there are usually at least two more tables for them to use. So the two members of the facilitation team moved the desks together into groups of four and six to create makeshift tables to fit their needs while another facilitator pulled all of the chairs out of the computer lab and created an oval around the area with them. Facilitator 2 then set up the LCD projector, and speakers, attaching them to a laptop computer. She hoped that it would work to use the wall as a screen. The facilitation team immediately sat down to adjust activities to work with the learning situation. This was the first time that they were not allowed the use of the classrooms. Facilitator 2 said that this wasn't the first site that she has used that had restrictions. Without access to technology and enough desks and tables, it makes it more difficult to create and facilitate lessons/activities that their teacher-learners can practice and immediately take back to their own classrooms.

Yet another illustration of flexibility was recorded:

> While the learners worked on their assigned activity, the facilitators (2, 3, and 10) revised the day's agenda, moving around one of the activities and

changing the way that they are going to process it. They also decided to add an additional collaboration piece to an activity.

Figure 4.3. Agenda Samples. This is an overview of how facilitators must constantly adjust lessons depending upon the learner needs.

Figure 4.3 provides an example of several agendas that show how the facilitators modify activities for the learning weekend. Facilitators have to be able to "think on their feet" and modify activities and lessons at a moment's notice. Learner interest, more time for the learners to process a large concept, and changing the presentation of the activity are all ways that facilitators use to portray flexibility as a teaching strategy.

Listening.

Listening to the teacher-learners seemed to be an important piece to ensure that activities are created and carried out, allowing for opportunity for learner success. A way that Facilitator 6 summed it up was written in her questionnaire, "Listening more than speaking."

Another questionnaire by Facilitator 9 contained, "I find myself listening more intently, because I'm trying to really understand where the learners are." Listening to the learners' interests and discovering their needs aids the facilitation teams in creating tailored activities using the concepts contained in the course outcomes.

In order to allow the weekend agenda to be learner-driven, a questionnaire response by Facilitator 9 indicated, "Most importantly, I listen to what they say, and validate their thoughts by providing feedback and asking questions. This way each learner is treated as a valuable part of the community." Listening and interpreting what each graduate learner needs for his or her success in the program is an attribute that facilitators must hone.

Modeling.

Modeling activities is believed to be of importance to facilitators within the learning community delivery model. Because of the non-traditional nature of the

program, activities are created in order for learners to both observe as well as practice before taking them back to their own classrooms to use. In general, whatever is asked of the learners, the facilitators also undertake. Examples were abundant within the observations. One included, "The three facilitators (2, 9, and 11) are also re-reading the article along with the learners."

The facilitators also advise the teacher-learners to model and teach concepts to their own students. Facilitator 1 advised the learners, "You don't need to pigeon-hole the roles. Just make sure that everyone is involved. Smaller groups would be better. You HAVE to teach group work. Pre-teach and model how to work in a group." The mentors also felt the same way, as stated by Facilitator 13, "We model constructivism, integration, and reflection."

Creating ambiguity.

Situations where ambiguity is present are purposefully created in order to create a sense of imbalance within the learners. Problem solving in a non-traditional setting allows for the learners to process new concepts in ways that allow for understanding at an individual level. Facilitators perceived this to be very beneficial to the learners. In a questionnaire, Facilitator 1 elaborated the need for, "…openness to new ideas and the ability to deal with ambiguity and suspend judgment."

Another way to describe the concept of ambiguity from Facilitator 4's questionnaire response was:

> Facilitating means listening more than talking, opening doors to new ways of thinking, helping (teacher-learner) educators try new strategies that may

> seem foreign to them, and taking the time to self-educate and become very well-read on current issues and trends in education.

Confusion is created using diversity in many cases. A mentor (Facilitator 6) summed it up, "Keeping diversity alive is what sparks the passion."

Providing opportunities for action research.

The belief that teacher-learners benefit from practicing action research was echoed by all of the participants. On his questionnaire, Facilitator 1 related:

> Also key to the implementation of strategies that come from the main concepts is the fact that learning community occurs over a long enough period (two years) so that candidates are able to use their classrooms as laboratories to test and become comfortable with the concepts.

Written on one questionnaire Facilitator 2 addressed the need for allowing the learners "…opportunities to conduct action research in their classrooms or places of work" so the program will create reflective practitioners in the field of education. These learners will be able to "do action research in their classrooms, and know how to look at research as a tool," stated Facilitator 3 on her questionnaire. Another questionnaire (Facilitator 6) addressed a misconception learners have when they enter the program, "…Action research is too hard, — they don't know how to collect and analyze data — and draw conclusions."

Because the majority of the graduate teacher-learners have never conducted action research or collected data, they are given opportunities to practice before they are required to begin in their own classrooms. As noted in a learning community practicing action research, stated by Facilitator 10:

> The learners are now going to become "process observers". They will still participate in all of the activities, however for one hour of the day today and the same hour tomorrow, learners will record observations for their mock study "A Day in the Life of Learning Community". The 1's will record observations between 9 and 10, the 2's between 10-11, the 3's between 11-12, the 4's between 12-1, the 5's between 1-2, and the 6's between 2-3. You will observe and collect data for your assigned hour. Collect thick, rich data, while, at the same time fully participating in all of the activities. Our mock study is intended to let you practice what you will be doing in your own classroom – collect data for an action research project. Collect whatever you think will be important to the focus of the study. At the end of the day, we will meet in numbers (all of the 1's will meet to compare notes, information, observations, data – and so on). All of the 1's begin writing observations - now.

The learners had many questions for the facilitation team the next day. Facilitators 2, 3, and 10 continually attempted to assist the learners in making sense of the concept, as shown by this response, "The facilitator (10) next clarified and further defined data collection – it's fine to tally the number of questions, but what else would you need to know about those questions?" and, by Facilitator 2, "We research for wisdom, not truth. Your thoughts are very important and valuable – and must be in a journal / keep them systematic." Also from Facilitator 1, "Keep notes on interviews, it helps you re-see things. What are some thoughts?" The facilitators believe that action research is a driving activity of the program and work tirelessly in assisting the learners

in understanding the reasoning behind the concept as well as the purpose for it. As stated by Facilitator 2:

> The research / our paper, is not to convince, just to draw some conclusions. Is your story valid? YES! It's not about proving what you are doing is the best thing ever, but you need to show what happened in a classroom with this technique.

Guiding questions.

Facilitators perceived that asking guiding questions allow the teacher-learners opportunities to construct their own knowledge. These questions are artfully posed, allowing wait-time after asking them. Even more important than the wait-time after asking the question is the wait-time after the first answer is received. This wait-time allows the learners to process the concept using the perception angle from the first response. Learners begin to become accustomed to this method of discussion and gentle probing by the facilitators. The questionnaires all indicated that questioning in a purposeful manner was a driving strategy within the learning community delivery model. A questionnaire response from Facilitator 2 was:

> I believe my role is that of designer of learning experiences that will hopefully help learners move forward from whatever point they begin. My role requires me to push learners with questions, stories and experiences so that they think deeply about teaching and learning.

Learning community facilitators are passionate about what they do. As noted by Facilitator 2, "It is asking questions in ways that will move the connections they make to new levels." She also elaborated, "Some facilitators bring a great ability to ask questions

while others have the ability to connect theories to experiences for the students." Facilitator 3 pointed out, "The facilitator doesn't answer straight out questions but guides students to learn and question what they are doing." Then Facilitator 2 elucidated, "Facilitators need to be able to ask questions and speak with a group of adults." Facilitator 2 also went on to describe, "Questioning and helping the learners to take risks is also vital when thinking about planning, implementing, and facilitating in a learning community." Facilitator 3 stated:

> A facilitator is a person that can be a leader when needed or a fellow student, asks the right questions, believes that discovery is crucial in learning, open and honest, has an educator's heart, knowledgeable on the current events in education, and lastly has passion for teaching.

The responses were very insightful. Facilitator 4 began, "Facilitators provide direction to the program without telling them [the learners] what it is they need to know." Facilitator 5 explained, "A facilitator guides, questions, and interacts with learners through activities designed to broaden their knowledge of education and make the learning personal and meaningful." Facilitator 6 advised to, "Listen. Ask questions. Listen again." Facilitator 5 then stated, "A facilitator uses questioning strategies that guide learners to deeper and broader understanding." Facilitator 6 summed it up best:

> I am not the same person I was before becoming a learning community facilitator. Because of my experience as a facilitator, I listen more than I speak, I reflect more deliberately, and I consciously seek diverse thinking. I also find that I ask more challenging questions and pay attention to the answers. I embrace the philosophy—*there is more than one right answer*.

More comments were written on the subject, as stated by Facilitator 8:

> When I facilitate, I keep in mind one of the facilitators I had when I was going through the learning community model to get my masters, and so, I try to epitomize a lot of her: quiet, probing, inquisitive, knowledgeable, innovative, creative, and positive.

Facilitator 9 continued, "Additionally, a vital part of my role as facilitator is to ask questions that push the learners to a point of disequilibrium." She then added, "I also am always thinking of questions to probe further, or to get them to see things from a different perspective. I plan experiences to engage the learners in a big idea, listen to them, and ask questions!" Facilitator 9 continued, "Most importantly, I listen to what they say, and validate their thoughts by providing feedback and asking questions. Each learner is treated as a valuable part of the community." According to Facilitator 9 a facilitator must also be a, "Thoughtful listener, adept at asking open-ended questions, and organized."

After an activity in one learning community, the facilitator allowed for the students to all come to the large circle. A great example of the questioning and wait-time was included, "she [Facilitator 12] waits… much wait-time… 'Why did we ask you to do this?' more wait-time… 'You guys are good…' (one learner said)". Included in observational field notes, illustrations of guided questions were present throughout the discussion, "Facilitator 7 asked the group, why would you do this in your classroom? Or, could you do this in your classroom?"

Skillful questioning is not reserved for discussion alone. Facilitators also frequently used questioning with small groups to encourage deeper thinking, "The learners are instructed to go back to advisory groups (they requested a little bit more time

to work on goals). Facilitator 2 moves from group to group, sitting in on their conversations and asking guiding questions to assist the thought process." Guiding questions allow for deeper thinking – even in written form. The feedback received on the learners' individual reflections included questions written specifically aimed at fostering additional, thoughtful processing of the information. Examples of these included:

> How are these connected?
>
> What are some ways to promote individual accountability?
>
> Sometimes we all feel like that, why is that?
>
> Could you possibly send this information home in a newsletter?
>
> How can we help the parents?
>
> What's the difference between age appropriate and developmentally appropriate?
>
> Did they learn that they have "wonderful ideas"?
>
> Are you thinking about what you are giving them? Why?
>
> What are the implications for your classroom? Development…?
>
> How will practicing help them?
>
> What might happen if they got to create their own process?

The facilitators often stretched the learners in discussions, as when Facilitator 1 asked his learners, "I'm gonna put it out there – What did you think? (wait-time…) What else? (wait-time…) What else did you think? (more wait-time…)" The learners responded initially very slowly, but warmed up to the concepts and discussed the idea as it pertained to their own classrooms. Examples of this type of questioning in large group discussions by Facilitator 11:

> How many times do you decide on the vocabulary and concepts BEFORE the activity? (wait-time…) How could you do this AFTER? (wait-

> time…) Why would you do this AFTER? (wait-time…) What would make it "sink in" better? (more wait-time…).

These examples are representative of all of the learning communities that were observed. Guided questioning was very typical and encouraged thought-provoking discussion as well as the meaning of the notion by many of the learners in each of the communities observed by the researcher.

After an activity where learners practiced facilitating a lesson to the large group, Facilitators 1 and 7 began a series of guided questions, asking the learners:

> How did this group facilitate? Wait-time… What is the value of this, as opposed to just direct teaching? (wait-time…) Could he have told you to do the experiment ten times and record the findings on a worksheet? (more wait-time…).

This allowed many voices to be heard with varying opinions and answers. To assist the learners in questioning in their own classrooms, Facilitator 1 gave his learners some advice – "With facilitating, working with groups, you have to remember to monitor and work with the groups. Don't just give the assignment and leave. Just keep poking, prodding, and guiding to help the process, and assist in overall understanding."

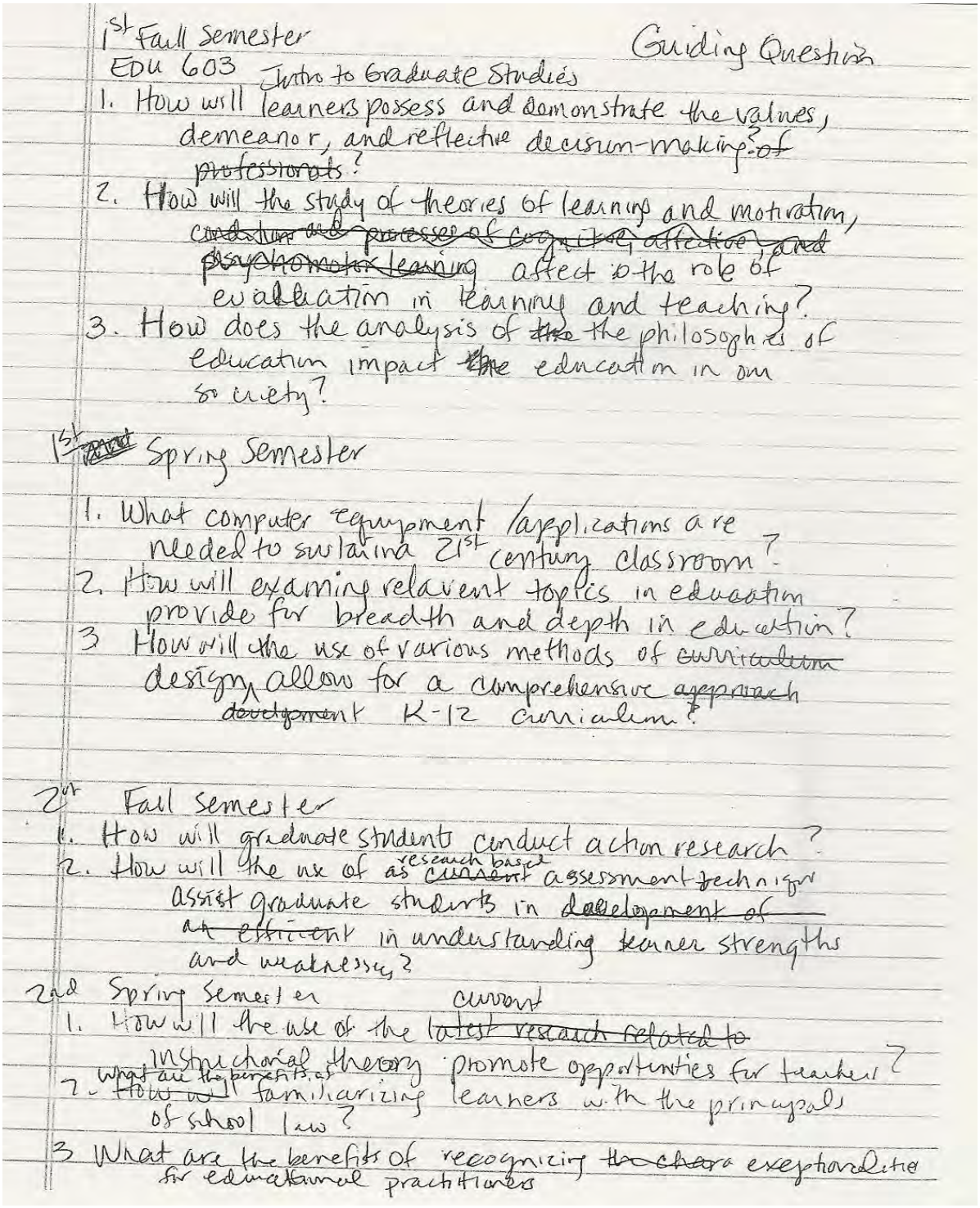


Figure 4.4. Facilitation Team Guiding Questions. This is an example from a facilitating training session depicting brainstorming of overarching guiding questions for the program.

Figure 4.4 illustrates a planning example by Facilitator 7 from a training session. Facilitation teams brainstormed over-arching guiding questions for the program. These questions assist them in thinking about how to plan activities for the learners. As seen in *figure 4.4*, the questions are always a "work in progress" and are adjusted along with the needs of the specific group of teacher-learners. The mentors believe that questioning is such an integral part of the learning community delivery format that they allotted a portion of the training session to sharing ways to use the strategy. Facilitator 12 commented, "We give focus questions for them to use as they read. It helps them make personal connections."

Facilitators began sharing how they use questioning effectively within the communities they facilitate. As stated by Facilitator 8, "We put our questioning directly onto the agenda to help guide the discussions." Another facilitator (6) explained, "Guiding questions for the program are ongoing – I would like to have them from each community."

Making time for reflection.

Standing out as the strategy that the facilitators perceived to be the most effective is reflection. It was summed up on a questionnaire by Facilitator 2:

> I believe our goal in this program is to help teachers, both in schools and in other areas, to become more reflective in their practice, to help them better understand what they believe about teaching and learning, to help them gain and use a language that will help them express what they believe about teaching and learning, and to help them gain a renewed

> sense of energy, inquiry and risk taking within their own practice.

Facilitator 2's questionnaire also yielded:

> Facilitation is a lot of behind the scenes work. It is knowing the concepts at a deep level and continuing to learn about them with learners. It is accessing materials and coming up with broad experiences that will help learners think, take risks, and reflect on their practice.

Another questionnaire (Facilitator 7) stated that reflection "Helps them to 'think' about their own learning." Facilitator 1 added, "Their reflections, although guided to some extent, are their own and go their own direction."

Other questionnaires indicated that reflection is needed and just as valuable for the facilitators as well as the teacher-learners. As stated by Facilitator 4, "I considered myself a guide toward reflective thinking and a resource to other educators looking for fresh, valid ideas to improve instruction and assist students in learning." She elaborated, "Everyone needs a place to shine. Teams must celebrate together and take the time to reflect regularly about what worked, what didn't, and how to improve." Facilitator 5 pointed out, "The facilitators I know are dedicated, reflective, professional, and helpful." "In addition, I strive to model key concepts such as constructivism, community, and reflection" explained Facilitator 6. She went on to state, "Model reflective practice, write when they write." She also advised facilitators to "plan the weekend, then step away for quiet reflection. Come back to the agenda at a later time and make necessary revisions."

While the facilitators are aware of the power of reflection, it is necessary to provide plenty of time to the learners to think and write. This was evident in the observational field notes when Facilitator 12 stated during a planning session, "We will

just have them sit, think, and write down what they want to get out of the program and process their ideas – this should take most of the morning." Other facilitators actually guide the learners and provide them questions to think about that might assist in the reflection process. An example was when Facilitator 15 asked of the learners:

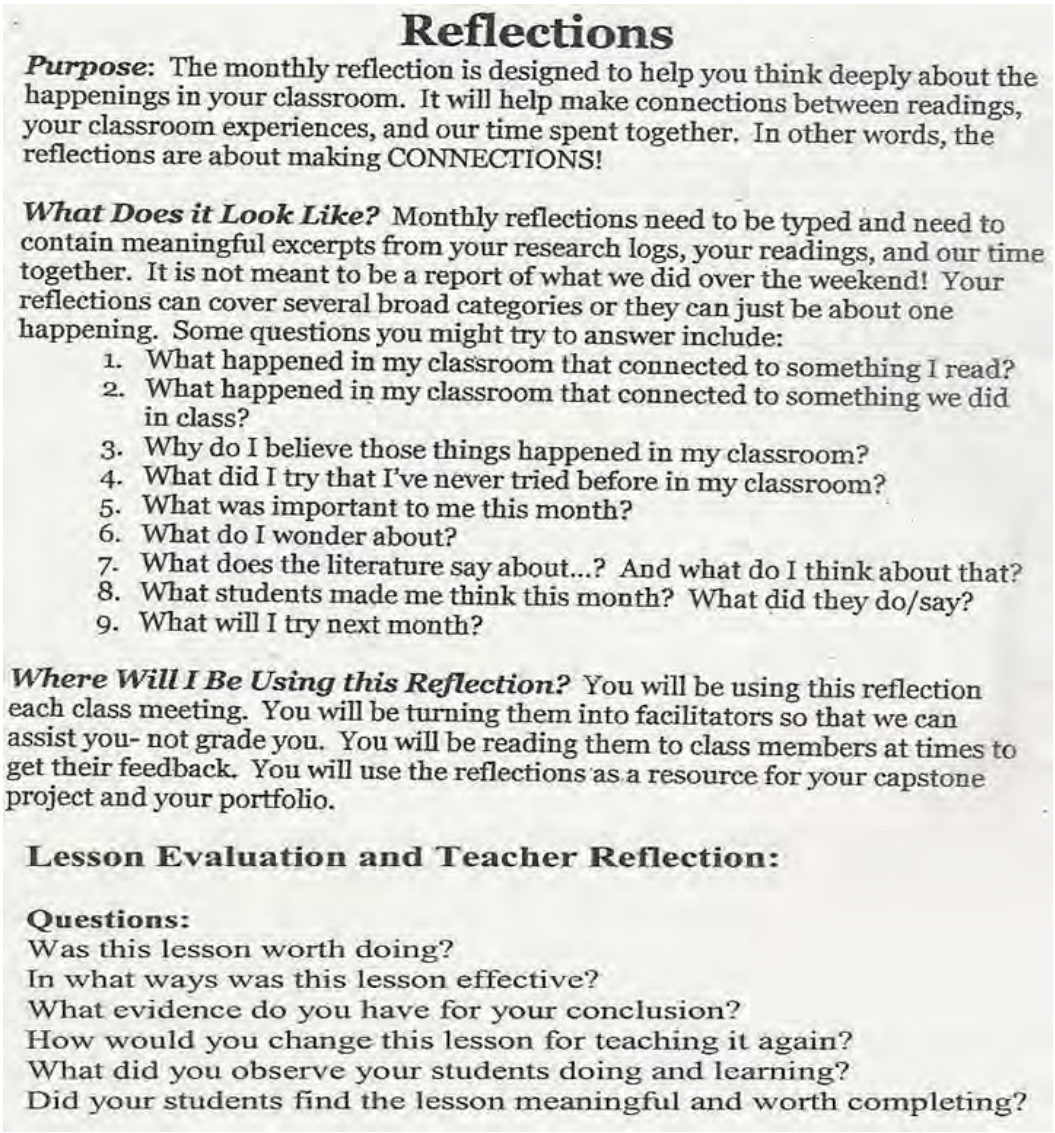
> What strategy did I use with the child? Why did I choose it? How did it work? Will I use it again? How could I change it? These are all questions you should be asking yourself after each lesson/activity/day… REFLECTION!

To get the learners to think even deeper about what they do in their classrooms, Facilitator 2 prodded them toward reflection:

> What are you doing? Why are you doing it? And at what cost? We must always think about these questions… Think in your head – would I do it to
>
> my own kid? It's easy to forget that we are teaching someone else's kid. These are life skills.

Opportunities to reflect were provided by the facilitators at every learning weekend. Their hope is that reflection will become a way of life for their teacher-learners. *Figure 4.5* shows examples of tools that facilitators give learners for reflection assistance. Very frequently, facilitators gave learners time to think. A Facilitator (9) encouraged the learners, and instructed, "Take out your notebooks and reflect on relating this activity to learning, community, constructivism, and your own classroom. (The teacher-learners begin to write quietly)." *Figure 4.6* is an example of products of learner reflections. By the responses, it appears the learners were thinking deeply about their

community, their own classroom, and their own professional development when writing these insights.



Reflections

Purpose: The monthly reflection is designed to help you think deeply about the happenings in your classroom. It will help make connections between readings, your classroom experiences, and our time spent together. In other words, the reflections are about making CONNECTIONS!

What Does it Look Like? Monthly reflections need to be typed and need to contain meaningful excerpts from your research logs, your readings, and our time together. It is not meant to be a report of what we did over the weekend! Your reflections can cover several broad categories or they can just be about one happening. Some questions you might try to answer include:

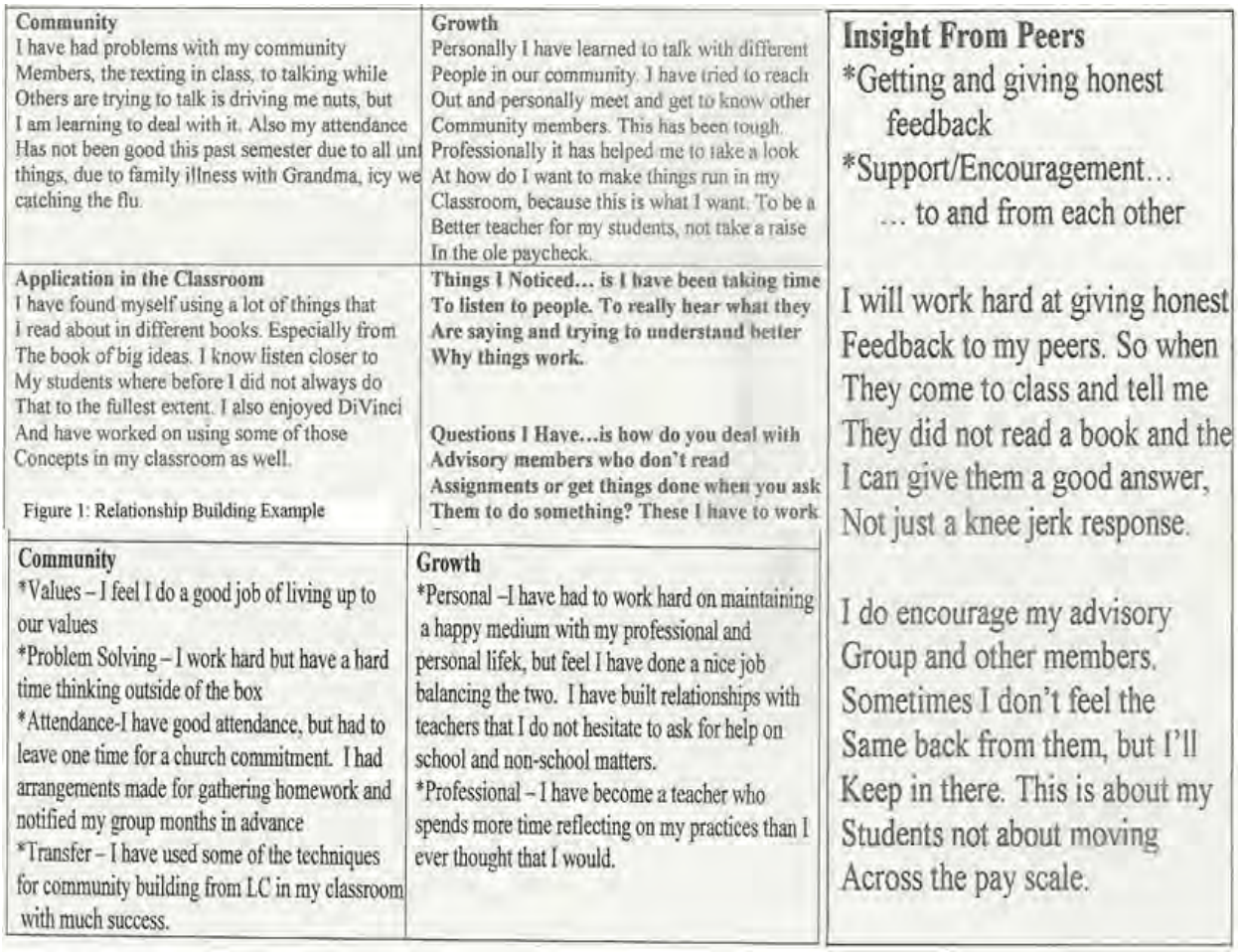
1. What happened in my classroom that connected to something I read?
2. What happened in my classroom that connected to something we did in class?
3. Why do I believe those things happened in my classroom?
4. What did I try that I've never tried before in my classroom?
5. What was important to me this month?
6. What do I wonder about?
7. What does the literature say about...? And what do I think about that?
8. What students made me think this month? What did they do/say?
9. What will I try next month?

Where Will I Be Using this Reflection? You will be using this reflection each class meeting. You will be turning them into facilitators so that we can assist you- not grade you. You will be reading them to class members at times to get their feedback. You will use the reflections as a resource for your capstone project and your portfolio.

Lesson Evaluation and Teacher Reflection:

Questions:
Was this lesson worth doing?
In what ways was this lesson effective?
What evidence do you have for your conclusion?
How would you change this lesson for teaching it again?
What did you observe your students doing and learning?
Did your students find the lesson meaningful and worth completing?

Figure 4.5. Reflection Tools. This is an example taken from two different learner handouts illustrating facilitator assistance with deeper reflection.



Community
I have had problems with my community Members, the texting in class, to talking while Others are trying to talk is driving me nuts, but I am learning to deal with it. Also my attendance Has not been good this past semester due to all unt things, due to family illness with Grandma, icy we catching the flu.

Growth
Personally I have learned to talk with different People in our community. I have tried to reach Out and personally meet and get to know other Community members. This has been tough. Professionally it has helped me to take a look At how do I want to make things run in my Classroom, because this is what I want. To be a Better teacher for my students, not take a raise In the ole paycheck.

Application in the Classroom
I have found myself using a lot of things that I read about in different books. Especially from The book of big ideas. I know listen closer to My students where before I did not always do That to the fullest extent. I also enjoyed DiVinci And have worked on using some of those Concepts in my classroom as well.

Things I Noticed… is I have been taking time To listen to people. To really hear what they Are saying and trying to understand better Why things work.

Questions I Have…is how do you deal with Advisory members who don't read Assignments or get things done when you ask Them to do something? These I have to work

Figure 1: Relationship Building Example

Community
*Values – I feel I do a good job of living up to our values
*Problem Solving – I work hard but have a hard time thinking outside of the box
*Attendance-I have good attendance, but had to leave one time for a church commitment. I had arrangements made for gathering homework and notified my group months in advance
*Transfer – I have used some of the techniques for community building from LC in my classroom with much success.

Growth
*Personal –I have had to work hard on maintaining a happy medium with my professional and personal lifek, but feel I have done a nice job balancing the two. I have built relationships with teachers that I do not hesitate to ask for help on school and non-school matters.
*Professional – I have become a teacher who spends more time reflecting on my practices than I ever thought that I would.

Insight From Peers
*Getting and giving honest feedback
*Support/Encouragement…
… to and from each other

I will work hard at giving honest Feedback to my peers. So when They come to class and tell me They did not read a book and the I can give them a good answer, Not just a knee jerk response.

I do encourage my advisory Group and other members. Sometimes I don't feel the Same back from them, but I'll Keep in there. This is about my Students not about moving Across the pay scale.

Figure 4.6. Learner Reflection Samples. These are some samples of learner comments showing reflection about their progress in the program.

The topic of thinking was very often at the forefront of the learning community delivery format. Facilitator 11 guided the learners with:

> It is so important to have conceptual understanding. Ways to facilitate and be constructivist. Standards that you all have to adhere to – if you read them, they should all be about concepts. Concepts are good for the kids – they need to learn how to think critically. By the way that you ask questions, guide them, lead the lesson, and process at the end.

Facilitators encourage teacher-learners to use reflection with their own students. Facilitator 1 told his learners, "Learning is neither thinking nor doing, it's thinking about doing. How can you use reflection in your classroom?" He went on to state to the learners that they all need to "think things through yourself – monitor your own thinking. Reflection helps you interpret what you see in a meaningful way. How does reflection fit into the research that you are doing in your classroom right now?" A mentor (Facilitator 13) described the essence of the program, "We try to get them to pick up on what works for them as learners, reflections, trying to graduate, the outcomes, whatever it is and cultivate it for and in them."

Facilitators use reflection when planning activities and lessons for the learners. One facilitator (10) described the way her team creates the weekend agenda:

> We take turns writing the agendas after the brainstorming and planning. It really allows the facilitator that is writing it "wrap the mind around it" and really internalize it. It provides a spark, it's hard to describe – but it lets others see the thought process too.

Facilitators perceived that activities improve with each use.

Tower of power.

A particular activity that the researcher observed in each of the first year communities she attended was titled the "Tower of Power." This is utilized in the learning community delivery format to build community and relationships within the newly created "advisory groups." Advisory groups are the support for the members throughout the entirety of the program's two years. The members will validate, assist, push, support, and communicate with each other when needed. It is essential that this group create a solid relationship. In the "Tower of Power" activity, learners in advisory groups attempt to build the tallest, free-standing structure using only newspaper and masking tape. It is a friendly competition involving group dynamics.

The "Tower of Power" activity was conducted differently in each of the first year communities. The concept was the same; however, it was processed differently. A reason for this given by Facilitator 2:

> A facilitator explained how this activity evolved… One facilitator on a different team came up with using vocabulary – but she gave them the vocabulary FIRST. A facilitator on this current team reworked it and had the learners come up with their own vocabulary that described what they just experienced, only AFTER the activity had taken place. Then, another facilitator from this current team added the idea that the learners define the concepts and connections that comprised the activity (again, after the activity). The other current team facilitator that had worked on three different teams decided to connect the entire activity to constructivism,

> community, relationships, etc (the big concepts from the weekend) in a large group discussion after the activity. This whole thought process evolved over time because of the change of the facilitator teams and their individual experiences with this tower activity. Everyone brings something different to the team. This is how we make the process so much better each time for the learners.

A facilitator (14) asked in the large group:

> Was it really about the tower? (wait-time…) don't answer that one – just keep it in the back of your mind. After reading, we will all come back together as tower groups and share key points. So split up, read, highlight, tag, etc., to internalize your section. You have an hour.

A mentor (Facilitator 6) gave reasoning for the ever-changing facilitation teams, "Diversity is a good thing. It's good to 'shake it up a bit' by having diverse facilitator teams. The constants are ALWAYS approached differently by each facilitator team." The diversity of the teams is very purposeful and necessary within this delivery model. Each facilitator brings different experiences, strengths, beliefs, and talent to the team. By changing the teams for each new community, the lessons, activities, and processing of the concepts take on differences. This manifests in stronger and better opportunities for success with the teacher-learners enrolled in the program. An example of this strategy in action for the researcher was observing the "Tower of Power" activity.

In addressing the diversity of the facilitation teams and the individual facilitator contributions to the team, questionnaires elicited: "The point is – I don't think there is any specific strategy or method needed" (Facilitator 1). "I work alongside my co-

facilitators to design learning experiences that meet the needs of all learners. As a facilitator, I seek to demonstrate a caring perspective, professionalism, and a vision for 'what we can become' rather than what we are" (Facilitator 6). "As a learner and then veteran facilitator, my role is to facilitate the current needs of educators the learning community as well as uncover the best practice models, i.e. community, constructivism, etc." (Facilitator 8). "Authentic assessment, brain-based learning/teaching strategies, experiential learning, opportunities for reflection, a clear and common understanding that all learners can and will improve their performance, personalized instruction" (Facilitator 9).

A last response by Facilitator 8 was just as informative:

> A lot of new concepts are introduced via a formative book. Learners see the big picture of the concept first and delve in the ambiguity of the concept. Facilitators then let the learners "play around" with ideas at weekend and in doing so; help learners clarify content of the book in relation to concept. After the weekend, learners are encouraged to meddle with the concept during the next month and write a reflection connecting and reflecting in at a personal level.

Defining "the process".

Another sub-category of this theme has been identified by each participant as "the process." This mysterious, recurrent notion embedded throughout the questionnaires and observation field notes merely contained the two words, "the process." A definition of "the process" was difficult in the beginning to discern. Delving into the components of this concept, the researcher discovered that this process includes everything that is

integral to the success of the program. Facilitators were heard throughout the observations (as contained in the field notes) telling the teacher-learners to "trust the process." "The process" sums up the entirety of the program, from start to finish; it is the balance of community-building, social constructivism, the integration of curricular concepts, the belief that is manifested throughout the experience, learner efficacy, the maturation of the adult into a lifelong learner, and finally the development of the learner as reflective practitioners in their own classroom. There may be additional components unique to the individual teacher-learner; however, it is certain that by the time the learner completes the program, he or she definitely knows what "the process" consists of on a personal level.

One facilitator's (1) definition of "the process" was:

> My role is to help candidates process readings and activities in such a way that they gain in understanding of the principle concepts of learning community. Processing often takes the form of Q & A, critical thinking exercises, dialogue, and reflective writing. Herein lies the "process" that is such a large part of community.

Facilitator 1 also went on to elaborate in his questionnaire:

> Facilitation is a learning process in itself, one in which there is a sharing of ideas and knowledge among the facilitators but also between and among various members of the community. Facilitators are, by definition, members of the community, members who possess a knowledge of the process and a certain amount of knowledge of the learning process and teaching in general.

Also taken from Facilitator 2's questionnaire, "It is a very complex process filled with decision-making, crafting experiences, and questioning. It constantly changes with new learners." This reiterated further that the learning community delivery format is unique for each teacher-learner and the carefully crafted "process" creates different outcomes within each individual.

During a large group discussion the teacher-learners were talking through leading a constructivist lesson in their own classrooms, "A facilitator recognizes the importance of the PROCESS. It's just as important as the content and information learned in the lesson. It is MAKING you think" (Facilitator 1). The same discussion clarified the discussion when Facilitator 7 explained, "With facilitating, working with groups, you have to remember to monitor and work with the groups. Don't just give the assignment and leave. Just keep poking, prodding, and guiding to help the process, and assist in overall understanding."

Some of the facilitators requested that the different facilitation teams share their lesson plans and weekend agendas by posting them on the class page of the college website. Facilitator 15 gave the reasoning of, "Seeing the product is a lot different than reading an agenda. It's product vs. process. Agendas would be hard to follow without seeing it play out – the continuum or from activity to activity." Facilitator 10 then decided, "The agenda – what's typed isn't how it actually occurs. There is timing, questioning, discussion… but that doesn't mean that we can't post them on the shared website for each other."

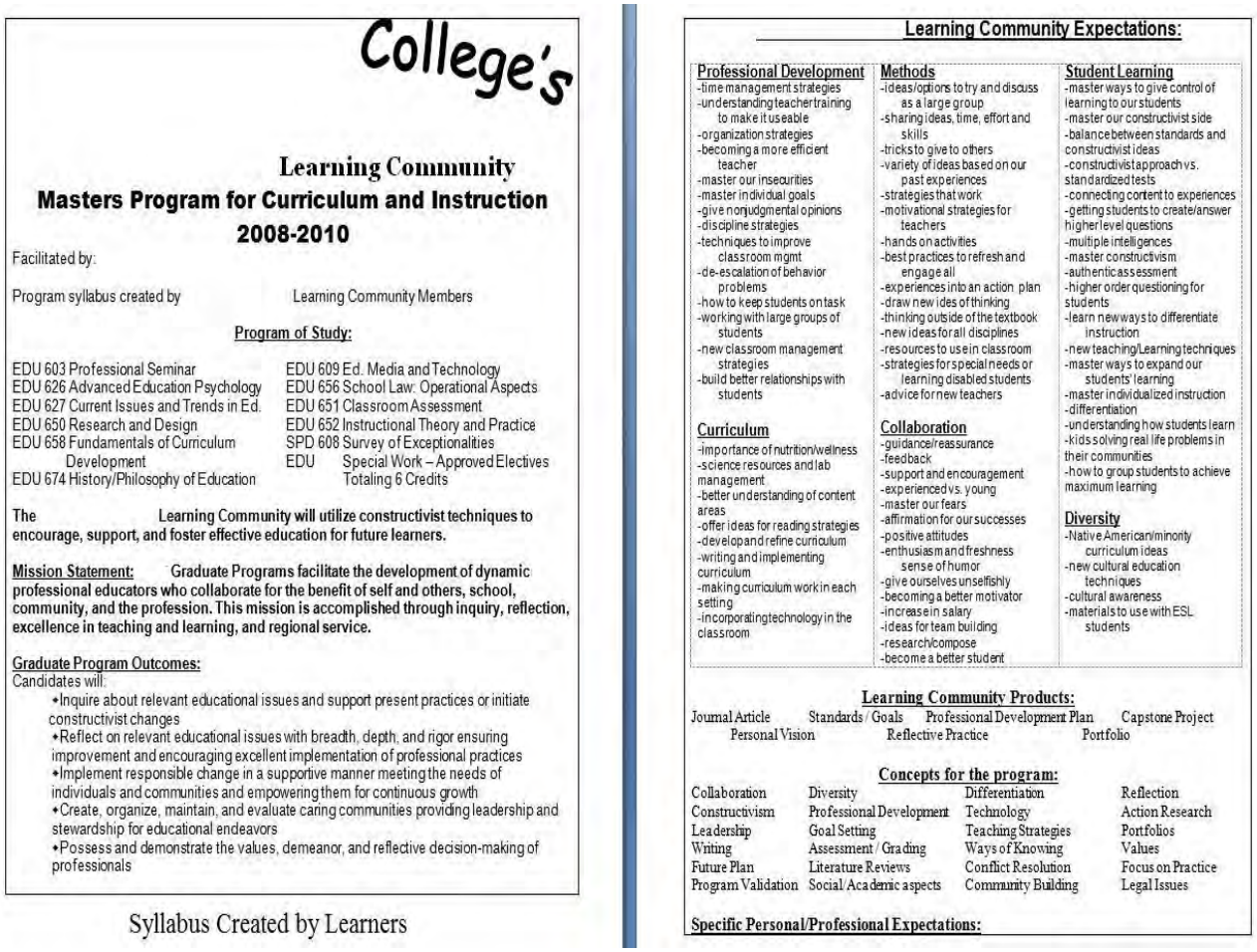
In defining "the process," Facilitator 9's questionnaire articulated this as,

> I want all members of the learning community to earn a masters degree that is meaningful and relevant. At the end of their two-year program, I hope that they will be conscientious educators who have strong conviction in their practice, and who are leaders in their school settings.

Another viewpoint from Facilitator 8 was, "I think it is a balance between the magic of trusting the process and the necessity of thoughtful planning.

The mentors and facilitators both believed, "A constant is that each develops and goes through the values process, the mortar between the bricks. Concepts PLUS values. In the learning community model, the values set it apart. We just stack our bricks in a different way from the traditional models" (Facilitator 6). Also brought up in the phone call was the issue of "Accountability – how do we be accountable to each other? We don't want to become the "traditional" model. Our agendas keep us on track and accountable to each other," decided Facilitator 13.

Throughout the same facilitator conference call, the conviction in the program was loud and clear. As stated by Facilitator 1, "Concepts – we all as facilitators share the same philosophy about how learners learn. The foundation, this model is concept rather than course driven."



College's

Learning Community

Masters Program for Curriculum and Instruction

2008-2010

Facilitated by:

Program syllabus created by Learning Community Members

Program of Study:

EDU 603 Professional Seminar
EDU 626 Advanced Education Psychology
EDU 627 Current Issues and Trends in Ed.
EDU 650 Research and Design
EDU 658 Fundamentals of Curriculum Development
EDU 674 History/Philosophy of Education
EDU 609 Ed. Media and Technology
EDU 656 School Law: Operational Aspects
EDU 651 Classroom Assessment
EDU 652 Instructional Theory and Practice
SPD 608 Survey of Exceptionalities
EDU Special Work – Approved Electives Totaling 6 Credits

The Learning Community will utilize constructivist techniques to encourage, support, and foster effective education for future learners.

Mission Statement: **Graduate Programs facilitate the development of dynamic professional educators who collaborate for the benefit of self and others, school, community, and the profession. This mission is accomplished through inquiry, reflection, excellence in teaching and learning, and regional service.**

Graduate Program Outcomes:

Candidates will:

- Inquire about relevant educational issues and support present practices or initiate constructivist changes
- Reflect on relevant educational issues with breadth, depth, and rigor ensuring improvement and encouraging excellent implementation of professional practices
- Implement responsible change in a supportive manner meeting the needs of individuals and communities and empowering them for continuous growth
- Create, organize, maintain, and evaluate caring communities providing leadership and stewardship for educational endeavors
- Possess and demonstrate the values, demeanor, and reflective decision-making of professionals

Syllabus Created by Learners

Learning Community Expectations:

Professional Development
-time management strategies
-understanding teacher training to make it useable
-organization strategies
-becoming a more efficient teacher
-master our insecurities
-master individual goals
-give nonjudgmental opinions
-discipline strategies
-techniques to improve classroom mgmt
-de-escalation of behavior problems
-how to keep students on task
-working with large groups of students
-new classroom management strategies
-build better relationships with students

Curriculum
-importance of nutrition/wellness
-science resources and lab management
-better understanding of content areas
-offer ideas for reading strategies
-develop and refine curriculum
-writing and implementing curriculum
-making curriculum work in each setting
-incorporating technology in the classroom

Methods
-ideas/options to try and discuss as a large group
-sharing ideas, time, effort and skills
-tricks to give to others
-variety of ideas based on our past experiences
-strategies that work
-motivational strategies for teachers
-hands on activities
-best practices to refresh and engage all
-experiences into an action plan
-draw new ides of thinking
-thinking outside of the textbook
-new ideas for all disciplines
-resources to use in classroom
-strategies for special needs or learning disabled students
-advice for new teachers

Collaboration
-guidance/reassurance
-feedback
-support and encouragement
-experienced vs. young
-master our fears
-affirmation for our successes
-positive attitudes
-enthusiasm and freshness
sense of humor
-give ourselves unselfishly
-becoming a better motivator
-increase in salary
-ideas for team building
-research/compose
-become a better student

Student Learning
-master ways to give control of learning to our students
-master our constructivist side
-balance between standards and constructivist ideas
-constructivist approach vs. standardized tests
-connecting content to experiences
-getting students to create/answer higher level questions
-multiple intelligences
-master constructivism
-authentic assessment
-higher order questioning for students
-learn new ways to differentiate instruction
-new teaching/Learning techniques
-master ways to expand our students' learning
-master individualized instruction
-differentiation
-understanding how students learn
-kids solving real life problems in their communities
-how to group students to achieve maximum learning

Diversity
-Native American/minority curriculum ideas
-new cultural education techniques
-cultural awareness
-materials to use with ESL students

Learning Community Products:

Journal Article Standards / Goals Professional Development Plan Capstone Project
Personal Vision Reflective Practice Portfolio

Concepts for the program:

Collaboration	Diversity	Differentiation	Reflection
Constructivism	Professional Development	Technology	Action Research
Leadership	Goal Setting	Teaching Strategies	Portfolios
Writing	Assessment / Grading	Ways of Knowing	Values
Future Plan	Literature Reviews	Conflict Resolution	Focus on Practice
Program Validation	Social/Academic aspects	Community Building	Legal Issues

Specific Personal/Professional Expectations:

Figure 4.7. Learner-Created Syllabus Sample. This is a syllabus created by the members of one learning community. Each member was afforded a voice in the creation of this tool – the "roadmap" of the two-year program.

Figure 4.7 sums up "the process" on paper. The class-created program syllabus contains learner choice (it was created by the community for the community) and big ideas (concepts) along with all of the outcomes the teacher-learners can expect to reach. Each member was afforded a voice in the creation of this tool. Teacher-learners each have ownership in this program because they created the concepts they wanted to achieve within the prescribed parameters of this program of study.

Summary.

Chapter four included descriptions of the themes that emerged from analyzing the collected questionnaires, observational field notes, institutional documentation, and archival documentation. Data were analyzed from a holistic perspective with the use of QSR NVivo® version 8 and an unbiased peer reviewer. These multiple perspectives were combined for insight into the research question. The five emergent themes – it is important for learners to personalize concepts, teacher-learners need to be self-directed, learning in a group community setting is a priority, learners need large concepts rather than small details, and best practice strategies are whatever the learners need were defined and described qualitatively. Chapter five will explain how the emergent themes connect to the literature included in chapter two and include implications along with recommendations for the future.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter will discuss the findings from Chapter four as they relate to the research question and connect to the literature from Chapter two. The findings from Chapter four included that according to the facilitators: it is important for learners to personalize concepts, teacher-learners need to be self-directed, learning in a group community setting is a priority, learners need large concepts rather than small details, and best practice strategies are whatever the learners need. The literature from Chapter two contained: social constructivism theory, adult learning theory, learning community format, integrated curriculum, and the role of the facilitator. The literature will connect to the themes as they relate to the research question. Implications and recommendations for the future will also be discussed.

This phenomenographic descriptive case study was of a Midwestern state college's non-traditional, Masters of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) learning community delivery format model. The study yielded many findings which may be interesting to the college itself, others involved in a similar program, or institutions considering a non-traditional delivery format for their graduate students.

Research question

The research question was: What structural components, methods, and best practice strategies do facilitators perceived they need to use when engaging in the learning community delivery model represented in this study? Table 5.1 portrays the connections of the themes to the literature.

Table 5.1

Themes as Connected to Literature

Themes	Sub-Categories	Literature
Facilitators perceived that it is important for learners to personalize concepts.	Allowing for learner choice Relationship building	Learning community format Social constructivism theory Adult learning theory
Facilitators perceived that teacher-learners need to be self-directed.	Motivation Lifelong learning	Social constructivism theory Adult learning theory
Facilitators perceived that learning in a group community setting is a priority.	Facilitators as community members	Learning community format Social constructivism theory
Facilitators perceived that learners need large concepts rather than small details.		Integrated curriculum Social constructivism theory
Facilitators perceived that best practice strategies are whatever the learners need.	Giving feedback Adding flexibility Listening Modeling Creating ambiguity Providing opportunities for action research Guiding questions Making time for reflection	Role of the facilitator Social constructivism theory Adult learning theory Learning community format

Discussion

Facilitators perceived that it is important for learners to personalize concepts.

This theme portrays the importance of making connections to the new information and synthesizing the concept to a personal situation. Some of the outcomes of the program are a Professional Development Plan (PDP), a professional growth portfolio, and an action research capstone project. The PDP seemed very thought-provoking for the learners. It included a vision, goals tied to national teaching propositions and standards, and an action plan to achieve these goals. The interesting part of this was that the PDP was a specific, ongoing product of each individual teacher-learner that contained application to his or her unique situation. Brown and Benson (2005) stated that the shift to the capstone by some colleges allows individual learners to become experts in their own classrooms through action research. The program is focused on each learner getting out of the program exactly what he or she needs to experience the prescribed outcomes they designed through the parameters from the college within a learning community setting.

Norman and Schmidt (1992) described a learning community format as having constructive, goal-directed learning. The activation of prior knowledge to new information when adapted internally to a learner's personal situation creates ownership of learning for that individual (Price, 2005). Chee (1997) advised that long-term understanding occurs when learning is usefully applied to the learner's personal situation. Knowles (1980) asserted in his adult learning theory concept that adults are most

interested in learning about subjects that have immediate relevance and implementation to their job.

Activities utilized by facilitation strategies encouraged and reminded learners at all times to share knowledge and ideas, BUT to make the information work for their classrooms. Teacher-learners are guided by facilitators to identify and solve their own classroom problems through social dialogue assistance from the group. This sharing, discussion, and problem-solving is what Antonacci and Colasacco (1995) had in mind when they articulated that students are strongly encouraged to ask questions of themselves and others. They also advised learners should keep an open mind to the possibility that there may be more than one "right" answer. Social constructivism was what they were referring to.

Sub-categories to the theme of learners personalizing concepts were identified as 'allowing for learner choice' and 'relationship building'. These two concepts are principles of both social constructivism and adult learning theory. In schools where student-directed, interest-driven social constructivist classrooms are present, sustained student achievement is displayed (Senge et al., 2000). Imel (1989) stated that adults are willing to take responsibility for their own learning and are clear about what they want to learn. The opportunity to connect with others and to develop a sense of belonging and mattering (White & Nonnamaker, 2008) binds the members throughout the program. Promoting dialogue among group members, sharing alternative viewpoints, challenging each other (Cunningham et al., 1993; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Sharan & Sharan, 1992), building trust, asking questions, and creating knowledge together (Sax & Fisher, 2001) is what these social constructivist learning communities are all about.

In order for social constructivism to *really* work, comprehension of the theory by the instructors is essential. Instructors cannot merely describe the concept and have the teacher-learners embrace and accept the concept. They must "walk the walk" and hold close the principles. Giving learners choices within the parameters of the curricular framework is another way to allow students to construct their own knowledge. Developing trusting relationships is crucial to the process and allows for open, honest discourse and discussion. An instructor articulated on her questionnaire, "I do think, however, that all facilitators need to really understand constructivism at a level that allows them to design learning, enabling learners to construct knowledge." Another concurred, "Exemplary facilitators have PASSION for the work they do and LIVE constructivism."

The theme of personalizing concepts and the sub-categories allowing for learner choice and relationship building are focused on the learning community format, social constructivism, and adult learning theory. Maturity, sharing, and problem-solving embedded in dialogue with peers, is at the core of the learning community delivery format.

Facilitators perceived that teacher-learners need to be self-directed.

Self-direction as an emergent theme, as well as the sub-themes of motivation and lifelong learning, are critical components of social constructivism and adult learning theory. The facilitators noted the relationship between maturation and self-direction. To be sustained, motivation and lifelong learning in teacher-learners, needs to be intrinsic. Knowles (1990) maintained that some adults are responsive to external factors, but the most potent motivators are internal pressures.

From observational field notes, a facilitator in discussing the program with the learners stated:

> You need to get out of this masters program what you need. It's not about the degree, it's about doing what's best for our students in our own classrooms… this learning community is about the best program in the area for that. We give books, activities, concepts, and opportunities for reflection, etc., and you tailor all of it to your particular needs.

This concurs with the social constructivist *Community of Inquiry Framework* developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). Using the design, facilitation, and direction of social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning experiences leaves it up to the learner to make sense of the course concepts.

In discussing andragogy, Knowles (1990) described the emphasis placed on self-direction. He acknowledged the assumption that adults learn differently from children and contended that, in light of that, adults must be taught differently from children. Merriam (2001) believed that the course content must be very learner-centered due to the self-directedness of the mature adult. He further believed that facilitators needed to involve as many aspects of learners' "education as possible in the creation of a climate in which they can most fruitfully learn" (p. 7).

When maturity levels among learners are not commensurate in graduate programs, problems arise. Depending on the situation or lesson, not all teacher-learners are necessarily going to be self-directed at all times. Understanding motivations behind and background knowledge of the adult learners in the classroom is paramount as each

brings unique perspectives from their personal life experiences. The social constructivist learning community seems to be the ideal situation for these graduate learners.

Facilitators perceived that teacher-learners need to be self-directed. The literature concurs. Along with the sub-categories of motivation and lifelong learning, theories of adult learning theory and social constructivism adhere to these findings.

Facilitators perceived that learning in a group community setting is a priority.

This theme was very important to the participants as was the sub-category, facilitators as community members. The sub-theme was actually described by the facilitators as pertaining to both the facilitation team community and the learning community graduate student group. The notion of the "community" is based upon social constructivism and the learning community format from the literature.

The carefully choreographed lessons created by the facilitators always have the concept of community at the forefront. An example (representative of all of the communities observed) follows, "Talk to your neighbor and together make a list of the things we did so far today to rebuild our community. She waits for the learners to process the request together." In another example, the facilitator discussed the value of using a particular activity, "It exemplified true community – including all stages at various times – from chaos, to pseudo, to true community."

McDonald (2002) addressed the balance of community when he stated, "A healthy community is one in which essential but often competing values are maintained in tensioned balance" (p. 3). Without the balance that he is referring to, he asserted that the community would degenerate. He elaborated that it is the balancing of cooperation,

competition, and "other impulses that is essential in the construction of community" (3). The learning community format will take teacher-learners out of the conventional educational setting in which they have been comfortable within their own instructional practices (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996).

Facilitators as community members is a sub-category within this theme. Facilitators serve both as members of the large group of graduate students and on the facilitation team. The same reasoning applies: the importance of social dialogue, adult learning theory, and learning community format drives the facilitators as they guide each other and the large group. The belief is that the sum of the whole community is greater than its individual members (Parker, 2007). Therefore, facilitators are lifelong learners themselves – right along with the graduate learners. Price (2005) found that facilitators appreciate the social support of working together as a team.

Facilitators perceived that learners need large concepts rather than small details.

Learners need large concepts to process according to facilitators, rather than small details. Connecting these big ideas is a very important piece of the learning community delivery format represented in this study. The notion of curriculum integration is threaded throughout the lessons and activities.

The mode of content delivery in this non-traditional format is through integrated curriculum immersion. The courses for the semester (also for the program) integrate in a prescribed format of college courses taking into consideration the interests and needs of the teacher-learners. Curriculum integration is also enhanced by the delivery through social constructivism.

Shoemaker (as cited in Walker, 1995) defined integrated curriculum as cutting across subject-matter lines through a focus of broad areas of study in a holistic manner. Facilitating in this way encourages lifelong learning and prepares teacher-learners to process information with deeper understanding (Windschitl, 1999). Learning community models can be utilized to produce better educators (Lake, 1994). A fragile balance is needed for integrated curriculum to be successful while at the same time allowing constructivism to flourish (Jacobs, 1989).

A renewed sense of purpose is created when integrated curriculum is coupled with learner interest (Jacobs, 1989). Jacobs also reported that synergized, blended learning concepts are associated with better learner self-direction and better attitudes as the learners process the information. Price (2005) reported that when asked, college faculty preferred integrated curriculum rather than return to traditional curriculum. Walker (1995) discovered that teams of facilitators are able to teach more effectively when they integrate lessons across subjects and courses. They discover new interests and teaching techniques. Teacher-learners are able to share experiences that revitalize their own teaching experiences in their classrooms. Sharing ideas in this social constructivist manner allows facilitators and graduate students to participate in one another's' thinking (Windschitl, 1999).

Facilitators perceived that best practice strategies are whatever the learners need.

The theme of best practice strategies are whatever the learners need is perceived by the facilitators as vital to the learning community delivery format. The emergent sub-categories of giving feedback, adding flexibility, listening, modeling, creating ambiguity,

providing opportunities for action research, guiding questions, and making time for reflection are all necessary components of this theme. Overall, the role of the facilitator, social constructivism, adult learning theory, and learning community format are illustrated through literature that assists in explaining this theme.

Throughout the entirety of the program, the focus is on the learner. This student-directed approach to learning occurs when the teaching staff backs down, takes on the role of the facilitator, and allows the teacher-learners to engage in peer-learning (Maor, 2003). Individual ownership of learning is the intended outcome (Savery & Duffy, 1995) of the program's design. Student query and interest as a mechanism for defining the curriculum, or any of the variety of other learner-centered approaches and activities (Brooks & Brooks, 1993) allows this ownership to occur within each learner.

By the use of a variety of different teaching and learning strategies, the learners are able to process the concepts in their own way, talking through their perceptions with the large group. These graduate students are then able to come to a consensus through the sharing of information with others in negotiating meaning (Fosnot, 1996). If the facilitator's interactions remain at metacognitive level, and he or she avoids expressing an opinion or giving information to the students, deeper understandings can be gained by the learners (Price, 2005).

Within a constructivist lesson, objectives are only guidelines. Learners should, within these prescribed guidelines, be able to learn something more if they so choose (Prefume, 2007). Creating opportunities for ambiguity is essential for facilitators so connections can be made by working through the confusion. For the benefit of teaching

and learning, teacher-learners must be able to transcend ambiguity and make connections to reality (Palmer, 2007).

A large part of the role of the facilitator is to challenge the learners' thinking. The importance of guided, mediated questioning cannot be understated. It is up to the facilitator to offer student-centered learning through an interest-driven learning process (Ali, 2004). This requires the facilitator to have a thorough content knowledge, which is an essential foundation for facilitating effective reasoning and questioning. All educators – facilitators and teacher-learners – bring real-life phenomena to the graduate classroom that could involve many perspectives; therefore, interpretations, discussion, questioning, and reflection must be allowed to play out until the concept has been thoroughly examined by the large group (Windschitl, 1999).

Reflection is another sub-theme that cannot be overlooked. Boud and Lee (2005) and Windschitl (1999) agreed that adaptation of everyday life examples in order to assist learners in making connections greatly increases the demand of content knowledge, teaching skills, and instructional tools. Preplanning for potential challenges that occur in the learning community model is essential in order for facilitators to guide the learning of the graduate learners, affording them the efficacy and revitalization they need to become better classroom teachers. Reflection that is purposeful and guided is a big part of this process.

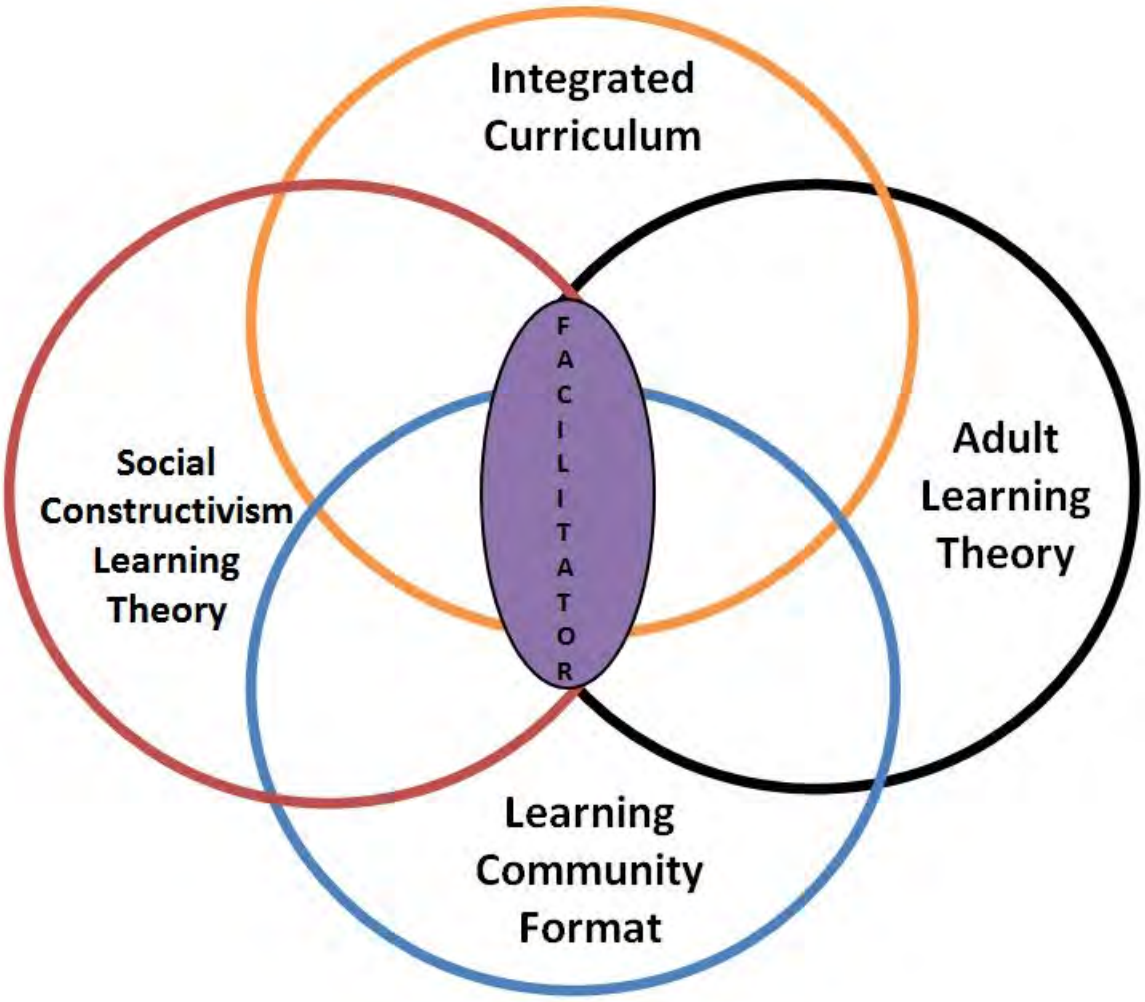


Figure 5.1. The Schiermeyer Learning Community Format Delivery Model: Facilitator Role. This is a graphic depiction of the balance essential to the program for maximum learner success.

The entire experience of the learning community format (including social constructivism theory, adult learning theory, learning community format, integrated curriculum, and the role of the facilitator) is summed up by the facilitators as "the process." *Figure 5.1* represents the program, specifically the balance that is necessary for learner success. From a facilitator questionnaire, "Facilitating is being able to demonstrate knowledge to self and others, respect each others diversity within the community, demonstrate active listening, willing to change, accepts making mistakes and learns by them, encourage others to walk the talk, trust the process, collaborate, values shared leadership." A mentor summed up the concept during a facilitator training conference call, "Learning community walks the walk and sees the value. The learner must take away the knowledge of having gone through the process." Another chimed in, "You can't pour knowledge into someone, he has to experience the process." Within a learning community, patient and deliberate care must be taken to allow the process to produce the intended outcomes.

Implications

This dissertation study explores an alternative model to the classical teacher-led, lecture-based traditional Masters of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) program. It would be helpful to the profession of education to unite around a goal of action research. The research need not always be a formal study – simply questioning and reflecting on the activities of the day, or constantly being aware of student levels of understanding (through polls, surveys, group discussions, etc.) lends itself to a certain wisdom and insight into the needs of learners.

Educators of all levels may, as a result of this study, glean insight from the

findings – particularly in reference to best practices. A result of data analysis indicated that best practices are whatever each individual student needs. While seemingly straightforward and obvious, instructors in traditional teacher-led, lecture-based classrooms must realize that all students do not learn in the same manner. Offering the opportunity for success to all students should be the focus of all lessons for content comprehension. Giving learners choices and alternative assessment options to show what they know should be at the forefront, which would be advantageous to both educators as well as the students they teach.

Pre-service teacher courses could benefit from some exposure to this type of delivery format. Experiencing a social constructivist educational setting through a learning community delivery format could provide these teachers-to-be an arsenal of instruction strategies for when they have their own classrooms, thereby helping them avoid practicing some of the traditional, conventional, direct-instruction teaching styles that this study shuns and deems adverse to the forward views of learning. The obvious goal through immersion in a learning community format is to prepare pre-service teachers to facilitate student-led classrooms of their own.

Recommendations

Research designed to study this delivery format over time would be of interest to practitioners as well as higher institutions wishing to implement a similar non-traditional graduate program. It also remains to be seen what effect, if any, the learning community delivery format experience has on sustained professional practice.

Another possible avenue for research related to this study would be the direct impact of this program on K-12 students as a result of their teacher having completed the

program. Does it make a difference in the learning of the students in learning community graduates' classrooms? Changes that K-12 students perceive in overall climate of the classroom in addition to student achievement are areas for future study.

Research could be done regarding retention rates of graduates of the learning community delivery model. Do they remain teaching "in the trenches"? Do they go on to seek additional degrees as a result of an appreciation for lifelong learning? The graduates of the program should have developed a sense of collaborative efficacy. This may be an avenue of study to provide further insight into the benefits of learning in adult collaborative groups.

Summary

The need for quality teachers in schools throughout the nation is a recurrent topic with state as well as federal policy makers; therefore, it is essential that teachers remain current on issues of best practice that encourage student success. A learning community delivery model is a way for K-12 educators to obtain their masters degrees while transforming their classrooms. Through this non-traditional format, teacher-learners in a three-state region are revitalized, challenged, and given choices in the direction of their own learning. The program is empowering to educators, enhancing efficacy and encouraging forward change in K-12 classrooms by engaging instructors and learners in inquisitiveness, skepticism, and critical reflection. Learning communities create master teachers with the intent of positively impacting student learning outcomes. These master teacher graduates are in reality newly created master facilitators themselves, incorporating the teaching strategies they practiced and honed throughout the purposefully planned two-year curriculum.

Program facilitators are the backbone to this program, ensuring the seamless flow of learning through an integrated curriculum along with social constructivism, keeping in mind the adult learning theory. The future of education depends on forward-thinking educational leaders committed to promoting more effective research-based alternatives to graduate students such as the learning community delivery format.

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Appendix A: Consent Form of College Represented in this Study

Dr. [redacted] July 9, 2009
Dean of Education and Counseling
[redacted] College
[redacted]

Dear Dr. [redacted],

My name is Brenda Schiermeyer and I am a Doctor of Education student at College of Saint Mary, in Omaha Nebraska. As part of my study, I am required to undertake a research project, which is being planned to be conducted on [redacted] College facilitators of the Master of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) program as delivered in a learning community model. This letter, serves to formally seek your consent for the execution of the study which is being planned to begin in mid-July 2009.

The research topic is as follows: "*Learning Communities Creating Master Teachers*". This study is aimed at investigating the role of the [redacted] College Facilitator of the Master of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) learning community delivery model. This study intends to provide research on and a better understanding of the role of the [redacted] College Facilitator of the Master of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) learning community delivery model. The research will also examine strategies that may influence teachers in the pursuit of a constructivist, non-traditional Masters of Science in Education: Curriculum and Instruction program. This study will present information that may contribute to the development of teachers who will create student-led classrooms will be an additional benefit. Moreover, this knowledge could help other institutions more effectively assist adult learners.

During the study, three methods of data collection will be used. Through the use of these data collection methods, it is hoped that a thick, rich, descriptive, qualitative case study can be created. First, past and present facilitators of the learning community delivery model mentioned above will be invited to participate in an online, email, semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire-interview. The invitational email will be sent through the [redacted] College of Education staff. Identification and contact of past faculty will be through the College of Education. These individual email interviews will take approximately 20 minutes. Permission to disseminate the initial email and invite participation of present and past facilitators of the learning community delivery model is being sought from you at this time as the college representative.

Second, non-participant, on-site observations will be conducted regarding facilitator instructional practices. These observations (up to five) will be on-site for up to four hours at a time; and take place at the Educational Services [redacted] during facilitator development training; or during regularly scheduled learning community delivery model meeting sites and dates at the [redacted] Middle School in [redacted] and the [redacted] City Middle School in [redacted]. On-site observational field notes will be limited to and collected regarding facilitator instructional practices to include facilitator comments, movements, delivery of lessons, questioning, wait-time, site classroom design, etc. The identity of all learning community members will remain confidential. Permission to observe in these meetings is being sought from you at this time as the college representative.

Third, various forms of documentation pertinent and relevant to the institution's learning community courses are located at [redacted] College will be collected and analyzed which may include syllabi, agendas, lesson plans, capstone topics, graduation requirements, and any other information used by the learning community delivery model facilitators that the college agrees to allow. Archived data will also be requested and, if received, analyzed [redacted] College in the form of data applicable to the facilitator role in the delivery of the learning community model. The documents may include 15-hour interviews, facilitator evaluations, student dropout rates, collective student demographics, and other information limited to the scope of the study that the college is comfortable in sharing. This material will not contain names or any identifying information. Permission to collect the previously described institutional documentation and archived data is being sought from you at this time as the college representative.

Be informed that during the entire research process, your school and the research participants will be respected as much as possible. This means the individual name(s) of your school or the participants will not be mentioned in the write-up but a code name or group representations will be used. As the study will take the duration of the fall 2009 learning community semester, the participants may withdraw from the study at any time with no prejudice. After the data collection, the participants will have an opportunity to look through the data for verification purposes. When the study is completed, one copy of a hardbound dissertation will be sent to your school as part of the ethical research process.

The following people are my research supervisors and they can be contacted for further information or questions regarding this study:

Peggy Hawkins, Ph.D, RN
College of Saint Mary
7000 Mercy Road
Omaha, Nebraska 68144
(402) 399-2658
phawkins@csm.edu

Lois Linden, Ed.D, RN
College of Saint Mary
7000 Mercy Road
Omaha, Nebraska 68144
(402) 399-2612
llinden@csm.edu

Enclosed is College of Saint Mary's Institutional Review Board approval letter for the research, a sample interview questionnaire, and other information related to the study. Thank you for your time and consideration of approval for this worthwhile study of your institution.

Brenda L. Schiermeyer, Principal Investigator
Phone: [redacted]
bschiermeyer@csm.edu

If you agree with the above, please sign below and fax to [redacted].

Signature:__[redacted]_____ Date:___July 9, 2009___
Dr. [redacted], Dean of Education and Counseling

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter

July 9, 2009

College of Saint Mary
7000 Mercy Road
Omaha, NE 68106

Dear Ms. Schiermeyer:

The Institutional Review Board at College of Saint Mary has reviewed your revisions that were submitted for your study *Learning Communities Creating Master Teachers***.** The IRB has granted full approval of your study and you are authorized to begin your research.

I have attached copies of date stamped Consent Forms that you will be able to use to make official copies for your participants. I have attached a copy of *The Rights of Research Participants* that must be distributed to each individual.

The IRB number assigned to your research is IRB # CSM 08-103 and the expiration date will be July 9, 2010.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Melanie K. Felton, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Chair, Institutional Review Board
mfelton@csm.edu

Appendix C: E-Mail Consent Form

LEARNING COMMUNITIES CREATING MASTER TEACHERS
IRB # CSM 08-103

Dear Past and Present [redacted] College Master of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) learning community delivery model facilitator:

You are invited to take part in a research study because you are a past or present [redacted] College Master of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) learning community delivery model Facilitator. The purpose of this study is to research, explore, and define the role of the [redacted] College Master of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) learning community delivery model Facilitator. This research study is being conducted as part of the requirements of the researcher's Doctorate in Education (Ed. D.) program at College of Saint Mary.

You may receive no direct benefit from participating in this study, but the information gained will be helpful to examine strategies that may influence teachers in the pursuit of a constructivist, non-traditional Masters of Science in Education program in Curriculum and Instruction, and/or present information that may contribute to the development of teachers who will create student-led classrooms.

Should you decide to participate you are being asked to complete the following on-line, e-mail questionnaire, which should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Present learning community facilitators may also be asked to allow up to five observations during regular class meetings for up to four hours at a time. Your participation is strictly voluntary. Furthermore, your response or decision not to respond will not affect your relationship with College of Saint Mary or any other entity. Please note that your responses will be used for research purposes only and will be strictly confidential. No one at College of Saint Mary will ever associate your individual responses with your name or e-mail address. The information from this study may be published in journals and presented at professional meetings.

Your completion and submission of the questionnaire indicate your consent to participate in the study. You may withdraw at any time by exiting the questionnaire. This study does not cost the participant in any way, except the time spent completing the survey. There is no compensation or known risk associated with participation. Please read *The Rights of Research Participants* below. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the College of Saint Mary Institutional Review Board, 7000 Mercy Road, Omaha, NE 68144 (402-399-2400).

Thank you sincerely for participating in this important research study. If you have comments, problems or questions about the survey, please contact the researcher.

If you are 19 years of age or older and agree to the above please complete the e-mail with the subject of *Schiermeyer CSM Research Questionnaire* when you receive it and return it via e-mail back to the researcher.

Sincerely,

Brenda L. Schiermeyer
bschiermeyer@csm.edu

7000 Mercy Road •Omaha, NE 68106-2606 •402.399.2400 •FAX 402.399.2341 •
www.csm.edu

Appendix D: Rights of Research Participants Form

COLLEGE OF SAINT MARY

THE RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS*

AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT ASSOCIATED WITH COLLEGE OF SAINT MARY YOU HAVE THE RIGHT:

1. TO BE TOLD EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH BEFORE YOU ARE ASKED TO DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO TAKE PART IN THE RESEARCH STUDY. The research will be explained to you in a way that assures you understand enough to decide whether or not to take part.

2. TO FREELY DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO TAKE PART IN THE RESEARCH.

3. TO DECIDE NOT TO BE IN THE RESEARCH, OR TO STOP PARTICIPATING IN THE RESEARCH AT ANY TIME. This will not affect your relationship with the investigator or College of Saint Mary.

4. TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH AT ANY TIME. The investigator will answer your questions honestly and completely.

5. TO KNOW THAT YOUR SAFETY AND WELFARE WILL ALWAYS COME FIRST. The investigator will display the highest possible degree of skill and care throughout this research. Any risks or discomforts will be minimized as much as possible.

6. TO PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY. The investigator will treat information about you carefully and will respect your privacy.

7. TO KEEP ALL THE LEGAL RIGHTS THAT YOU HAVE NOW. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by taking part in this research study.

8. TO BE TREATED WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT AT ALL TIMES.

THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ASSURING THAT YOUR RIGHTS AND WELFARE ARE PROTECTED. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS, CONTACT THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CHAIR AT (402) 399-2400.

***ADAPTED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA MEDICAL CENTER , IRB WITH PERMISSION**

Appendix E: Schiermeyer CSM Research Questionnaire

Schiermeyer CSM Research Questionnaire

Title of Study: **Learning Communities Creating Master Teachers**

I am working on a dissertation for an Educational Doctorate from College of Saint Mary. The research focus is a qualitative case study on the role of the [redacted] College learning community facilitator. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research project. I want to remind you that your comments will remain confidential and anonymous.
Your E-mail Address (for follow-up only, if needed):

Please indicate which describe your current situation:
Gender:
Age:
Highest Level of Education:
Years as a Learning Community Facilitator:
Current Position (Outside of Learning Community):
Years of Teaching Experience (Excluding Learning Community):
Please feel free to respond to the following questions with as much detail as you are comfortable with providing, using as much space as needed.

1. How would you characterize the goal/mission of the [redacted] College learning community program?

2. How do you perceive your role as a [redacted] College learning community facilitator?

3. Describe facilitating in a learning community format.

4. Describe the [redacted] College learning community format.

5. What do you perceive as the goals for your learning community learners?

6. How do you relate to the learners?

7. Based on your experience, what common misconceptions do the learners have?

8. How would you characterize the entirety of the facilitators? (Knowledge, credentials, experiences, etc.)

9. What knowledge, attitudes, practices, and skills characterize an exemplary facilitator?

10. Describe the best practices that are used in planning, implementing, and facilitating a learning community.

11. Explain a strategy or method used to support collaboration and construction of knowledge among a community of learners.

12. What metaphor describes your style of facilitation?

13. Is there anything I have not asked you that you would like to add?

Please e-mail this completed survey back to **bschiermeyer@csm.edu**.
Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire, I know that you are a busy person and appreciate your valuable contribution to this study.

Brenda L. Schiermeyer, researcher

Appendix F: Member Check Form

Member Check Confirmation

December 2, 2009

Dear XXXX,

Thank you so much for participating in the e-mail research survey for the study I am currently conducting. I greatly appreciate your willingness to share your insights on this study - entitled Learning Communities Creating Master Teachers.

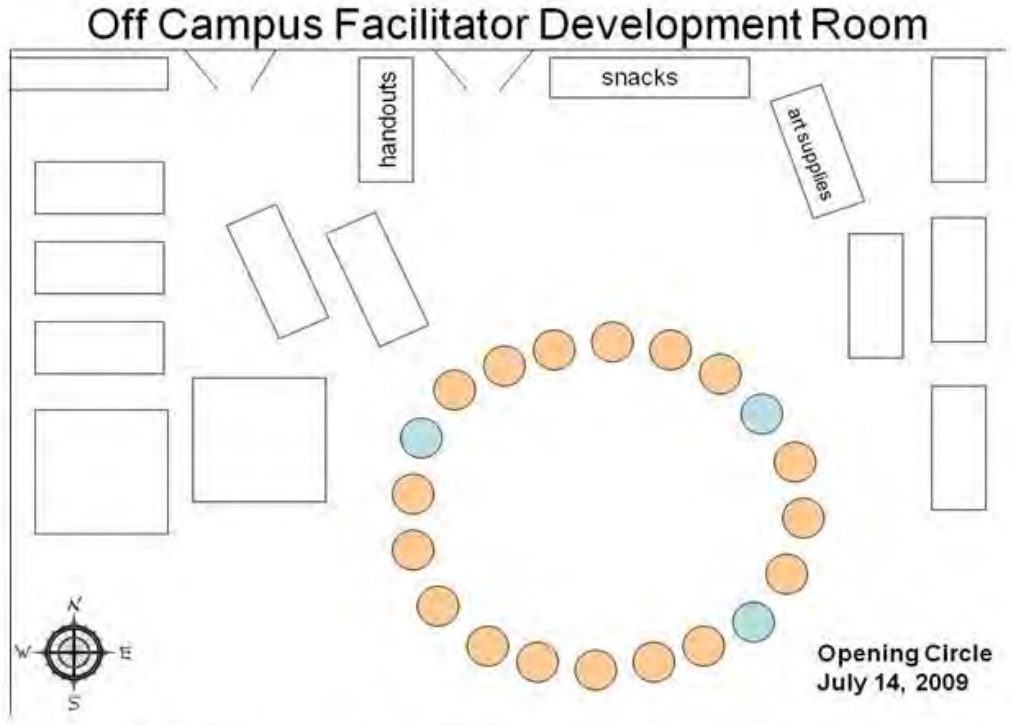
Enclosed you will find a copy of the survey questions along with the answers you provided. Also included within your answers are the coding (emergent themes) that I have assigned to some of the 'meaningful segments' for you to review. As part of the research process, it is important that participants confirm the accuracy and completeness my interpretation of your thoughts. Please read the manuscript, make any changes or corrections, and e-mail back to me. If you do not need to make any changes please return an e-mail confirming the receipt of the manuscript and acknowledgment in your belief that the transcript and coding is an accurate portrayal of your intentions. I would appreciate the return of the corrections or confirmation by December 11, 2009. If I do not receive and e-mail response from you by December 11, 2009, I will assume that your ideas are accurately portrayed in the coding.

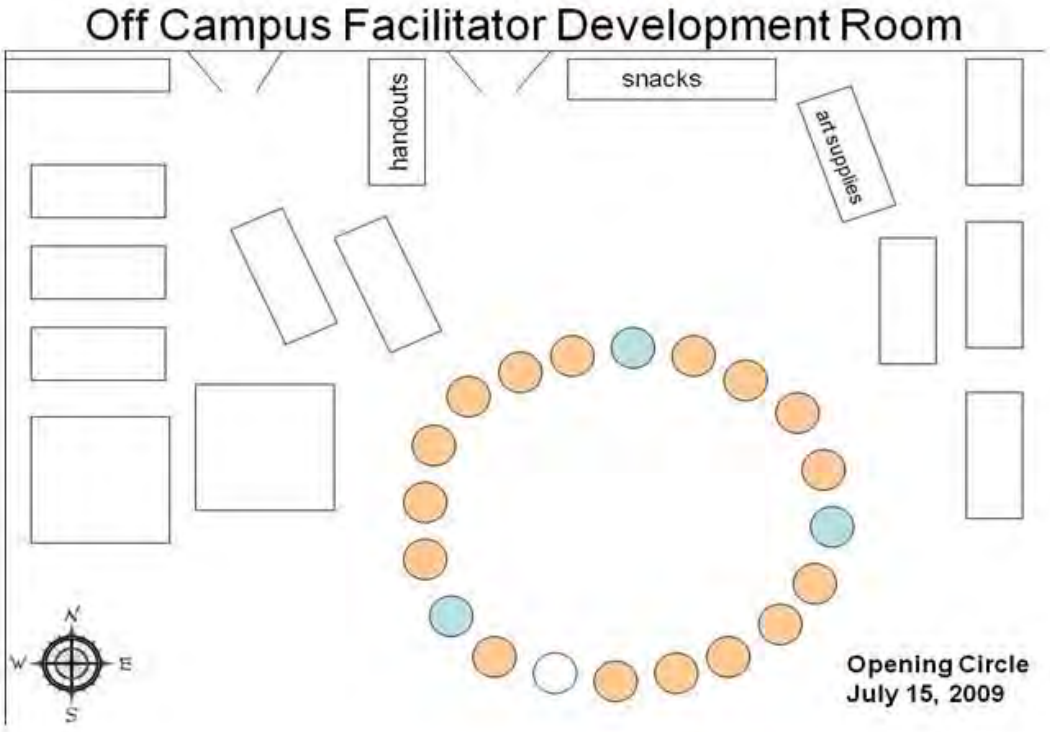
Again, thank you for your time and effort in participating in this research study. Your input is important. Please let me know if you have any questions or comments.

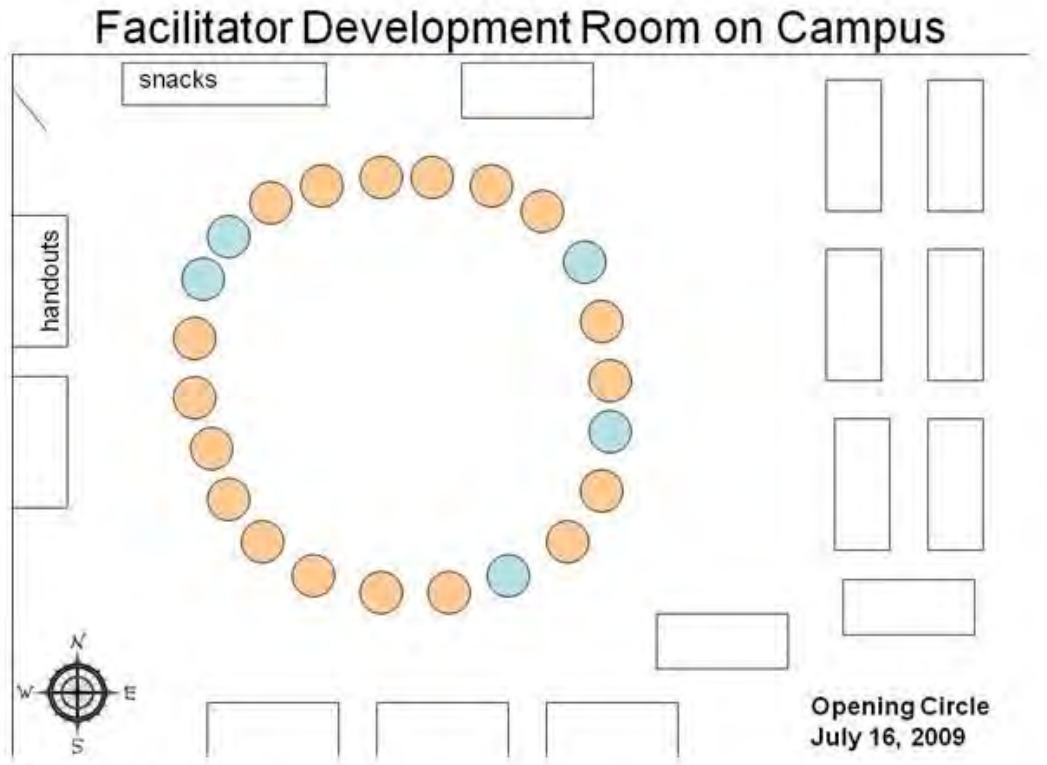
Sincerely,

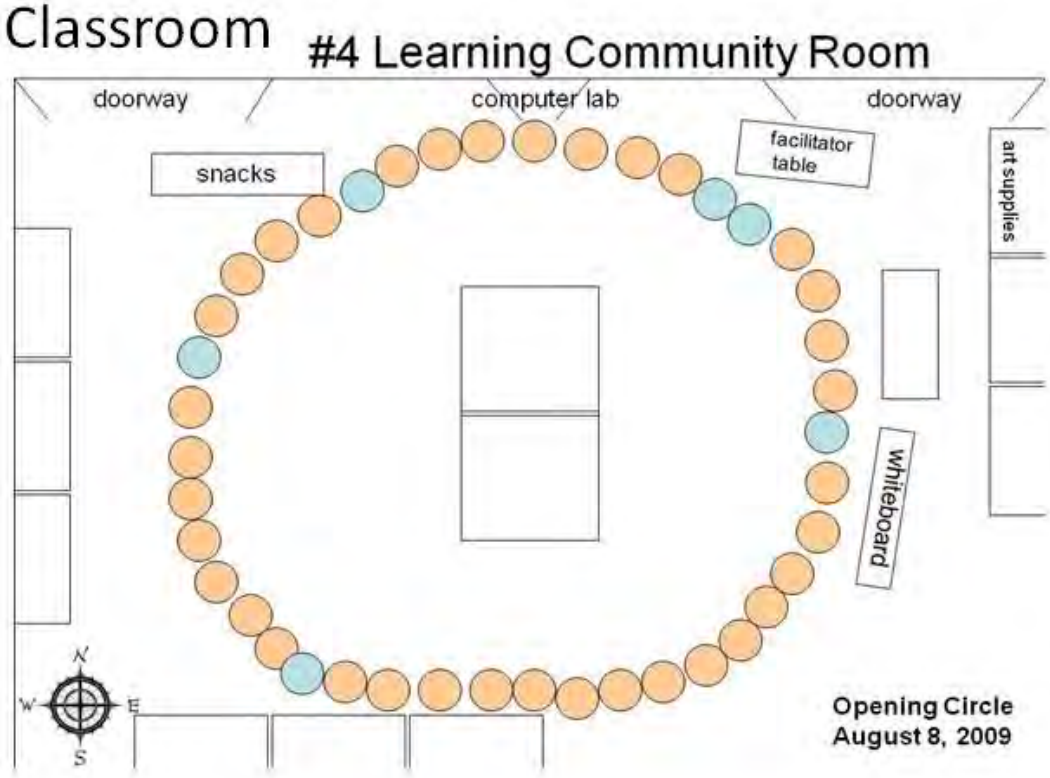
Brenda Schiermeyer

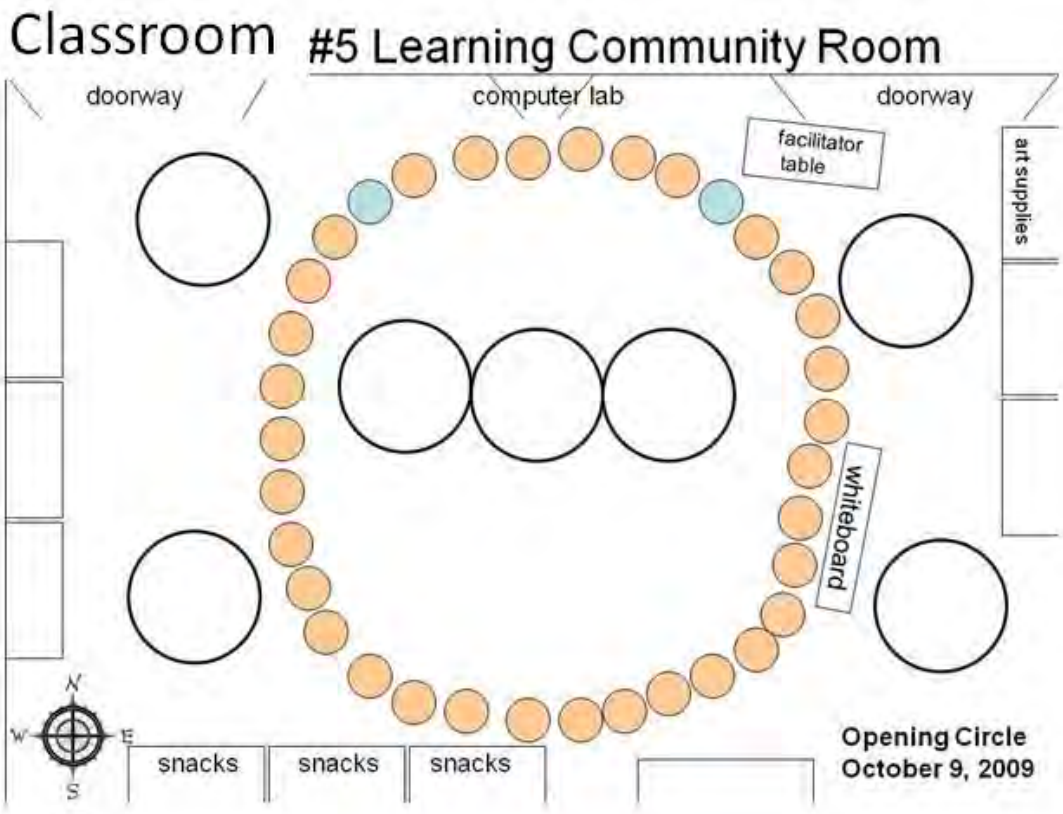
Appendix G: Classroom Diagrams

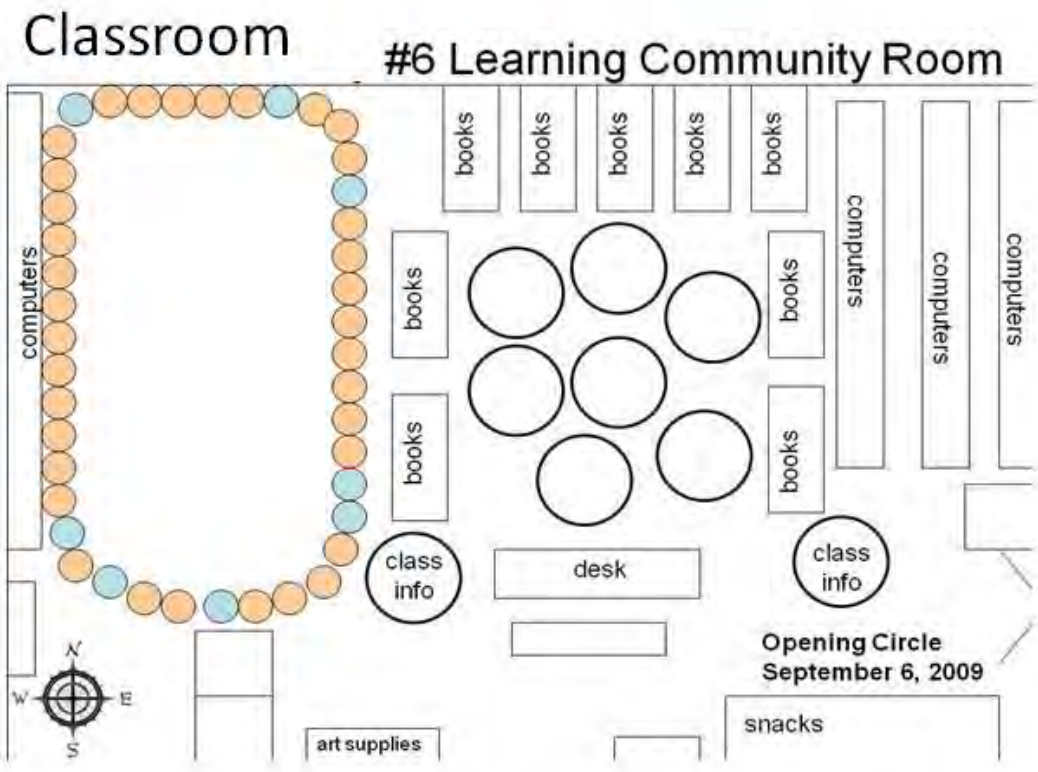


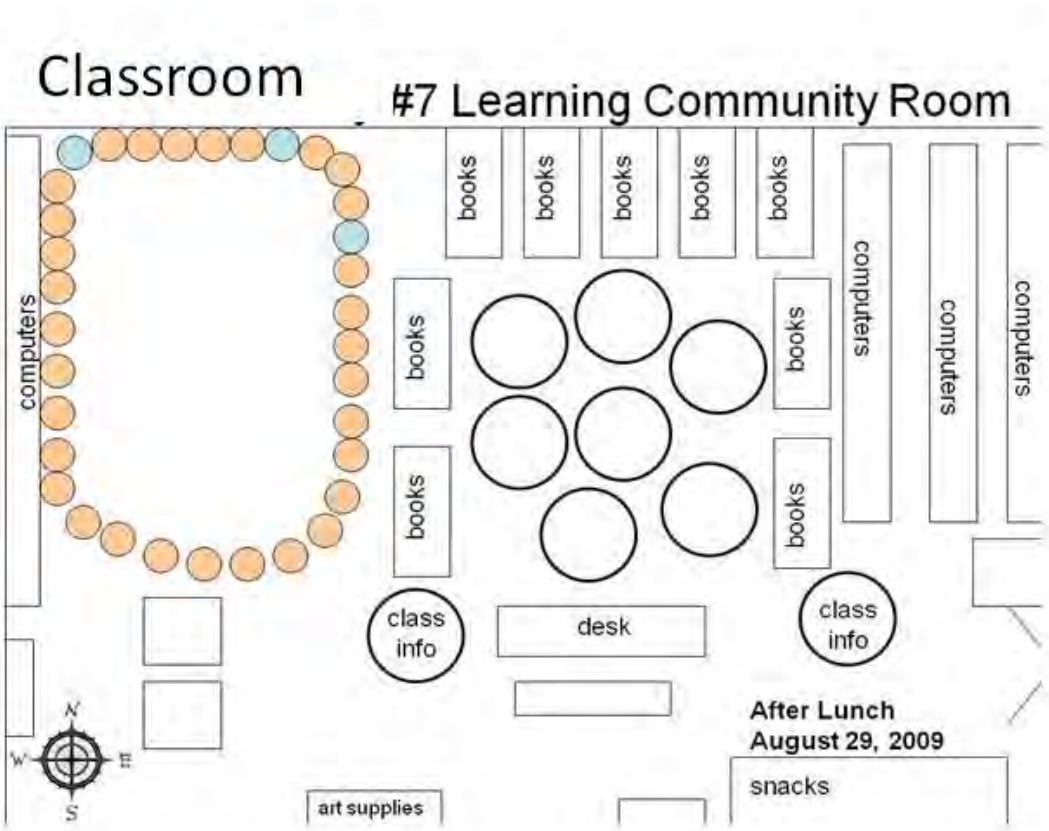



Facilitator Development Room on Campus
snacks
handouts
N
W
E
S
Opening Circle
July 16, 2009


Classroom #4 Learning Community Room
doorway
computer lab
doorway
facilitator table
snacks
art supplies
whiteboard
N
W
E
S
Opening Circle
August 8, 2009


Classroom #5 Learning Community Room
doorway
computer lab
doorway
facilitator table
art supplies
whiteboard
snacks
snacks
snacks
Opening Circle
October 9, 2009


Classroom #6 Learning Community Room
computers
books
books
books
books
books
books
books
books
books
computers
computers
computers
class info
desk
class info
Opening Circle
September 6, 2009
art supplies
snacks


Classroom
#7 Learning Community Room
books
books
books
books
books
computers
computers
computers
computers
books
books
books
books
class info
desk
class info
After Lunch
August 29, 2009
snacks
art supplies
N
W
E
S

Appendix H: Word Frequency List

Word Frequency	Count	Percentage
community	222	1.53
learning	199	1.37
learners	194	1.34
facilitators	156	1.07
group	143	0.99
model	109	0.75
students	98	0.67
delivery	88	0.60
experience	88	0.47
need	82	0.56
questions	76	0.52
process	59	0.41
think	59	0.41
concepts	58	0.40
time	57	0.39
read	55	0.38
team	54	0.37
knowledge	53	0.36
years	50	0.35
program	49	0.34
describe	49	0.33
teacher	48	0.33
classroom	47	0.32
college	45	0.31
teaching	45	0.31
asked	43	0.29
master	43	0.29
activities	43	0.29
circle	42	0.29
goals	42	0.29
others	42	0.29
work	41	0.28
back	40	0.27
graduate	40	0.27
education	39	0.27
everyone	38	0.26
book	36	0.25
help	35	0.24
ideas	35	0.24
practices	34	0.23
facilitation	33	0.23
share	33	0.23
planning	32	0.22
reflection	31	0.21
instruction	30	0.21
together	30	0.21
members	30	0.21
different	29	0.20
know	29	0.20
characterize	28	0.19
curriculum	28	0.19
facilitating	28	0.19
constructivist	28	0.19
current	27	0.19
write	26	0.18
school	25	0.17
learn	24	0.16
best	23	0.16
through	23	0.16
used	23	0.16
connections	23	0.16
support	23	0.16
development	22	0.15
doing	21	0.14
role	21	0.14
collaboration	20	0.14
professional	20	0.14
right	20	0.14
class	20	0.13
advisory	19	0.13
among	19	0.13
create	19	0.13
agenda	18	0.12
common	18	0.12
perceive	18	0.12
same	18	0.12
skills	18	0.12
wait	18	0.12
courses	17	0.12
important	17	0.12
outside	17	0.12

Appendix I: Facilitator E-Mail Survey Results

Facilitator E-Mail Survey Results:

Question 1. How would you characterize the goal/mission of the [redacted] College Master of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) learning community delivery model program?

Provide a masters degree program that suits the professional development needs of the teachers in the area.

I believe our goal in this program is to help teachers, both in schools and in other areas, to become more reflective in their practice, to help them better understand what they believe about teaching and learning, to help them gain and use a language that will help them express what they believe about teaching and learning, and to help them gain a renewed sense of energy, inquiry and risk taking within their own practice.

Create master teachers that are designing learning to meet the needs of their students.

The teachers are current on education issues, can do action research in their classrooms, and know how to look at research as a tool.

To foster a lifelong professional development experience through community building, values, diversity, reflection, leadership and collaboration.

I would characterize it as equal in rigor to other accredited institutions' masters curriculum; exemplary in applicability to classroom teaching, particularly instructional strategies and techniques. It is research-based and utilizes the most current acclaimed pedagogical concepts.

I believe the mission is to provide a non-threatening environment where learners are given the time to collaborate with peers in a variety of diverse groupings, to reflect on their learning, and to apply what they learn in their school settings. Learning is considered effortless and individualized.

I'm not sure I'm all that familiar with the exact goal/mission of [redacted]. I don't have it in front of me. I'd have to guess that the model of delivery

reinforces the positive characteristics I've experienced: inclusive, diverse, supportive, communal, self-directed, and yet rigorous.

To offer learners an alternative to traditional classes while providing an interactive, constructivist based, reflective learning situation

The Learning Community delivery model utilizes a constructivist framework which provides opportunities for participants to grow personally and professionally. In addition, the facilitators are co-learners with the members; this enables all involved to become reflective practitioners that teach and/or work differently based on their experiences in the two-year program.

Question 2. How do you perceive your role as a [redacted] College facilitator of a Master of Science in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) learning community delivery model?

My role is to collaborate with other facilitators to provide resources and experiences that enhance the professional development of teachers in the region. In addition, as faculty member at [redacted], I served as advisor and instructor of record for community members. As such, my role is to see that the needs and requirements of the college and the graduate department are met and act as a liaison between the community members and the college. I also see myself as theoretical and conceptual foil to the practitioners among the facilitators as well as the facilitator with the most access to resources and the time to use them. My role is to help candidates process readings and activities in such a way that they gain in understanding of the principle concepts of learning community. Processing often takes the form of Q & A, critical thinking exercises, dialogue, and reflective writing. Herein lies the "process" that is such a large part of community.

I believe my role is that of designer of learning experiences that will hopefully help learners move forward from whatever point they begin. My role requires me to push learners with questions, stories and experiences so that they think deeply about teaching and learning. Facilitation also requires collaboration with other facilitators to create experiences that will help members of the community learn about themselves, about other community members and about the concepts that [redacted] requires as well as the concepts, ideas, and questions learners wish to pursue.

The facilitator is allowed to be a leader and a student at the same time. The facilitator doesn't answer straight out questions but guides students to learn and question what they are doing.

I must be able to collaborate in many ways, be a lifelong learner, have empathy for others, help the learners see the big picture in their quest for a masters, share responsibility in planning and facilitating, support one anther.

I considered myself a guide toward reflective thinking and a resource to other educators looking for fresh, valid ideas to improve instruction and assist students in learning. I model life-long learning and strive to be a motivational force for the teacher-learners.

I see myself as a guide on a journey. It's my responsibility to provide environments and experiences for learning, based on the needs of the learners. On-going assessment of guides the focus and the direction of the ideas we address. Additionally, a vital part of my role as facilitator is to ask questions that push the learners to a point of disequilibrium.

As a learner and then veteran facilitator, my role is to facilitate the current needs of educators the learning community as well as uncover the best practice models, i.e. community, constructivism, etc.

A facilitator guides, questions, and interacts with learners through activities designed to broaden their knowledge of education and make the learning personal and meaningful

I am a co-learner in the process. It's my role to model constructivist practice and reflection. I work alongside my co-facilitators to design learning experiences that meet the needs of all learners. As a facilitator, I seek to demonstrate a caring perspective, professionalism, and a vision for "what we can become" rather than what we are.

Question 3. Describe facilitating in a learning community delivery model.

Collaborative planning, collaborative facilitation of weekend activities, and collaborative assessment and evaluation of learning. Facilitation is a learning process in itself, one in which there is a sharing of ideas and knowledge among the facilitators but also between and among various

members of the community. Facilitators are, by definition, members of the community, Members who possess a knowledge of the process and a certain amount of knowledge of the learning process and teaching in general.

Facilitation is a lot of behind the scenes work. It is knowing the concepts at a deep level and continuing to learn about them with learners. It is accessing materials and coming up with broad experiences that will help learners think, take risks, and reflect on their practice. It is scaffolding experiences so that learners can make connections to them. It is asking questions in ways that will move the connections that they make to new levels. It is providing support and opportunities for fun and community building throughout the process.

The facilitator is allowed to be a leader and a student at the same time. The facilitator doesn't answer straight out questions but guides students to learn and question what they are doing.

Facilitating is being able to demonstrate knowledge to self and others, respect each others diversity within the community, demonstrate active listening, willing to change, accepts making mistakes and learns by them, encourage others to walk the talk, trust the process, collaborate, values shared leadership.

It takes team work. If one facilitator monopolizes the delivery, the community develops a lack of trust for the other facilitators. Teams are put together with great thought, considering the diverse talents and personalities - as well as teaching/learning styles – of each member of the facilitation team. All voices need to be heard in order for the experience to be maximized for teacher-learners. Sometimes this does not happen. Sometimes one facilitator dominates. That is problematic and should be addressed by mentors and college directors. Facilitating means listening more than talking, opening doors to new ways of thinking, helping educators try new strategies that may seem foreign to them, and taking the time to self-educate and become very well-read on current issues and trends in education. Facilitators should be experts on curriculum and instruction, but must know how to help teacher-learners construct the same knowledge for themselves. They must be able to resist the temptation to "teach" them how to teach.

I find myself listening more intently, because I'm trying to really understand where the learners are. I also am always thinking of questions to probe further, or to get them to see things from a different perspective. I plan experiences to engage the learners in a big idea, listen to them, and ask questions!

It is difficult to describe the whole process, but initially, facilitators go through facilitator training during summer and usually once a month throughout the school year. Next, teams are chosen with mentors. This team works together to generate a "big picture" for the two years as well as creating monthly agendas—all flexible and subject to change depending on the needs of the community. As a facilitator, I do a lot of planning and reading to keep the community moving from month to month as well as a lot of reading and commenting on journals. As action research deadlines approach, I aid writers in submitting a professional document. As a member of the team, I also deal with lots of other issues like assessing learners' commitment to program and community values and often having uncomfortable conversations (but necessary.)

A facilitator guides, questions, and interacts with learners through activities designed to broaden their knowledge of education and make the learning personal and meaningful

Being a Learning Community facilitator is a personally gratifying and awe-inspiring experience. I have the opportunity to learn alongside my co-facilitators, as well as the learners. In addition, I strive to model key concepts such as constructivism, community, and reflection.

Question 4. Describe the [redacted] College learning community delivery model.

Learning community is a means of delivering a master of science in education at [redacted] College. Candidates meet 10 weekends per year for two years. There are a set number of 2, 3, and 4 hour courses that are experienced in a totally integrated way. Learners are required to obtain 6 credits of electives that bring the credit total to the traditional 36 of most masters degree programs. The courses themselves are less important than are a set of conceptual understandings that have been derived from graduate outcomes prescribed by the college and the literature on professional development. A book list of required readings has been developed with

these principal concepts in mind. The books are not normal texts but education literature probably mostly designed with individual professional development in mind. The weekends consist of activities and discussion designed to enhance learner understanding and allow for learners' individual construction of that meaning and understanding. This hopefully leads to an artful and thoughtful application of the concepts to the actual practice of teaching.

The program calls for three major products that the learners develop individually. These are the professional development plan (pdp), the portfolio, and the action research project. No one of these is more important than the others. They all inter-connect, the pdp including elements of inquiry, the gathering of artifacts of development, etc. There is a good deal of choice involved in the knowledge that is constructed in the program. Learners are encouraged to set their own learning and teaching goals and the topics of their inquiry. Their reflections, although guided to some extent, are their own and go their own direction.

Another facet of learning community format that is important is that the setting and the format enhances the learners' ability to network with other teachers. Group processing of ideas is accompanied by a lot of discussion as to their implementation. A relaxed and collegial atmosphere is key to this social and cooperative learning.

Also key to the implementation of strategies that come from the main concepts is the fact that learning community occurs over a long enough period (2 years) so that candidates are able to use their class rooms as laboratories to test and become comfortable with the concepts.

It is an integrated program that brings together concepts from traditional curriculum and instruction master's degree programs, learner needs and interests, and the idea of the importance of community. Learners who participate in this model will experience collaboration in various small groups, individualized goals and outcomes, the ability to hold each other accountable rather than by a professor, and opportunities to conduct action research in their classrooms or places of work.

This is a user friendly model that allows friendships and collegiality to build over a two year process.

This is our mission statement from our Learning Community: [redacted] Graduate programs facilitate the development of dynamic professional educators who collaborate for the benefit of self and others, school, community, and the professional. This mission is accomplished through inquiry, reflection, excellence in teaching and learning, and regional service.

Frankly, this model as it was originally adopted from [redacted], Inc. was exemplary. It offered facilitation teams and teacher-learners unrestricted avenues for learning opportunities. It exemplified true community – including all stages at various times – from chaos, to pseudo, to true community. It was a unique and extremely valuable venue for collaboration among the professional educational community. Unfortunately, as time has passed and new leadership has been introduced, I have seen some very serious issues arise that are currently being ignored. [The main issue includes the hypocrisy of facilitators and mentors who profess the value of true community, but fail to walk the walk. In the past two years, I have witnessed facilitators gossiping behind each others' backs, squabbling about power issues instead of acting like team members, and refusing to communicate openly with each other. In many instances, I have sent e-mails that have been entirely ignored by my teams. It is hard to convincingly preach about building community among teacher-learners when you cannot even manage to do it among facilitation teams.] If these critical concerns are not addressed – and soon – the foundation of this learning community delivery model, and in my opinion its value, will be compromised – possibly beyond repair. Word of mouth has been the most common and successful means of getting teachers involved in the program. As poor facilitator and teacher-learner experiences develop, word of mouth will likely dissipate, and could lead to the program's demise.

Learners have the opportunity to talk with others and feel support and belonging in a community. All course concepts (big ideas) are integrated throughout the two-year program, so that learners can make connections among all the big ideas. The educators are given several opportunities to synthesize what it means to become a Master Teacher through the five propositions set forth by the National Board of Teacher Certification. Additionally, they experience academic literature review, and write a scholarly article to be submitted for publication.

The model thrives on reflection, application of best practice, action research, and professional development.

A facilitator guides, questions, and interacts with learners through activities designed to broaden their knowledge of education and make the learning personal and meaningful

The Learning Community model is a framework for learning. As members become proficient with Curriculum & Instruction, they learn within a caring, reflective community. Strong relationships are built through a variety of small groups (Advisory Groups, Job-Alike Groups, Generation Groups, etc.) which often extend into the years following graduation from the program.

Question 5. What do you perceive as the goals for your learning community delivery model graduate students?

The goal is professional development and better educational opportunities for the students in the region. They also get a raise.

I would like the students to gain a language and ability to communicate their ideas about teaching and learning, gain an ability to try new ideas as well as the ability to assess the implementation of those ideas, gain an ability to read and conduct research, gain the ability to question themselves as well as their students, gain the ability to understand and get to know their own students at deep levels, and gain a renewed attitude towards their own students and teaching itself.

Create master teachers that are designing learning to meet the needs of their students.
The teachers are current on education issues, can do action research in their classrooms, and know how to look at research as a tool.

To become a lifelong learner.
Use the constructivist practices in their own jobs.
To collaborate with others.
To have a professional development plan that is ongoing.
Accept diversity in groups and have empathy for others situations.
Expect professionalism.

I believe most of them start the program initially to get a pay increase (teacher wages need all the boost they can get). Many also admit to having long-time personal goals of achieving a masters degree. What I enjoy most about the program, is watching their goals change. Before the end of the first semester, most of them have emerged as passionate teachers who had previously been beaten down by the system – a system that doesn't always value them as they deserve, nor equip them to do their jobs in exemplary way. They begin to develop confidence as they share success stories from their classrooms. They become problem solvers and collaborate to help each other maximize student learning and develop a love of learning in their students. They seek research, read books and journals, discuss them, reflect on them, debate them, and slowly begin to change the climate of their classrooms. Then they begin sharing with others in their building. All of this takes on a ripple effect so badly needed to help teachers become the instructional experts students need and deserve. My goal is for all of the aforementioned to happen – and time after time – case after case – it does.

I want all members of the learning community to earn a Masters Degree that is meaningful and relevant. At the end of their two-year program, I hope that they will be conscientious educators who have strong conviction in their practice, and who are leaders in their school settings.

I hope that each learner will use the opportunity that [redacted] & the facilitators have crafted in this model to improve as educators and members of their schools & communities.

To deepen and broaden their knowledge level of the educational setting as it relates to them

Design and implement a constructivist classroom/work environment.
Build caring relationships among fellow classmates.
Become a reflective practitioner.
Read professionally.
Conduct action research.

Question 6. How do you relate to the graduate students?

As a member of the community who leads but learns alongside the other members.

I work to get to know them outside of the school arena, I try to support their goals and aspirations, and I try to communicate with them efficiently and effectively.

I went through this program as a graduate student myself. I also did a traditional master's program, so I feel that I can relate to what they are going through at [redacted]. Also, I am a life long learner so I like to learn and read along with the students.

I do not try to talk above them (not that I can do that anyway). I try to listen to them and help them to understand what it is they are trying to accomplish. I can relate to their lives because I work in the public setting and those are the issues that we face everyday.

The most important thing to remember when relating to students is the root of that word "relate" – as in "relationship". The learning community format is unique and achieves much of its success because one of the critical differences between it and a traditional graduate format is the effort and time invested in building community. People are unwilling to collaborate with strangers. In order to collaborate, there must be a personal and professional trust. Why would you take the advice of a stranger, or worse yet, someone you deem untrustworthy or ineffective at their job? I relate to the graduate students by sharing my stories – successes, failures, things I dearly wish I had done differently. I get to know them by having them tell me about their families, dreams, what's going on in their lives. I let them know I care and I am interested in them as people first; teachers second. I don't want them to see me as the model for what a teacher should be. I want them to see me as one of them – a teacher, in the trenches just like them, facing the same obstacles, and finding solutions to them so students can excel. I want them to see that the obstacles will always be there, but hopefully, with more of us working toward the right goals, we will wipe out some of them, and those we cannot eradicate, we will deal with in the best way we can. The bottom line is to do whatever it takes to give our students the very best education we can. I want to relate to them at this level – teachers working together with students' needs at the forefront.

I feel that it's very important to give learners an opportunity to get to know each other, and to build a foundation for a strong community. That trust that develops is so important in helping them to think about my questions as opportunities to think more deeply. Humor is important to me as well, as I

believe it helps us not take ourselves too seriously in an academic setting. Most importantly, I listen to what they say, and validate their thoughts by providing feedback and asking questions. Each learner is treated as a valuable part of the community.

In a community of graduate students, often the stereotypical group dynamics emerge: class clown, teacher pleaser, etc. They are all still there—but older! Some are supportive one day and frustrated the next. Others do minimal work to get by, but often learn in spite of themselves. So, all in all, it is difficult to answer this question. It is a good thing that we are in teams! That way, learners have a choice and an ear. And yet, facilitators communicate with each other to find out the best way they can help each learner.

As a practicing educator I can relate to their joys, frustrations and situations

*I build a caring relationship with each of them. I do this by connecting with each of them throughout the weekend and/or between weekends through emails, phone calls, etc. Know them as people, not just students.
*Offer insight as I read their monthly reflections, action research paper, and when conducting various projects throughout the weekend activities.
*Listen. Ask questions. Listen again.
*Allow learners to come to their own conclusions, but offer gentle nudges along the way.
*Model reflective practice. Write when they write.
*Be an enthusiastic, supportive and encouraging facilitator. Invite an attitude of “We can do this!”

Question 7. Based on your experience, what common misconceptions do you encounter with the graduate students in this setting?

Most learning community students believe that they must direct, coerce, and teach students.
They think I will do the same to them.
They think that they need to have someone tell them what to learn.
They think they have to have my approval before they can believe their own growth.
They expect the whole thing to be laid out for them before they start.
They think the best way to motivate learners is through positive reinforcement.

I think they often believe they cannot get a master's degree or that they aren't worthy of a master's degree.

The most common misconception that I have encountered is some students feel they can slide by without doing all of the reading. They are only hurting themselves in the long run. They think that since there are no tests, they don't have to do the work/reading. The lack of work/reading shows up in their input, reflections, etc.

Some want to be spoon fed and have everything spelled out for them; timeline, expectations, etc.
The younger the group the less experience they have to draw from which is very beneficial to the experience.

The most common misconception concerns the rigor of the program. Most of these teacher-learners begin by thinking this is going to be a cake walk because there are no "formal" tests. WRONG! It doesn't take long for them to realize they will be working just as hard – if not harder – than many graduate students in traditional programs. The difference is they are willing to do the hard work because all of it is immediately applicable to what they do in their classrooms. They can implement what they learn right away and see the results, making adjustments as needed. Plus, they are confident about applying their learning because they begin to feel like experts throughout the course of the work. Another common misconception is that they are just in this for the pay. Before they get very deep into the program, most of them admit, they are doing this for the students – they just didn't realize it at the time they enrolled.

My misconceptions of them? That they'll be fluent writers who are responsible for their own learning. Sometimes they have to be redirected, just like younger students. Also, some have to really work to want to be a part of a community.
Their misconceptions? That there will be a rigid syllabus with a strict timeline. Many of them have expressed the desire to "work ahead." Initially, self-accountability is a little daunting to some of them as well.

Oh boy. . . one of the biggest I've encountered was commitment to program of study and the community values. This particular learner didn't appreciate the core value of learning community of "community" and was absent or tardy a lot. If a learner is absent, it not only affects that learner, but also

other learners miss his or her voice and insight. So, the misconception is the maturity of a learner—thinking that graduate students should be more dedicated.

Learners often share that they have never been asked for their opinions or thoughts on a topic, nor have they been called on before to share their talents

Attendance is somewhat important.
Action research is too hard—I don't know how to collect and analyze data and draw conclusions.
It's easy to get an "A".

Question 8. How would you characterize the entirety of the facilitators? (Knowledge, credentials, experiences, etc.)

A happy mix of experienced teachers who are dedicated to teaching and learning. All have some important credentials and knowledge to bring to the mix.

I am not quite sure what you mean here. My answer is that I think there is a nice mix of facilitators in our group. I think there are facilitators who have a lot of experiences in the classroom, those who have studied and understand many theories of teaching and learning, those who have facilitated for a long time and those who are just beginning. All of these things put together make for a nice team if all are willing to appreciate and value differences.

I believe they must have a mix of college professors that have the pedagogy and are "read". You also need to have the teachers that are in the trenches; working with kids and dealing with all the issues of today.

All of the facilitators have graduate degrees – either masters or doctorates. Experiences are very diverse. Some are experts on writing, others on action research, instructional theory, or leadership. Still others are well-versed in school law or technology. All of these concepts must be mastered for successful completion of the program, so having a diverse team is of utmost importance. As far as knowledge goes, entire dissertations have been written on that very subject; it is almost too vast to contemplate in the context of one interview question, but if I consider it in general, I would say all facilitators are knowledgeable in their content or they would not have been selected as members of a team. Unfortunately, as constructivism is the

key concept of the learning community format, it is regrettable that a few of the facilitators preach it, but do not know how to model it when facilitating. Some of them proclaim teachers should not act as "sage on the stage" but rather as "guide on the side"; but they do this in the form of lecture to the teacher-learners – an incongruity that, believe me, does not go unnoticed by team or graduate students.

Superb group of people who are dedicated to true learning. Facilitators are a diverse group of personalities. Continual learners. Enthusiastic about their practice. Approachable. Team-oriented.

I'm always humbled at facilitator development and in wonder of the people get to work with. The mixture of professors and class room teachers really fuels this program—it is authentic and unique. Authentic since our learners know that its facilitators ARE in the trenches of public education (or private) and yet our models interests are secure since we have professors reading and doing research, etc.

The facilitators I know are dedicated, reflective, professional, and helpful

*One of the strengths of the program is having a facilitator that is connected to the college and 1-2 facilitators that are "in the field". It's a great foundation for a powerful partnership!
*Often, the college connected facilitator is skilled in the constructivist philosophy and the 1-2 "in the field" facilitators are learning "constructivism" as they facilitate.
*Having graduates of the Learning Community delivery model serve as facilitators is powerful. However, it's also beneficial to have facilitators that are not graduates of the Learning Communities. Diversity is good!

Question 9. What knowledge, attitudes, practices, and skills characterize an exemplary facilitator?

Open mind, empathy, questioning skills, a belief in the goodness of people and the ability of people to chart their own courses, a thirst for knowledge, honesty, respect, and all the values that usually are identified in learning communities.

I think that there are many kinds of exemplary facilitators. Some bring a great sense of humor and that often makes the community a great place to

be. Some bring a great ability to ask questions while others have the ability to connect theories to experiences for the students. I do think, however, that all facilitators need to really understand constructivism at a level that allows them to design learning, enabling learners to construct knowledge. They need to be able to ask questions and speak with a group of adults. They need to be able to write well and help others write well. Finally, I believe facilitators need to be committed to the learning community process.

A person that can be a leader when needed or a fellow student, asks the right questions, believes that discovery is crucial in learning, open and honest, has an educator's heart, knowledgeable on the current events in education and lastly has passion for teaching.

Provide an environment where all learners can succeed.
Value a diverse group and what they bring to the community.
Have high expectations for self and learners.
Learner focused setting.
Build relationships.
Must be able to work with people. (People skills)
Be able to commit to the time involved to plan and collaborate for the success of the community.

Good listener, adept at providing resources, concerned and caring of teacher-learners, well-read in instructional strategies, team player, aware of individual teacher-learners' needs, honest, a true advocate of the community format, a true teacher advocate, a true student advocate, genuine in what they say and do, open to others' insights, a model of life-long learning, willing to conduct action research in order to promote it among teacher-learners in the program, dedicated to their facilitation team, able to make learning fun, a constructivist, humble

Skills: Very strong writing skills. Thoughtful listener. Adept at asking open-ended questions. Organized.
Attitudes & characteristics: Continual learner. Does not demand attention. Relates well to people.
Knowledge: Human educational development. Constructivism. Classic view of learning. Assessment. Classroom management.

When I facilitate, I keep in mind one of the facilitators I had when I was going through the learning community model to get my masters, and so, I try

to epitomize a lot of her: quiet, probing, inquisitive, knowledgeable, innovative, creative, & positive.

They are lifelong learners who want to foster that in others --see #8 (the facilitators I know are dedicated, reflective, professional and helpful)

An exemplary facilitator is caring, reflective and welcomes divergent thinking. In addition, they plan engaging weekends, think critically, and are flexible. Exemplary facilitators have PASSION for the work they do and LIVE constructivism. Learners view them as approachable and committed to the learner's success.

Question 10. Describe the best practices that are used in planning, implementing, and facilitating a learning community delivery model.

Collaboration and a willingness to compromise and share. Openness to new ideas. The ability to deal with ambiguity and suspend judgment.

I think best practices include collaborating, making sure you know the learners, and helping them to construct their own knowledge rather than give it to them. Questioning and helping the learners to take risks is also vital when thinking about planning, implementing, and facilitating in a learning community.

We plan and work as a team. We share ideas, frustrations, joys, etc. as a group. There is no lecturing, but time to present a topic, discuss, discover and file learning in a way that it can be retrieved again.

Focus on learner goals and needs
Help them to "think" about their learning.
Help them to connect all the concepts they are learning.
Help them to become intrinsically motivated.
Provide direction to the program without telling them what it is they need to know.

Planning, implementing, and facilitating cannot occur without a strong camaraderie between all team members. You cannot fake liking someone. You cannot work as a team if you don't like all members. There must be respect between all team members. One of the things that came forth most often when I asked my team this very question is that they wanted to be able

to have fun together. Planning over a meal is sometimes a good strategy. All members need to be flexible with their schedules and agree on when they will meet to plan – and for how long. Compromise is critical. Each person must be allowed to do what they do best. Everyone needs a place to shine. Teams must celebrate together and take the time to reflect regularly about what worked, what didn't, and how to improve.

Authentic assessment, brain-based learning/teaching strategies, experiential learning, opportunities for reflection, a clear and common understanding that all learners can and will improve their performance, personalized instruction.

I'm still struggling with this, but I think it is a balance between the magic of trusting the process and the necessity of thoughtful planning.

Teamwork, strong listening skills, effective communication, capable of synthesis and proactive dispositions

*Planning the weekend, then stepping away for quiet reflection. Coming back to the agenda at a later time and making necessary revisions.
*Sharing the responsibility before, during and after the weekend with their co-facilitators.
*Listening more than speaking.
*If needed, changing "mid-stream" if that's what's needed during the weekend to help the learners be successful.
*Reading voraciously so that the content, questions and insights can be incorporated into the Learning Community model.
*Taking time to debrief after the weekend—and including the mentor in the planning, implementing and facilitating.

Question 11. Explain a strategy or method used to support collaboration and construction of knowledge among a community of learners.

This is really the same answer as above. The point is, I don't think there is any specific strategy or method needed. All that is needed is the stuff above.

I think the different groups we create help support collaboration and construction of knowledge. I think the experiences that we facilitate help them as well. Some of the learners have never experienced a classroom that is constructivist. During one of our first weekends, we asked the learners to come up with things they wanted to learn more about during our two years

together. One of the learners just sat and kind of stared into space. I went over to her and asked her if she was okay. She said, "No one has ever asked me what I wanted to learn before." Yikes! Teachers teach the way they were taught and that is really difficult to overcome. The learners in learning community must experience for themselves the power of collaboration and construction of knowledge if we want them to do similar things in their classrooms. In short, I think everything we do is meant to support collaboration and construction of knowledge.

The wagon wheel—there are two circles, one inside the other. The two circles face each other. The students share information or thoughts with the person across from them in the other circle. After a time, the students rotate the outside wagon wheel and start sharing with another member of the community.

The advisory groups are created for the purpose of understanding diversity and establishing relationships within the group. We also have job alike groups, generation's groups, and many other groupings that help them to collaborate with a variety of individuals for the common good of the group.

Opening circle – everyone shares a classroom success story from last month. Job alike groups – time to sit and share in an informal fashion among people of like core groups

We utilize a wide variety of groupings in which learners can collaborate. Advisory groups help to hold each other accountable and support each other. Job-alike groups provide an opportunity to give and take fresh ideas that can be immediately used in their school settings. Job-alike groups can also discuss topics of mutual concern. Generation groups provide the opportunity for learners to question and analyze their own educational experiences.

A lot of new concepts are introduced via a formative book. Learners see the big picture of the concept first and delve in the ambiguity of the concept. Facilitators then let the learners "play around" with ideas at weekend and in doing so, help learners clarify content of the book in relation to concept. After the weekend, learners are encouraged to meddle with the concept during the next month and write a reflection connecting and reflecting in at a personal level.

questioning strategies that guide learners to deeper and broader understanding

The Advisory Group is a powerful process. This group, built upon diversity, offers support to the learner. Their job is to invite continued growth, provide accountability and support, and care for their members. Advisory Groups often become a foundational support throughout the process—both during and after the Learning Community experience.

Question 12. What metaphor describes your style of facilitation, and why?

I'm not good at metaphors.

I think I am a see-saw as a facilitator with one side of the see-saw being learner directed and one side being facilitator directed. My see-saw leans greatly toward the learner directed side, but I also believe that if I can create disequilibrium through questions, stories, and planned experiences the learners will construct knowledge. So, I am a see-saw who goes back and forth between pushing the learners and letting them think and reflect. It is a back and forth if you will.

I feel like an assistant coach. The students are the ones making the plays but I help drive them in the right areas to further their learning.

My style of facilitation is like a warm bath; inviting and soothing but yet invigorated when it comes to an end.

I am a key because I open minds and doors to opportunities for learning.

I feel like a leisurely tour guide. There's a clear beginning and a clear end. I know all the cool places to see. I have a strong background knowledge of the material. I walk with the learners on their journey, but what they take from and make of the experience is theirs.

I'm a farmer. I gamble with the weather and God (trusting the process) in hopes that my crop (my leaners) will get "it" but I do everything in my power to ensure that "it" happens by irrigating, fertilizing, etc. (The irrigating, fertilizing, etc. is like the planning.)

A fishing guide. He provides an opportunity for the fisherman to have the most success but does not catch the fish for them. In other words, as a Learning Community facilitator, I want to provide the experiences that will yield the best results for the learner. He/she trusts that I will take them on a journey that leads to success. If they have questions, they ask and I share insight. However, I don't often answer without asking a question in return. This encourages the learner to think for themselves and trust their "gut", building confidence along the way. When the learner is successful, I feel satisfaction, knowing I helped create the conditions that led to this. That's also the aim of the fishing guide.

Question 13. Is there anything I have not asked that you would like to add?

I think facilitation is a lot harder than it looks. Many times people think that facilitation is just about letting people do whatever they want. It is a very complex process filled with decision-making, crafting experiences, and questioning. It constantly changes with new learners.

I am not the same person I was before becoming a Learning Community facilitator. Because of my experience as a facilitator, I listen more than I speak, I reflect more deliberately, and I consciously seek diverse thinking. I also find that I ask more challenging questions and pay attention to the answers. I embrace the philosophy—there is more than one right answer.