

**“Students don’t realize the value of learning
communities until later”
- or do they?**

Insights from focus groups conducted after the learning community

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Presentation Overview

- TLCs at IUPUI
- Methodology
- Participants
- Qualitative Survey Items
- General Focus Group Themes
- Specific Focus Group Questions
- Implications
- Questions/Comments?



Overview of Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) at IUPUI

Basic elements of TLCs:

- Cohort of 25 freshmen students
- 3 or more linked courses
- Instructional team
- Interdisciplinary theme & connections
- Learning beyond the classroom

Current Programs:

- 40 offerings serving just under 1,000 students
- Program offerings in Liberal Arts, Engineering & Technology, Science, Nursing, Art, Social Work, Education, Business, Physical Education, Public & Environmental Affairs & University College.
- More information available at tlc.iupui.edu



Methodology

- Employed a stratified random sample by gender and ethnicity.
- Conducted 14 semi-structured focus groups lasting an hour. Students were also asked to complete a short questionnaire.
- IRB approved \$15 incentive (provided using university issued IUPUI JagTags)
- Conducted one semester or one year and one semester after the students participated in a TLC.
- All focus groups were transcribed verbatim.
- Used Atlas.ti qualitative software to code and identify emergent themes in an effort to provide rich and detailed insight into students' unique experiences.



Participants

- **48 total participants**
- **Gender**
 - Female: 37
 - Male: 10
 - Missing: 1
- **Ages**
 - Ages 18-19: 28
 - Ages 20-21: 20
- **Ethnicity**
 - African American: 7
 - Asian American: 1
 - Latino/Hispanic: 5
 - White: 34
 - Other: 1

Participants: Majors Represented

- Exercise Science
- Nursing
- Pre-Nursing
- Psychology
- Fine Arts
- History
- Mechanical Engineering
- Religious Studies/Philosophy
- Elementary Education
- Radiation Therapy & Nuclear Medicine
- Supply Chain Management
- Radiography/Medical Imaging
- Mathematics
- Forensics & Investigative Science
- Accounting and Finance
- Psychology/Pre-Med
- Undeclared
- Criminal Justice
- Biomedical Engineering
- Art Education
- Management & Human Resource
- Journalism
- Finance/ Supply Chain
- Computer Science
- Motorsports Engineering
- Social Work
- Elementary Ed.
- Social Work/Law
- Political Science

Results: Selected Qualitative Survey Items

Student definitions of TLCs

- What does the term “themed learning community” mean to you?
- Which theme was most prominent in students’ responses?
 - Theme/common interest
 - Cohort of students
 - Block of classes
 - First-year program/transition from high school

Results: Selected Qualitative Survey Items

Student definitions of TLCs

- Examples:
 - “A group of students that have a similar interest in a major. The students develop bonds because they attend many of the same classes and discuss issues concerning life as a new college student.”
 - “Being involved with similar students with similar interests to become more familiar with people & the college experience”

Results: Selected Qualitative Survey Items

What do students call the TLC?

- What was the name of your TLC?
- True or False?
- The majority of students conveyed:
 - Affiliated courses, academic schools or departments
True
 - The theme or title
False
 - Some degree of uncertainty in their response
False

Results: Selected Qualitative Survey Items

What do students call the TLC?

- Examples:
 - “Forensic Science”
 - “Nursing B104 (had B104, Soc K100, Eng 131)”
 - “Going green”
 - “International Studies?”
 - “not sure, it was the Business TLC?”

Results: Selected Qualitative Survey Items

Do they remember you?

- What were the names of some of your instructors?
 - True or False?
 - More than 90% of students named at least one professor
True
 - Less than half of the students identified multiple professors
False
 - The majority of students referred to professors by their first names
True

Results: Major Focus Group Themes

Cohort/Friendships

- “The best part was it helped you know get to know people... cause in other classes you’re your just your there you go to class and you leave it. It **helped me build friendships...**”
- “They are like my **big support group**... compared to other people...and other classes I think it’s so much harder to make a connection with them especially like with the bigger classes.”
- “**Interacting** with others students. I think with our TLC...my group there’s like 20 people in the class and we had like four or five classes together so we were kind of closer than all the others students at IUPUI so I think it **helped you develop close relationships** with the students in your class that will help you further along.”
- “It really helped create sort of a **support system** for yourself. And like I now have a group of people that I can go to and say heh have you taken this class are you in this class you know how did we do that for this research paper cause that would be really helpful for me now. And I was just able to **meet so many great people** as a matter of fact **my roommate is someone that I met in my themed learning community.**”

Results: Major Focus Group Themes

Integration

- “I was in international studies we had to pick a country and write about that country but...the English since we were in English she'd wanted us to take a different thing like a special thing with the country so I took what **I learned about the country as a whole like you know education, statistics**, that kind of thing and put it into a paper and more themed paper for English like the theme would be some kind of social problem in that country. But I took things I learned about just about education, GNP, that kind of thing from international studies and put it into a paper for English...”
- “I think there was a **comprehension** thing - like you read something and then we had to write about it and like you just look at this picture - and you have to describe like what you saw...”
- “Sociology helped a lot **by knowing different perspectives** of the different communities where then when we did write in our nursing journals about that article in a given week that we knew more about it that it didn't tell us by taking Sociology that you know but you don't really think about on a daily basis and it just made you have a broader – could just write easier cause you would know a broader information about the given subject.”

Results: Major Focus Group Themes

Transition Assistance

- “I felt that my first week of school went a lot smoother...I actually had two or three friends come here from my high school and their all asking me where this building was or how do you get to here and like I already knew my way around and I kind of knew what to expect - I liked that and my other friends who didn't take the TLC were just lost and like freaking out because it was like their first year of college...”
- “I would have been one lost puppy. That's for sure (laugh). Like I wouldn't know like what's going on on campus or like where my classes are where some of the resources centers are I wouldn't know anybody. Well I probably would know a few people but just I don't know I it made is so much easier very very good experience.”
- “I wouldn't of known anybody when I got school my first day..I wouldn't of known where to go because I didn't have to ask anybody I just knew where to go cause we had like a little scavenger hunt that we had to participate in so we learned the campus...And I also wouldn't of known you know how to have a better idea of what the professors would expect from me as far as school work is concerned.”

Results: Major Focus Group Themes

Bridge

- “I think it makes you act more professional because you got that first well for **Bridge** you have first like week to get to know everybody and **your more comfortable** and then a themed learning community where you have the same people over and over again you get like a bond I guess you just feel really comfortable and you can express yourself more.”
- “I felt that they kind of like we had like these icebreakers at the beginning like during **bridge and stuff they really got to or I really got close to all my TLC classmates that way.** And like in a way they kind of did break the ice. They helped us out and they kind of shared with us like the do’s and don’ts of college and I found that really helpful.”
- “We went to the Indiana Museum of Art which was really cool because I hadn’t been there since I was really little and the first day of **Bridge** we took a walk downtown - and that just killed me but it was **nice to like learn about the city and that was really fun.**”

Results: Specific Questions Out of Class Activities after the TLC

- How did (your participation in out of class activities) compare to your experience during the spring semester when you were not enrolled in a TLC?
- Themes
 - More out-of-class experiences in TLC courses
 - Continued engagement

Results: Specific Questions

Out of Class Activities after the TLC

- Examples:
- “Yeah - I still see some of the people that I had in the themed learning community in my classes for this semester... We also don't take as many field trips this semester. I've only taken one and that was in my education class...But I have noticed that the classes that I've taken this semester do correlate with each other. I don't think the professors mean for it to happen but I do notice like similarities like in Astronomy we'll be talking about something and then in my logic philosophy class... like something in there will match up with astronomy and education so things do bounce around in my different classes, and like I've said I still see some of my classmates from the themed learning community and we still keep in touch (with those) that I don't see in class.”
- “...part of the student organization (for) engineers...we had a soccer tournament in the last week and I'm, I'm always like involved on campus and now. I know a lot of people and I try to get in contact with my friends from the themed learning community and try to make them to get involved...”

Results: Specific Questions

Connections with Instructional Team & Students

- Themes
 - Formed lasting friendships
 - Continued relationship with Academic Advisor
 - Engaged in informal conversations with TLC professors
 - Enrolled in classes with members of TLC cohort
 - Maintained connection with student mentor

- Some students enrolled in subsequent classes with TLC professors
- Some students mentioned attending events together

Results: Specific Questions

Connections with Instructional Team & Students

Example:

“All the people in my TLC not only are we interconnected through like facebook and we all have each other’s numbers but a lot of us are getting into radiography together – Actually Kate that you mentioned, she’s getting into radiography our class too. So its gonna be kind of weird having...our mentor...in the class with us, but...like you were saying **(our professor) is always there if you need him or you pass him have a 10 minute conversation just how’s it going you know and (our advisor) is always there for you so if you need something just pop her a question ... Most of us still communicate with each other and go to the SAPB movies** and stuff like that, so and if not you know you’ll see them with a group of friends and then you’ll kind of they’ll introduce you to their group of friends so you get to branch out even more if you get that opportunity...”

Results: Specific Questions

Do students realize the value later?

- There is some research suggesting that students may not fully realize the effects of their first semester experiences such as themed learning communities until much later in their academic careers. What do you think of this statement? Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why?
- Themes
 - 74% of students agreed (many noting they would realize it even more later)
 - 11% students disagreed, indicating they realized the benefits while enrolled
 - 9% of students were unsure
 - 6% of students didn't know

Results: Specific Questions

Do students realize the value later?

- Examples:
- Agree:
 - “I agree with that a lot, because I was like hey why do I have to take Ethics – I don’t need this for Nursing like I mean obviously Nurses have to be ethical, but I don’t think I need to take a whole class on it and why do I have to write this law paper? I’m not going into law and like why do we have to do this and like now I’m like ohh my gosh like I’m so glad I had to do those things because they’re so helpful now and they just helped me meet people and if I wouldn’t have been in a TLC like I feel like I wouldn’t have gotten as close to as many people.”

Results: Specific Questions

Do students realize the value later?

- Examples:
- “I agree 100% because when I was in the TLC I thought this is pointless. I don’t know why I have to write this 15 page paper. I don’t know why I have to take this scavenger hunt. I kind of know what’s going on... and then the Spring right after it finished I thought OK There were those 15 page papers I had to write and I thought oh well I’m already used to writing and doing all the research required for the papers and getting to know people feeling comfortable in front of strangers – I had already had that because of my TLC... I guess yeah I appreciated it more This is why they required you to be here at 9 in the morning. This is why they required a paper. This is why you had to sit and listen about what was on campus because now no one’s telling you. There’s nobody reminding you what’s on campus where the library is... There’s nobody telling you that anymore. And I thought – oh well I already knew this because of my TLC and I was so much more appreciative once I was out of it.”

Results: Specific Questions

Do students realize the value later?

- Examples:
- Disagree:
 - “I guess I disagree for myself I can already see the differences... from my first semester and...I don't know how being farther out would change how I think about it right now.”
 - “I disagree... I don't agree with that. I think for me personally I thought that was important after my second semester freshman year.”

Implications

- Students seem to react positively to LC interventions that facilitate positive connections with other students, faculty members, and advisors; equip them with skills necessary to effectively transition to college; and help them make connections between courses.
- LCs seem to provide opportunities for students to form lasting friendships.
- While some students realize the value of LCs while enrolled, many students may not realize the benefits of LCs until they have had the opportunity to compare LC experiences to experiences without LCs.
- Following the LC experience, students seemed to miss the out-of-class experiences and other supportive aspects of LC environments. Campus leaders could provide other mechanisms for students to stay connected.
- Summer Bridge programs may provide a sense of readiness for engaging pedagogies offered the LC experiences.

Questions/Comments?

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