

LEARNING COMMUNITIES, LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS, AND LEARNING COLLEGES

Terry O'Banion

A learning revolution appears to be spreading rapidly across the higher education landscape. Triggered by the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, that warned "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity," the revolution was energized by a second wave of reform reports that began appearing in the early 1990s. These reports focused the reform efforts on a common theme: to place learning first. A 1993 report, *An American Imperative*, called for "putting student learning first" and "creating a nation of learners." In 1994 the Education Commission of the States urged a reinvented higher education system that would reflect a new paradigm shift centered on learning. In 1995 the Association of American Colleges and Universities issued a paper titled, "The Direction of Educational Change: Putting Learning at the Center."

Community colleges and their leaders have also joined the revolution. Myran and Zeiss predict "we are entering a period of profound and fundamental change for community collegesWe are becoming learner-based colleges." George Boggs says "The mission is student learning. The most important people in the institution are the learners. Everyone else is there to facilitate and support student learning." The Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges in its 1995 New Basic Agenda announces "Student learning is essential to the social and economic development of multicultural California."

And a handful of community colleges, soon to number in the hundreds, are busy redrafting statements of values and mission, redesigning organizational structures and processes, developing outcome measures, and applying information technology, all in the name of making their institutions more learner centered. As community colleges embrace the learning revolution, there is some understandable confusion regarding a number of terms that have appropriated the word "learning" as part of their nomenclature. Terms in current use include learning communities, learning organizations, and learning colleges.

Learning Communities

A curricular intervention designed to enhance collaboration and expand learning, a learning community "purposefully restructures the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning, as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students." The structures are also referred to as learning clusters, triads, federated learning communities, coordinated studies, and integrated studies; but the term "learning

communities” has emerged as the favorite descriptor. When the same 30 students enroll for nine credit hours in a sequence of courses under the rubric of “Reading, Writing, and Rats” they have enrolled in a learning community.

The first learning community was offered in the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. There have been numerous variations on the learning community in higher education for the last 70 years, and the first such experiments in a community college occurred at Santa Fe Community College (Florida) in 1966. More recently, the community colleges in Washington state, Daytona Beach Community College (Florida), and LaGuardia Community College (New York) have been leaders in developing new and expanded forms of learning communities.

Learning communities are powerful curricular innovations and certainly help revolutionize the learning process, but they are not a necessary construct in the learning revolution. Learning communities would have emerged with or without a learning revolution; it is not likely they would have by themselves created a learning revolution. In some colleges in which they exist, the rest of the institution maintains business as usual in which learning is not always first. But since learning communities do exist, it would be wise to incorporate them into the architecture of the current learning revolution.

Learning Organizations

Garvin suggests that “A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.” The goal is to create a “community of commitment” among the members of an organization so they can function more fully and more openly to achieve the goals of the organization.

Peter Senge chartered the territory of the learning organization in his 1990 book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Senge describes the learning organization as one in which “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.” According to Senge, a learning organization depends upon five disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning. Through these disciplines, a college will flatten its organization, develop models of collaboration for faculty and administrators, develop processes for evaluating and reviewing its goals, and involve all stakeholders in learning better how to do their jobs.

A number of community colleges are attracted to the concept of the learning organization and have begun to apply some of the processes developed by Senge and his colleagues. Because they are familiar with the language of the learning organization, many community college leaders assume they are

engaged in creating learning- centered institutions as a result of their interest in and compliance with the processes of the learning organization. It is quite possible, however, for a college to reduce its hierarchy, open the information flow, focus on whole systems, work together in teams, and develop flexible structures designed to enhance the continuing involvement of all stakeholders and still retain models of classrooms, lecturing, and teacher-as-sage as has been true in past practice. In some ways, a learning organization is designed for the staff of the institution, while a learning-centered institution is designed for the students. There is no guarantee that a learning organization will become a learning-centered institution placing learning first for students unless those values are made clearly visible as the primary goal of a learning organization.

The basic concept of the learning organization, however, provides a powerful foundation on which to build a learning-centered institution. The concepts of the learning organization are philosophically compatible with the concepts of a learning-centered institution, and the processes of learning organizations are compatible with the processes of learning-centered institutions.

Learning Colleges

A new term has emerged in the last several years, specifically tailored for the community college, that reflects the goals and purposes of the learning revolution in action. The term “learning college” is much more useful in describing the comprehensive nature of a community college committed to placing learning first than are the terms “learning communities” and “learning organizations.” The learning college places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners any way, any place, any time. The learning college is based on six key principles:

The learning college creates substantive change in individual learners.

The learning college engages learners as full partners in the learning process, assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.

The learning college creates and offers as many options for learning as possible.

The learning college assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.

The learning college defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.

The learning college and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners.

The key challenge for those who wish to launch learning colleges is to redesign the current learning environment inherited from an earlier agricultural and industrial society—an environment that is time bound, place bound, efficiency bound, and role bound. Roger Moe, Majority Leader for the Minnesota State Senate, has described higher education as “a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy.” Education today is not very different than education was one hundred years ago.

The learning revolution aims toward creating a new culture and a new architecture of education, a new system in which the learner is placed at the center of everything that occurs in the educational enterprise. The learning community is a curricular innovation that can help achieve that purpose when it is included in an institution-wide plan. The learning organization is a concept that contributes to an institutional culture in which discussions regarding student learning are more likely to take place. The learning college is a comprehensive approach incorporating both learning communities and learning organizations in helping community colleges to fulfill the aims of the learning revolution which is to place learning first.

Terry O'Banion is executive director of the League for Innovation in the Community College. The principles and examples outlined in this abstract are detailed in his new book, *The Learning College*, to be published in late 1996 or early 1997.

Volume 9, number 8

August 1996

[HOME](#) | [SEARCH](#) | [SITE MAP](#) | [TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING CONNECTIONS \(TLC\)](#) | [LEAGUE STORE](#) | [WEBMASTER](#)

League for Innovation in the Community College

4505 East Chandler Boulevard, Suite 250 · Phoenix, Arizona 85048 · Voice: (480) 705-8200 · Fax: (480) 705-8201

Copyright © 2003 League for Innovation in the Community College. All rights reserved.