Engaging Students in Life-Changing Learning

Royal Roads University's Learning and Teaching Model in Practice - Revised Edition


Royal Roads University
Victoria, British Columbia
Cultivating Belonging: Living Leadership in Communities of Learning

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Abstract

Learning Communities are an important element of the Royal Roads University (RRU) Learning and Teaching Model. Cohort members in Royal Roads University’s Master’s of Arts in Leadership (MAL) program remain connected and continue to support one another’s career development years after they have graduated. In this chapter, we explore the intentional design in MAL that serves to build multiple opportunities for belonging, giving rise to these long-standing relationships. After a brief review of the adult learning literature and the concept of Learning Communities, we present several examples of students accomplishing their learning needs through their cohort. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of these activities for the student, the cohort, and for faculty and staff members.
We identify activities that support the cohort as a learning community and offer examples of learner-focused approaches.
Introduction

The idea of a Learning Community is a key element of the Royal Roads University Learning and Teaching Model (RRU LTM). As a Learning Community, individuals learn and “work together as a cohort for the duration of the program” (Royal Roads University, 2003, pp. 15-16). Specifically, according to the RRU LTM, a Learning Community:

- allows students to experience a strong sense of connectedness, collegial support, and shared experiences;
- increases access to the professional knowledge of colleagues and peers;
- exposes students to a diversity of views, experiences, perspectives, and scholarship; and
- creates a broad base of readily available learning resources. (Royal Roads University, 2003, p. 16).

We frequently find that cohort members remain connected for years after they have graduated, which means that these relationships extend well beyond the duration of the program. Often, students continue to support one another as they develop in their professional careers.

In the MA-Leadership (MAL) program in the School of Leadership Studies (SoLS), these Learning Communities do not happen by accident. Rather, they are the result of intentional processes and structures that we explore below. These processes and structures serve as the foundation for the cohort model and support the belief that learning happens in relationship (Short, 1998).

Written by a First Residency Team Lead (Beth) as well as two former Program Heads for MAL (Catherine and Niels), the purpose of this chapter is to identify and explore the multiple Learning Communities that support the cohort model. The case we are exploring here, specifically the MAL program in SoLS, is significant in that it explores the sense of belonging that results from the intentional cultivation of these Learning Communities throughout the duration of the program. The chapter opens with a review of literature related to learning and the concept of Learning Communities, then shifts into a review of several examples of how students work with their cohort to accomplish their learning needs. It closes with a discussion of the implications of these activities for the individual and the collective cohort of students, staff, and faculty members.

Learning and Belonging in Community

Students coming to the MAL program typically say they are interested in learning and by the time they graduate, often report they have gone through a transformative learning process in the program. Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock (2012) described “transformation as an outcome [that] refers
to a deep and lasting change, equivalent to what some people term a *developmental shift or a change in worldview*” (p. 184). The MAL program has been carefully designed to support transformations in perspective, or worldview, including the development of critical awareness of one’s earlier assumptions as constraints on perceiving and understanding the world, as described by Mezirow’s (1991) concept of transformative learning. As Mezirow remarked, the development of critical awareness of one’s assumptions has the result of “changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (1991, p. 167). As such, the MAL program builds on a new experience of learning for many of our adult learners entering the program.

Students frequently come into the program with expectations of the classroom environment based on a more traditional, top-down, teacher-centred model of education (i.e., Freire’s infamous banking model, 2000/2005). However, they quickly find that our program involving adult learning principles and facilitated, experiential group processes creates deep bonds among student colleagues in a cohort. As their confidence increases with their increased understanding of the MAL learning model, students begin to experience an occasionally emotional transformation of their earlier perspectives. Two elements quickly become apparent: firstly, they see how learning “in this way might not simply be an anecdotal experience in one class, but also a useful life skill” (Etmanski & Barss, 2011, p. 24); secondly, students realize they are sharing significant learning experiences with a group of other mid-career adults similarly interested in learning, who each have considerable experience in the very topic they are interested in learning more about—namely, leadership.

From its inception, contributors to the development of the MAL program have understood that people learn better when they feel that they belong. As Block (2008) suggested, community cannot exist without people experiencing a sense of belonging; therefore, a Learning Community includes learning in the context of belonging. For this reason, in addition to the holistic integration of adult learning principles and practices, we have historically placed, and continue to place, a strong emphasis on building community among our students from the start of their program. Recognizing that people respond differently to different scenarios and have different learning preferences (Kolb, 1984), the MAL program offers a diverse range of options for experiencing community, with the intention of offering the possibility of belonging for everyone.

In addition, Stallard and Pankau (2008) identified that “people have six psychological needs that they expect will be met in the workplace: respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, personal growth, and meaning” (p. 20). While we aim to meet all of these psychological needs, the focus on
belonging to community allows students to (a) understand “that one’s own stories are partial, local, limited, or bounded,” and (b) “[realize] the value of remaining in the tension between standing one’s own ground and being profoundly open to the other” (Pearce & Pearce, 2003).

As a result, the act of belonging is co-created through sharing stories and understanding oneself more deeply. It is through this understanding of self in relationship to others that we can teach effective and holistic leadership.

Communities of Learning and Communities of Practice

In the existing literature, the concepts of Communities of Learning (CoL) and Communities of Practice (CoP) are frequently conflated. Although CoLs are at times narrowly defined in the educational literature “as a formal cross-disciplinary approach, involving the restructuring of the curriculum to enhance active, collaborative learning,” (Wastawy, Uth, & Stewart, 2004, p. 333) they are typically associated more generally with the sharing and co-creation of knowledge. Likewise, the concept of a CoP is typically associated with Wenger’s (1998) work (see also, Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Described as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise,” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139) CoPs have become part of organizational and educational discourse for the past two decades.

The concept of CoPs has become more nuanced over the years as new technologies have emerged and the body of related literature has expanded. However, in his original association of community with the idea of practice, Wenger (1998) claimed that the association of these two words “yields a more tractable characterization of the concept of practice—in particular, by distinguishing it from less tractable terms like culture, activity, or structure [and]…defines a special type of community—a community of practice” (p. 72). Wenger went on to assert that the three characteristics of CoPs were mutual engagement (i.e., people doing things together in the midst of complexity and diversity), a joint enterprise (i.e., in the context of heterogeneity, mutual responsibility, and diverse interpretations), and a shared repertoire (i.e., of stories, artifacts, historical events, concepts, and discourses) (pp. 73-85). Moreover, Hydle, Kvalshaugen, and Breunig (2014) have added to Wenger’s original conception to assert that “a view of CoP that extends beyond the local understanding to consider relational ties in terms of spatial and relational proximity is needed” (p. 610). In other words, the more traditional understanding of community as only comprising a place-based group of people has evolved and communities are now understood to exist in virtual settings as well. As such, the Learning Communities (both CoL and CoP) we discuss in this chapter extend beyond place-based communities of more typical, localized classrooms and into the online setting.

In their research into different types of CoPs, Hydle et al. (2014) further differentiated between CoLs and Communities of Task (CoT). The latter was
focused on distributing work tasks across a community while the former was focused on people sharing and creating “knowledge across geographic locations and time” (Hydle et al., 2014, p. 610). Although this research was focused on business contexts rather than educational settings, Hydle and colleagues’ findings are useful to this paper through their suggestion that in CoLs, individuals knew one another well and used multiple forms of communication (phone and e-mail, among others). In addition, “management stressed that both formal and informal organizations were necessary” to operate successfully (Hydle et al., 2014, p. 620). These findings support the value of a blended (both online and face-to-face) learning model that emphasizes the building of strong relationships prior to engaging in either task-oriented or learning-oriented processes at a distance in a virtual setting.

Fleck (2012) discussed Learning Communities in the context of a blended learning environment at the UK’s Open University. He argued that face-to-face learning periods, akin to the two week residencies we offer in MAL, are foundational to the creation of Learning Communities, and “can be designed to maximise interactions between student peers with relevant experience to share, and to facilitate the development of real world business relationships that can offer considerable value beyond the merely didactic benefits of transmission teaching” (p. 403). Although Learning Communities exist in online settings, in the following section we focus on the mix of activities, both online and face-to-face, that offer MAL students the opportunity to build relationships.

Intentional Processes and Structures in the MA Leadership Design

The intentional processes and structures we introduce in this section serve as the foundation for the cohort model. At the time of writing, the MAL program was offered three times per year during the winter, spring, and summer, with a MAL-Health specialization also offered in the fall. In recent years, each offering has been attracting a cohort of approximately 40 to 50 students, with a handful of Interdisciplinary students joining the cohort for the first residency term as well as some who take it as an elective. Despite these large cohort sizes, we offer individualized and small group attention through advisory groups of 10-13 people assigned to one instructor. These advisory groups form the basis of our team teaching model—described in more depth in the paragraphs below—along with other learning activities that help to build strong relationships and a sense of belonging among the students.

Successful educators, like the successful managers described by Wenger and Snyder (2000), know how to “bring the right people together, provide an infrastructure in which communities can thrive, and measure the communities’ value in non-traditional ways” (p. 140). Additionally, Cochrane et al. (2013) have discussed the merits of using mobile social media to create
an alternative online open and connected (OOC) framework. Similarly, as part of the culture of each particular cohort, students organically develop communication strategies and ways of working through mobile and social media, in addition to the class-based online platforms. Therefore, in the sections below, it is important to understand that there exists a balance between the intentional design created by the instructors and program administrative staff and the emergent properties of the group. In other words, the instructors and staff create the container (or infrastructure, to echo the quote above), but the people (the students together with the instructors and staff) fill this container with life and learning. The unique culture of each cohort is socially constructed (see for example, Gergen, 2009) through the dialogue and the stories that emerge from this weaving together and sharing of life experiences. As one of the participants in Storch’s (2015) process identified, “It’s the feeling that we are together in doing this, we share it. It only works because everybody plays along” (p. 212). This corresponds to Lewin’s (1951) social psychology research that demonstrated people are more inclined to make a change in behaviour when they are committed and loyal to a group that can hold them accountable for carrying out new actions. The result of this mix of formal and informal opportunities to connect and transform reveals similarities and unique attributes between the different cohorts, year after year.

Finally, it is also important to understand that there is a widely held belief amongst faculty members—a belief grounded in adult education principles—that the learning communities we co-create in the cohort also allow faculty to demonstrate that we are learning with and from one other, the students, and the administrative staff. Clapp (2010) referred to these multiple forms of learning as omni-directional mentorship. The following sections provide insight into the multiple opportunities for omni-directional mentorship students experience in the MAL program.

**Competencies to Support Teamwork**

As suggested by Cochrane et al. (2013): “One of the key graduate attributes that lecturers aspire to develop in their students is the ability to work collaboratively in teams to design creative solutions to real world problems” (p. 1). As a special purpose university designed for working professionals, RRU places strong emphasis on collaborative and creative problem-solving in service of real world problems. RRU’s competency-based learning and assessment model (see Dunning, 2014; Popova and Clougherty, 2014) in general, and the SoLS competency framework in particular, supports the development of effective teamwork skills amongst MAL students. The competency areas we focus on in MA-Leadership include:

- enhancing one’s personal mastery and self-leadership,
- managing one’s own learning and change processes,
- enabling others’ learning,
• communicating effectively in diverse settings,
• developing team leadership and group facilitation skills,
• thinking and acting from a systems perspective,
• enhancing one’s capacity for organizational leadership, and
• cultivating aptitude in organizational inquiry and research.

With all courses designed to address some or all of the above competencies, students have many opportunities to enhance their competencies during team-based learning activities, both during face-to-face residencies and online.

In this program, we offer seminars, workshops, readings, individual and team coaching, and other resources that support strong team development and teamwork skills. Moreover, the learning environment itself creates multiple opportunities for students to not only enable the learning of others, but to further develop their own personal mastery through a focus on the competency of personal leadership. Senge (2006) described personal mastery as “the discipline of personal growth and learning” (p. 131). The multiple learning communities we will describe below also allow students with specific gifts such as coaching, facilitation or systems thinking to express their leadership.

Although team dynamics are not always enjoyable or productive, and some teams are certainly more high performing than others, through building the competencies necessary for effective teamwork, we hope to inspire students with the idea that “you can’t get extraordinary things done by yourself” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 242). The intentional focus on these competency areas means that not only do we acknowledge that working in teams can often generate conflict, be more challenging at times, and occasionally be more time-consuming, but we also provide the tools and resources to work toward resolving these challenges. Indeed, as instructors, we would not be able to facilitate the learning of mid-career professionals on our own, which means that we endeavour to model effective teamwork ourselves.

**Faculty and Staff Teams**

During the residency period in particular, the faculty and staff demonstrate the value of engaging in our own Learning Community through a collective commitment to building a strong team and engaging in lifelong learning. As a community of learning and practice ourselves, we model the way (Kouzes & Posner, 2012) for the MAL students and demonstrate what is possible through working in collaboration. As we have described elsewhere (Etmanski, Fulton, Nasmyth, & Page, 2014), we have learned that explicitly naming our shared values is essential to the success of these residency delivery teams. This practice is affirmed by leadership scholars and practitioners such as Barrett
(2010), Copeland (2010), Hall (2001), Kouzes and Posner (2012), and Senge (2006). For most teams,

The process of planning for a residency begins with an in-depth conversation about the values we individually bring to the work, the values we share, the ways in which we wish to work together, and the ways in which we want to stretch and grow. It is in these early dialogues that our deep relational connections are established. (Etmanski, Fulton, Nasmyth, & Page, 2014, pp. 101-102).

These relationships then serve as a foundation for our work and allow us to create a welcoming, brave, reflective, and compassionately critical learning space for the incoming cohort. From this foundation, we divide the cohort into team and small group configurations.

**Beginning the Journey Online: Advisory Groups**

To give students the opportunity to connect with a smaller group and work more personally with their faculty advisor, our cohorts are divided into advisory groups. Advisory groups spend the first four weeks of the program working together online. During this period of time, they are introducing themselves to one another, completing required readings, completing self-assessment activities, posting responses to activities, and participating in online dialogues with the other members of their advisee group. Each faculty advisor participates in online forums, modelling possibilities for interaction and supporting the advisory group as they begin their online journey. During the second week of the online pre-residency session, faculty advisors host a Collaborate™, Skype™, or teleconference call with their respective advisory groups. The purpose of this call is generally to connect as a group, identify team values and ways of working together, provide an overview of the first assignment, and clarify any questions the students may have to date. Thus, the seeds of community are planted during this initial online session, in preparation for their work together in residency.

**Opening and Stewarding Community: The Role of Dreamkeepers**

During the opening reception for the residency, second year students serve as hosts by warmly welcoming first year students arriving on campus and by serving as their mentors in a buddy system. This evening event also serves to introduce the first year students to stewards of community called *Dreamkeepers*—or keepers of the dream—a longstanding tradition in the MAL program. Within 12 hours of this event, the first year students have grasped the idea that the Dreamkeepers are responsible for taking the pulse of the cohort and identifying activities that will help to foster greater cohesion and community. In other words, through their relationships with other members of the cohort, Dreamkeepers gain a general sense of how people are feeling (curious, excited, tired, anxious, overwhelmed, etc.) and design activities intended to support their colleagues and generate deeper relationships between all members of the cohort.
On their first day of residency, the first year students select their initial team of Dreamkeepers. Essentially, two or three individuals from each of the advisory groups self-select to play the role of Dreamkeeper for different parts of the program. This group of individuals support creating the sense of belonging that is so crucial to community (Block, 2008). Individuals are also responsible for facilitating the exercises that will help the cohort determine its vision and values, and for bringing the cohort community to a close on the final day of the residency experience. These individuals steward the community throughout the residency experience and for the remainder of the two year program. They also offer an early opportunity for individuals to step into their leadership in the context of this cohort-based Learning Community, if they wish. The individuals who hold the role of Dreamkeeper switch regularly, and there is always a team of people who are taking the pulse of community and offering activities and experiences to further develop and enhance the cohort. Although the Dreamkeeper activities sometimes wane during the year of online learning following the first year residency, they are always rekindled as the second year students prepare to welcome the incoming first year cohort.

Supporting Each Other Throughout the First Term: Learning Partnerships

As described by Agger-Gupta and Etmanski (2014), one of the basic learning structures in the First Residency Term is a learning partnership, typically a triad or dyad. During the first few days of the first-year residency, students self-select into learning partnerships. We encourage students to be intentional about their choices, taking into consideration, for example, opportunities for personal growth based on an immediate response to specific individuals, as well as opportunity to maximize diversity factors including, among others, work sector, geographic home, age, culture, (dis)ability, and gender. This diversity of experience, culture, and thought is highly valued in learning partnerships as it ensures that students are exposed to ways of thinking, being, and knowing that are different—or perhaps surprisingly similar—to their own. Our experience has been that these learning partnerships can also help to develop cross-cultural communication skills and empathy, especially because they take place in the context of a supportive CoL environment with multiple opportunities for belonging. In the second-year residency, the program staff and faculty assign learning partnerships based on our growing understanding of the students’ personalities, knowledge of their previous opportunities to work with specific classmates and instructors, and their Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)™ profiles. If a second-year learning partnership is clearly not working, we accommodate this reality; however, for the most part we ask

1. This section on learning partnerships, as well as the next one on Leadership Challenge teams, draws extensively from our previous writing on the topic of Transformative Learning in the MAL program (Agger-Gupta & Etmanski, 2014, pp. 43–44). Please see the original publication for more information.
students to respect the choices we have made in assigning these learning partnerships. This allows them to practice their growing leadership competencies with any given member of the cohort and, on occasion, this allows them to resolve conflicts or misunderstandings.

The main purpose of the learning partnership is to create a safe environment for experimentation with different leadership strategies and behaviours, and to provide reciprocal, learning-oriented peer feedback. Learning partners become familiar in detail with one another’s learning goals and provide mutual aid in developing learning plans, reflecting on readings and class material, sharing their leadership experiences, and addressing personal and professional challenges from a learning perspective. The dyad or triad learning partnership meets outside of class time, supports one another in learning, reviews assignments prior to submission to the faculty advisor, meets as a learning partnership with the faculty advisor each week during residency, and provides feedforward (Goldsmith, 2002)—that is, future focused, improvement oriented, or affirming suggestions about how to succeed in future iterations of self-identified learning goals.

Students conduct learning experiments in their triads on a range of interpersonal skills such as: creating a respectful environment, optimizing others’ learning, sharing stories of their experiences and cultural orientations to the world, and practicing a variety of communication skills, including asking helpful reflective questions. The partnership gives students experience in rehearsing leadership behaviours, in observing, and in providing learning-oriented feedback to others in a small group. Partners also observe one another in larger learning venues and provide learning-oriented feedback on their observations. The learning partners have a rich opportunity to enable one another’s learning, challenge behavioural or thinking patterns that might be inhibiting learning and leadership, and offer a supportive ear (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1995; Short, 1998).

Learning About Team and Group Process: Leadership Challenge Teams

The primary structure providing an experience base for learning during the first year residency is the Leadership Challenge (LC). Prior to the residency, faculty engage a local non-profit or sector-relevant sponsor with an organizational challenge or opportunity that would benefit from inquiry by teams of graduate students. The organizational sponsor works with faculty to develop a LC document outlining the organization’s mission, goals, structure, and critical details of the immediate leadership issue that they are seeking to address.

Students then self-select (or sometimes are organized) into LC teams and each LC team constitutes approximately half of their advisory group (described above). These teams work together to explore the issue and prepare a response and set of recommendations to the sponsoring
organization on the leadership challenge they have brought forward. The students have approximately ten days from when they meet the client to deliver their recommendations to the client panel. During this ten-day period, they: identify their team agreements, values, and vision; determine the core client issue that they are going to focus on; determine their roles, responsibilities and tasks; and complete the above within the prescribed timeline. This assignment is completed in residency and is designed to provide an opportunity to immediately apply their leadership learning to a real life situation and to navigate the delivery of the final product within the context of learning more about group process and working within a team. As Kouzes and Posner (2012) emphasized, effective “leaders foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships” (p. 21). While time is set aside daily for this work, leadership challenge teams discover that evening and weekend work is also required in order to complete the project.

Engagement as a part of a team working on a practical challenge faced by a real organization creates a common experience in which students can apply the theory they have been reading and dialoguing about in combination with their own professional experience. The LC activity therefore provides rich opportunities for students to develop their strengths on all of the competencies of the first blended learning term. Instructors frequently remind the LC teams of the two goals of this experience: include the end product presentation to the sponsor and the process they use to get there. Delivery of one at the expense of the other is a lost opportunity for deep and rich learning.

Learning From Across the Cohort: Seminar Learning Groups

A final learning community configuration in the first residency term is the seminar learning group. To facilitate and support the work of the LC teams in completing their assignment, each of the faculty advisors teaches a seminar in an area of expertise and passion. These seminars also align with the program competencies and support success in the Leadership Challenge. The seminar learning groups include an intentional mix of students from across all leadership challenge teams. This mixture translates into each of these LC groups having lessons from each seminar when they convene in their leadership challenge team meetings following each day of learning. This additional Learning Community also presents another opportunity to build connections across the cohort and diminishes the possibility of advisory groups becoming insular.

After the First Residency: Online, Second Residency, and Capstone Communities

As previously mentioned, Fleck’s (2012) work supports our current design of including a two-week residency near the beginning of this blended learning program. Once the students have formed strong relationships, they are better
able to attend to the team-based assignments required as part of their online learning. The online courses offer a variety of learning activities, most of which include drawing links between the students’ professional and personal experiences. Although some activities require more individual reflection or straightforward discussion, online courses also include opportunities for team writing and presentations. Just as in residency, online courses are often divided into sections, smaller groups, and even learning partnerships. As described above, students may also continue organizing informal Dreamkeeper activities, such as initiating Collaborate™ or Skype™ calls, or simply sharing video clips via e-mail to support ongoing connections.

Similar to the first residency period, the second year residency includes advisory groups, learning partnerships, and seminar groups. Although there is no Leadership Challenge assignment, students are required to complete an Inquiry and Leadership Lab. For this assignment, team members (who often include learning partners) work together to prepare a short presentation with supporting resources to teach the whole cohort. The purpose of this presentation is for students to teach their colleagues about a selected research method. Again, this assignment asks students to balance the process with the outcomes, while offering an opportunity to develop their skills of learning in community.

As a final Learning Community option, some faculty members have begun supervising their capstone project or thesis advisees in groups of two or more. As is common with graduate level research, many students report feelings of isolation and disconnection in the final stretch of the program. Since most students have not conducted research in affiliation with a university, this can be a period of great uncertainty with a steep learning curve, not to mention the most intense writing experience most students have ever experienced. When supervisors offer to operate in small groups, this provides an option for students to check in with one another on a regular basis, share learning and resources, and realize that they are not alone in their struggles to complete a Master’s degree.

**Discussion and Challenges**

Each of the smaller group configurations outlined above is highly interconnected and interdependent. In the first residency alone, opportunities exist for optional participation across the cohort (seminar learning groups and Dreamkeepers) and within advisory groups (advisory group, learning partnerships, and leadership challenge teams). Each of the small group configurations offers opportunities for students to uncover more about themselves as they operate in a range of different relationships (Short, 1998), challenges they face in their personal leadership and development of personal mastery, and overall leadership practices and approach (Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Senge, 2006). In particular, they offer opportunities to better understand their presence in teams and groups (Kaner, Lind, Toldi, Fisk, & ...
Berger, 2014; Lencioni, 2005) and how to see themselves as part of a human system (Etmanski, Fulton, Nasmyth, & Page, 2014; Senge, 2006).

Peter Senge has offered that “it takes courage to hold visions that are not in the social mainstream. But it is exactly that courage to take a stand for one’s vision that distinguishes people with high levels of personal mastery” (Senge, 2006, p.139). Our hope is that we successfully graduate leaders who have the courage of their convictions, and the tools and skills to achieve their visions. Although the journey to personal mastery is never ending, we have seen that the multiple intentional processes and structures we offer throughout this program support students’ ongoing leadership development. What is more, as relationships deepen, our hope is that each student experiences at least one community where they feel they truly belong.

The benefit of these multiple Learning Communities notwithstanding, it is important to recognize that a strong focus on teamwork is more of an extroverted preference. As Cain (2012) has offered, more introverted preferences can also generate deep learning, creativity, and innovation. Based on observations of some students feeling overwhelmed by the intensive residency experience, some teams of instructors have chosen to integrate dedicated reflective periods, or intentionally silent periods, into the residency schedule. For one faculty team in particular (of which Beth and Catherine were part),

Creating a silent period in the [middle of a] busy agenda demonstrated to the learners that we valued reflection enough to move other content out of the way. … As instructors, we observed that committing to this short daily practice had a tremendous impact. It served as a calming mechanism in the midst of the busy pace of residency and offered opportunities for learners to share their own personal leadership practices with one other. (Etmanski, Fulton, Nasmyth, & Page, p. 103)

Although some individuals can spend all day in conversation, in developing community, it is important to remember to provide spaces where individuals who require more personal time for reflection can take care of their needs. In addition, the intensity of this teamwork also has implications for faculty. Due to the necessity to be fully present for a two week period, often including weekends, the team teaching model attracts only the most dedicated of instructors. As such, we faculty strive to balance our own needs with those of the individual students, the larger cohort, and the institution.

In addition to the idea that an over-emphasis on teamwork can create challenges for students, there is also a question around the possibility for exclusion. As mentioned earlier, occasionally students from outside the cohort will join for a class or two. Although the outside knowledge and experiences they bring can enhance the learning community, there is occasionally a concern about how these students will integrate into the cohort. As a point of reference, Hydle et al. (2014) found that when employees had not met their colleagues face-to-face, “there was less sharing of
knowledge, experiences, solutions, and systems information” (p. 620)—an experience we sometimes see reflected when interdisciplinary or continuing studies students join our online courses. Nevertheless, as is consistent with Hydle et al., we often see particular students from the cohort take the initiative to reach out and build relationships with these new students, thus serving a connector (Gladwell, 2000) or “boundary spanning” function (Cross & Parker, 2004; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Since exclusionary practices are at times unconscious, instructors must be alert to this possibility and support these students—as well as any other students from the cohort who may not be working well with others—in their integration into the course. This requires skillful facilitation and, admittedly, is not always possible. Nevertheless, if belonging is a key element of the cohort-based learning experience, it behooves both instructors and students alike to be wary of exclusionary practices as part of their ongoing leadership development.

Other programs at RRU might also encourage, if not replicate, some of the successful experiences SoLS has had in developing and sustaining CoLs. Although many programs at RRU support CoLs, the Leadership School is the only one that structures its residency teams based on the model of Advisee Groups and team teaching and assessment. The increased costs over a more traditional faculty/student structure may be what stand out on a superficial glance. However, the transformational changes the MAL program generates through its focus on leadership as engagement, its integration of scholarship with practice, of knowledge with personal experience, and its evidence-informed decision-making process result in devoted students and strong word of mouth advertising for the program, resulting in a waiting list for each cohort offering. Moving to this model of learning and teaching requires a willingness to invest in students as adult learners and an orientation to possibility, which is one of the key Leadership School principles (Harris & Agger-Gupta, 2015).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented the SoLS approach to enacting the Learning Community element of Royal Roads University’s Learning and Teaching model. Specifically, we have investigated the diversity of intentional learning processes and structures that offer the possibility of belonging and provide the foundation for a strong and vibrant cohort. Even though these activities sometimes take additional time and dedication from faculty, program staff, and students alike, they nevertheless engage the heads, hearts, hands, and spirits of each one of us and offer opportunities to develop our leadership competencies through trusting relationships. Our own experience of teaching in this way, coupled with affirmative comments from our students, provide evidence that learning in community contributes to a greater sense of well-being that continues to attract new students and faculty, year after year.
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