

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP AND GROUP FACILITATION IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Lori J. Robison, LISW, ACSW, McMaster Associate Fellow

Learning communities are an integral part of the model for learning that the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity has adopted. In particular, the Cambodia Learning Community has evolved in such a way as to become critical for preparing students and faculty for scholarly research in a diverse culture while maximizing the opportunities for learning, professional development, and service in the context of collaborative partnerships. Jo Ann Burkhardt (2008) states that the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity “has embraced the concept of learning communities as an instructional practice that promotes deep learning that can lead to community benefit. McMaster Cambodia Learning Communities integrate intellectual and social growth through intentional interactions between faculty and students; they also continue to advance the creation of new knowledge to improve the human condition” (p. 70).

Group work is not a new concept in higher education. However, collaborative learning with teachers as advisors and facilitators has experienced a resurgence over the past decade (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Smith, 2001). Smith (2001) describes “a renaissance of interest in Dewey” (p. 2). She reports a renewed interest in the ideas of other educational leaders such as Meiklejohn and Tinto, founders of the learning community concepts that are reforming student learning across college and university campuses. Smith notes, however, that the effectiveness of learning communities relies on the leadership, and that leadership styles vary greatly as do the organizational settings in which learning communities are found. She cites fear and anxiety as contributors to faculty reluctance to become involved. “This anxiety is partly fear of the unknown but it is also a concern about whether they are effective, whether they will work in their fields and whether it fits their own teaching style. Most people want to do well” (Smith, 2001, p. 7).

Gerald Corey (2008), a skilled practitioner and educator of group counseling, finds that it is important to develop a leadership style that fits each person’s personality and strengths, whether it emphasizes thinking, feeling, or action. He recommends remaining “open and to seriously consider the unique contributions as well as the limitations of different approaches” (p. 39). Corey cautions against imposing one’s own agenda, treating members inequitably, and masking one’s authenticity behind the role of “leader.” He identifies key attributes of an effective group facilitator as someone who encourages members to focus on identifying and expressing feelings

and expectations openly and plainly to one another; who works to create a climate of safety; supports members as they take risks and try new behaviors; fosters a member-to-member rather than member-to-leader interaction style; encourages open expression of conflict; helps members integrate what they are learning in the group and in their everyday lives; and encourages members to engage in ongoing assessment to determine whether changes should be made to the group (Corey, 2005, p. 257).

Smith and MacGregor (1992) state, “wanting to be a facilitator of collaborative learning and being good at it are very different things. As with all kinds of teaching, designing and guiding group work takes time to learn and practice” (p. 8). The 2007-2008 Cambodia Learning Community benefited from the experiences and refinement of teaching and learning strategies of previous years. Though structured much like a task group as defined in social work literature, it has achieved a balance of attention to task and attention to the socio-emotional needs of its members. The importance of this balance is underscored by Toseland and Rivas (2005), who contend that “[e]xclusive attention to task leads to dissatisfaction and conflict within the group. Exclusive attention to members’ socioemotional needs leads to the group’s failure to accomplish its objectives and goals. . . . Therefore the worker is placed in the precarious position of attending alternately to task and socioemotional needs to maintain the group’s optimal functioning (p. 56).

The 2008 Cambodia Learning Community’s balanced approach included debriefing sessions on an almost daily basis to support the individual work of group members toward goal attainment, as well as to support their socioemotional well-being. Roger Greenaway’s (2000) *Active Reviewing Cycle* was useful in structuring these sessions. His model for debriefing features a “four zone” form of inquiry in this order: fact, feelings, findings, and futures. Opening fact questions focus on what happened and what the critical moments were. Questions about feelings focus on responses to experiences, including awareness of points of controlling or expressing emotions. Findings center on what has been learned and any regrets or missed opportunities. Futures focus on personal effects and what can be taken forward.

Greenaway (2004) is also a proponent of utilizing smaller groups for preliminary reflection before debriefing in the larger group. He explains that “when the final part of the debriefing process takes place in the whole group, it tends to be more honest, insightful and significant if it is the result of high quality small group reflection rather than the rambling of dominant individuals in the large group” (p. 8). Utilizing Greenaway’s approach, our



Cambodia Learning Community often made use of small working groups that reported back to the larger group. This proved effective for problem-solving on issues related to task. The approach was also for issues of interpersonal and cultural adaptation. One of the unique challenges of the learning community was to attend to the possibility of “culture shock,” the problem of adapting to a new physical and cultural environment.

Learning communities could also benefit from an understanding of the stages of group development. Such knowledge could help a facilitator anticipate and respond to the changing needs of a group. Generally, the leader must take a more active and directive role in beginning stages and become less active as the group progresses to an optimal level of functioning (Toseland & Rivas, 2005). While there are numerous models of group development, Tuckman’s (1963) stages of Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Transforming seem most applicable to the Cambodia Learning Community.

In the Forming stage, the leader assists the group in planning, organizing and convening. Members begin to get to know each other and seek to find their “fit” and establish their purpose. As feelings begin to emerge, some members may remain distant or offer resistance. The leader can encourage participation and interaction among members. Activities can be purposely structured to enhance this stage. Facilitators should be aware that safety and trust are important socioemotional needs for members at this stage.

As member differences start to emerge, tension and conflict can arise. The leader can assist by establishing norms of respect, tolerance, and cooperation among members in the Storming stage. When members find their roles and begin to assume responsibilities, Norming becomes evidenced and the group moves into the Performing or Working stage. Group cohesion increases at this stage, and there is a focus on task accomplishment (Toseland & Rivas, 2005). The leader is less involved in directing group activity as members learn how to involve themselves more spontaneously and realize they must take responsibility for themselves (Corey, 2008). The leader continues to model expected norms and behaviors for group members and intervenes only when necessary to direct group process or resolve group conflict.

The final stage, Transforming, returns to reliance upon the skills of the leader as the group prepares for ending. The role of the facilitator is to assist members with the task of transferring what has been learned in the group to their outside environments. "The consolidation of this learning takes on special meaning as a group moves toward termination; this is a time for summarizing, pulling together loose ends, and integrating and interpreting the group experience" (Corey, 2008, p. 107). Facilitators should not ignore feelings of sadness at this stage. Members may need guidance to bring their work to a close, to review accomplishments, and to identify the impact of the experience.

In summary, learning communities will continue to be a presence at institutions of higher education. Documented evidence of their effectiveness (Zhao & Kuh, 2004) will increase their attractiveness to administrators and thus be encouraged among faculty and students. Though group work is not an experience for everyone, faculty who are interested in the challenge of leading a learning community have many helpful tools at their disposal. Basic knowledge of effective group facilitation and group development will enhance the leader's ability to create a unique collaborative learning experience. Those who participate in a successful learning community treasure the experience as a time of sharing, growth, adventure, and accomplishment.

REFERENCES

- Burkhardt, J. (2008). Learning communities to improve the human condition. *The McMaster Journal*, 3, 66-70.
- Corey, G. (2008). *Theory & practice of group counseling* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Greenaway, R. (2004). Debriefing by numbers. Retrieved on November 28, 2007 from www.thiagi.com/pfp/IE4H/september2004.html
- Greenaway, R. (2000). The active reviewing cycle. Retrieved on November 28, 2007 from <http://reviewing.co.uk/learning-cycle/question.html>
- Smith, B.L. (2001, March). The challenge of learning communities as a growing national movement. Paper presented at the Association of American Colleges and Universities Conference on Learning Communities, Providence, R.I.
- Smith, B. L. & MacGregor, J.T. (1992). What is collaborative learning? Washington Center for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education. Retrieved June 9, 2008 from <http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/pdf/collab.pdf>
- Toseland, R. & Rivas, R. (2005). *An introduction to group work practice* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson/ Allyn & Bacon.
- Tuckman, B. (1963). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384-399.
- Zhao, C. & Kuh, G.D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115-138.