Teaching and learning in community: a phenomenological study of community college faculty pedagogy and learning communities

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Teaching and learning in community: A phenomenological study of community college faculty pedagogy and learning communities

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my parents, Darlene and Gordon Jedele. Although both are deceased, I am grateful to them for planting the seeds of determination and perseverance. Both gave me a love for life and they instilled within me the desire to be successful. They would be standing and applauding if they could see me receive my doctoral hood.
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ABSTRACT

This study explored whether faculty/student collaboration in learning communities can help fulfill faculty members’ professional developmental needs, and if so, how these teaching experiences in learning communities benefit the faculty and their institution. The research sought to discover if faculty perceived that they experienced rejuvenation because of their participation in learning communities, and as a result of this rejuvenation, did they perceive that they had altered their pedagogy. And finally, the study investigated whether or not faculty perceived if their participation in learning communities affected their stand-alone classes and other college responsibilities such as committee work. This qualitative inquiry used an in-depth phenomenological interview process to seek the data. Six participants from a metropolitan community college in the Southwest were each interviewed three times. The first interview was a life story interview, which focused on teaching careers in general. The second interview asked each to reflect specifically on their learning community teaching experiences, and in the third interview, each was given the opportunity to make meaning from all teaching experiences and indicate if they felt learning communities had affected pedagogy and participation in college activities and responsibilities. The analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed the following themes: a passion for teaching; strong and positive attitudes about students; the importance of learning communities in their teaching experiences; a metaphor about marriage and their teaching partners; the multiple ways their pedagogy had been altered; the need for flexibility if participating in learning communities; and multiple types of faculty benefits, such as how faculty learn more when teaching with a partner, how they use collaboration, and how learning communities provide significant opportunities for faculty development. This study suggests that institutions contemplating
starting learning community initiatives or alternative methods for faculty development would benefit from reading the rich descriptions embedded in the participants’ stories. Finally, the study offers the rationale for beginning a learning community initiative because faculty and the institution have opportunities to gain significant benefits, such as synergy, a more creative faculty, and a faculty who are more willing to participate in additional academic responsibilities.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

It is my intention with this chapter to introduce the study. After presenting a rationale for the study, I will also offer a statement of the problem, a purpose for the research, the research questions, the theoretical perspectives, the significance of the study, a definition of necessary terms, and the study’s delimitations and limitations.

A Rationale for the Study

From their inception, community colleges were designed as teaching institutions where “a large majority of the faculty are oriented more toward teaching than toward research” (Huber, 1998, p. 24). In fact, Cain (1999) stated that “the teaching faculty is the key to the community college’s work” (p. 47). While community college faculty are encouraged to do research and publish, their primary responsibility is to focus on student learning as they prepare classroom materials, grade student papers and exams, and work with students one-on-one. Community college faculty spend more time teaching—an average of 15 hours a week—and more time with students on a one-on-one basis—an average of 9 hours a week—tutoring or advising students, than their contemporaries at baccalaureate and research institutions (Huber, 1998).

Besides their commitment to teaching and student learning, community college faculty also have a strong commitment to and responsibility for professional growth and development. According to Steinert (2000), a general definition of faculty development is that “broad range of activities that institutions use to renew or assist faculty in their roles . . . to sustain their productivity and vitality” (p. 2). However, more specifically, POD, the Professional and Organizational Development Network (2007), maintained that “the arena of faculty development actually consists of the three major areas of faculty development,
instructional development, and organizational development” (n. p.). POD also distinguished the differences between the three areas, as well as suggested that a faculty development program could consist of a combination of all three areas. When discussing faculty development, POD indicated that these programs would focus on “the faculty member as teacher, . . . faculty member as a scholar and professional, and . . . the faculty member as a person” (n. p.).

Unfortunately, and for a variety of reasons, most faculty development programs are ineffective, usually because of “inadequate resources” (Outcalt, 2000, p. 2), or because “most colleges have used in-service education in unfocused and thoughtless ways” (Grubb, 1999, p. 297). However, because faculty development is a key and fundamental ingredient in quality academic programs, it can be argued that there needs to be a serious commitment to offering quality faculty development programs and opportunities. In fact, the state of Iowa has recently eliminated its licensure requirements for community colleges and, instead, shifted the responsibility of faculty development to the individual community colleges, which is yet another reason to ensure opportunities for growth and development. Unfortunately, several “obstacles” stand in the way of effective faculty development on most community college campuses. According to Outcalt (2000), besides insufficient funding for faculty development, “faculty isolation, a growing reliance on part-time faculty, . . . increasing pressure . . . to undertake research, [and] underprepared students” (pp. 1-2) are the major challenges that stand in the way of effective teaching and quality faculty development.

While there is not one panacea that magically can remove the obstacles, it appears that the use of learning communities, which rely heavily on student and faculty collaboration, on community college campuses can enhance classroom pedagogy. In addition to enhancing
pedagogy, learning communities also potentially can have a strong impact on faculty development, minimize faculty isolation, and provide opportunities for faculty research. Indeed, “many colleges are creating learning communities as an avenue of educational improvement and faculty revitalization” (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 5).

While preparing the literature review for this study, it readily became evident that there are many types of learning communities in educational arenas. For example, there is a breadth of literature that discusses transforming entire schools, usually K-12, into learning communities and the effects that result from such collaboration. There is also a significant body of literature that focuses on PLCs, professional learning communities that faculty members form for collaborative and team-building experiences. However, this study focuses on the faculty/student learning communities developed on college and university campuses. Even with these types of learning communities, definitions vary from institution to institution. Levine Laufgraben, Shapiro, and Associates (2004) maintained “there is a sense that no ‘one size fits all,’ and classifications, as well as models of learning communities, vary as needed to adapt to distinct campus cultures” (p. 2). However, it is important to identify a few possible definitions. According to Gabelnick et al. (1990), learning communities have been defined as follows:

A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.
Astin (1985) defined learning communities in the following manner:

Communities can be organized along curricular lines, common career interests, avocational interests, residential living areas, and so on. These can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness; to encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel. (p. 161)

And finally, at my Midwestern community college (2000), learning communities have been defined as “a cohort of students taking two or more theme-related classes with two or more faculty members. The classes are either linked—taught separately—or coordinated—team taught—to facilitate integrated learning” (n. p.).

Many consequences result when collaborative environments, such as learning communities, are created. Originally, the expected and quantifiable end-products were student academic success, retention during an individual semester, and persistence to completion of academic degrees (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). However, one of the most unexpected discoveries in learning community research, and a partial focus of this study, has been the discovery of how learning communities have become powerful institutional change agents because they change faculty. Several research studies (Matthews, Smith, MacGregor, & Gabelnick, 1997; Rasmussen & Skinner, 1997; Rye, 1997) used the action verb “revitalize” when describing what is happening to faculty members who participate in learning communities. These teaching experiences can revitalize teaching because they “rekindle the creative side of teaching and provide new challenges for well-established teachers” (Matthews et al., 1997, p. 472). In addition, learning communities are
viewed as one of the highest forms of establishing collegiality, which is a “mutual learning and discussion of classroom practice and student performance” (Kruse, 1999, p. 2). Besides collegiality, learning communities are fertile arenas for collaboration, both collaborative learning and collaborative teaching. Huber (1998) maintained that “collaborative learning and teaching is the focus” (p. 13) and change agent that is energizing faculty on college and university campuses. Similar to Huber, Grubb (1999) stated that the “most innovative practices seem to emerge from collective efforts, not from individual instructors” (p. 199).

**Statement of the Problem**

The premise for this study, as the literature suggests, is that if learning communities revitalize faculty and increase opportunities—more opportunities than experienced around the faculty coffee table—for collaboration, collegiality, and cohesiveness, they become valuable institutional arenas for faculty development. In fact, “inspired by the rich possibilities for connecting disciplines, the collaborative planning of syllabi, or the possibility of team-teaching, faculty members view learning community teaching as a special faculty development opportunity,” according to Matthews et al. (1997, p. 471). At institutions where faculty have embraced the value of learning communities for their students, as well as themselves, expensive, nonproductive, and periodic faculty development seminars do not have to be endured. At these institutions, faculty members can use the planning, implementing, and assessing of their learning communities as potential faculty development opportunities. This method of faculty development is a paradigm shift that is becoming a “road map to help teachers navigate the shift from the traditional ways of teaching to the more active collaborative modes of pedagogy characteristic of learning communities” (Levine Laugfraben et al., 2004, p. 77). Although the literature suggests that
teaching in learning communities revitalizes or rejuvenates faculty and provides them opportunities for growth and development (Matthews, et al., 1997; Rasmussen & Skinner, 1997; Rye, 1997), we do not know how this change occurs.

**Purpose for the Research**

The purpose of this study is to explore whether faculty/student collaboration in learning communities can help fulfill faculty members’ professional development needs, and if so, how do these teaching experiences in learning communities benefit the faculty and the institution. In part, the research will seek to discover if faculty perceive they have a rejuvenation because of their participation in learning communities, and as a result of this rejuvenation, do they perceive that they have altered their pedagogy. This study will also investigate if faculty members who participate in learning communities carry their revitalization to their other stand-alone classes or other academic arenas, as well as to their committee work. Levine Laufgraben et al. (2004) suggested that learning communities are “empowering faculty to serve as change agents to move campuses from institutions to learning organizations” (p. 77). By capturing the voices—the rich description—of experienced learning community faculty members, this study will explore how faculty grow as a result of teaching and learning in community.

**Research Questions**

The following four questions guided this study:

1. As a result of teaching in a learning community, do faculty perceive that they have altered their pedagogy? If so, how does the altered pedagogy affect their stand-alone classes?

2. Do faculty perceive that their use of collaboration and collegiality have been
altered because of their participation in learning community environments? If so, how?

3. Do faculty perceive that their teaching in learning communities has affected their participation in other college responsibilities? If so, how?

4. As perceived by faculty, how effective are learning communities as vehicles for faculty development?

**Theoretical Perspective**

According to Krathwohl (1998), theory “means an explanation of behavior that makes good logical sense and either is consistent with the research and explanations that preceded it or convincingly negates or modifies them” (p. 84). Furthermore, Krathwohl maintained that a study by itself has little significance. On the other hand, “when a study contributes to explanations or significant ideas, when it modifies, contradicts, or extends them in some way, it multiplies its impact” (p. 84). Creswell (2003) stated that “qualitative researchers increasingly use a theoretical lens or perspective to guide their study and raise the questions . . . they would like to address” (p. 131). With these ideas in mind, I used four theoretical perspectives to guide or serve as the foundation for this study: a theory of community, a theory of teacher community, a theory of collaboration, and a theory of cooperative practice. All four of these theories are also grounded on the views of social theorists and their ideas about establishing community.

**Theory of Community**

Sergiovanni’s (1999) theory of community for schools focuses on entire schools becoming learning communities. However, it is easy to transfer the theory of community to a smaller scale of learning communities within a school system. Sergiovanni maintained that
“communities are much more like social organisations than formal organisations” (p. 15) and he defined social organizations in the following manner:

[They are] institutions of civil society. They include the families we love, friendship networks we enjoy, volunteer associations we value, faith communities we belong to, and other family, neighbourhood and community groups where moral connections characterized by intimacy, caring, shared commitments and reciprocal responsibilities are the norm. (p. 13)

Furthermore, Sergiovanni suggested that communities about relationships create bonds and “oneness” between the participants. And finally, Sergiovanni stated that “communities are defined by their centres of values, sentiments and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of ‘we’ from the ‘I’ of each individual” (p. 15).

The theory of community helps to frame this study because it suggests that when two or more faculty members create “a sense of ‘we’” in a learning community teaching environment, they benefit because of their “shared commitments and reciprocal responsibilities” referenced above. Also, because they no longer teach in isolation and experience the “‘I,’” which could represent individualism or isolation, they create a bond.

**Theory of Teacher Community**

Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) claimed “there is no shortage of theoretical formulations of how community is supposed to function in educational settings” (p. 943). They also believed that “a key rationale for teacher community is that it provides an ongoing venue for teacher learning” (p. 947). However, teacher learning is not the only focus in teacher community. “Teacher community must be equally concerned with student learning and with teacher learning. . . . Both are at the *essence* of teaching. Both represent key
ingredients in successful professional development” (p. 952). It is, in fact, this relationship between student learning and teacher learning that happens in learning community environments when faculty collaborate, cooperate, and experience cohesion and collegiality. Indeed, “the act of creating and participating in a learning community is itself a community-building experience for faculty [because this act] . . . breaks down the isolation of faculty and the essential loneliness of teaching as currently conceived and executed” (Matthews, 1994, pp. 186-187).

The theory of teacher community also helps to frame this study because of its emphasis on teachers and their learning. If faculty members have taught in multiple learning communities, there must be reasons why they continue to repeat the experiences, especially since most faculty admit that it takes more time and work to teach collaboratively in a learning community (Rasmussen & Skinner, 1997). Research supports that faculty learn from the students, their colleagues and themselves while they teach in learning communities. In fact, “one of the unexpected benefits of learning communities is that the faculty learn as much the students [sic]” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999a, p. 109.)

Theory of Collaboration

Collaboration is an essential component when teaching in community. Although faculty in higher education usually teach in isolation, Austin and Baldwin (1991) suggested they should “consider developing collaborative relationships [because] carefully managed collaborative partnerships can enrich academic life” (p. v). Furthermore, Austin and Baldwin maintained there are three benefits that faculty experience in collaborative teaching environments: “development of their teaching ability, new intellectual stimulation, and a closer connection to the university or college as a community” (p. 41). In addition, Rogers
(1999) claimed that “through collaborative efforts, a community of learners creates synergy, a synchronized energy where the power of the group is more profound than that of any one individual” (p. 58).

Although his work focuses on students and collaboration, Bruffee (1993, 1995, 2003) has provided the foundation for a theory of collaboration. Bruffee’s ideas about students and collaboration can easily be transferred to faculty members collaborating in learning community environments. His emphasis on interdependence, the “ability to engage productively in group efforts that are substantive, various, and demanding” (Bruffee, 2003, p. 20), is exactly what is expected of two or more faculty members collaborating in a learning community. Based on Bruffee’s (1993) work, MacGregor and Matthews (1994) transferred Bruffee’s theory to teachers and students in learning communities:

Bruffee has displaced—or replaced—the central issue of higher education today. College teachers should not be arguing over just the “canon” (what is to be taught), but rather how we teach and how we bring the various learners and voices in the conversations of the academy. Some of the most exciting work in this regard, from our point of view, is going on in learning communities organized around inter- and cross-disciplinary questions regarding the central issues of our time. Here, teachers working at the boundaries of their own knowledge are learning from each other while engaging students in these same questions. (p. 2)

During the interview process, the participants were asked questions about their use of faculty collaboration before teaching in learning communities and how they used collaboration differently during the participation in the learning community teaching experiences. Indeed, their experiences, which are presented in Chapter 5, mirrored Austin
and Baldwin’s insights referenced above. Their experiences demonstrated how their teaching together enhanced their learning together and that together this teaching and learning in community aided in their development as teachers.

Theory of Cooperative Practice

Bertrand (2003) discussed the theory of cooperative practice, which he distinguished as being different from collaboration theories. He developed his cooperative practice theory from cooperative teaching and learning theories that have the following characteristics:

They give equal importance to an individual’s personal growth and to social learning. [The theories] value responsibilities in the community. They emphasize practice, cooperation, and working together. The main goal is to build a learning community: to achieve academic and social learning in the same project. The idea is quite simple: we learn better when we work together! (p. 259)

Although they used the term communities of practice, Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) mirror Bertrand’s theory of cooperative practice. Smith et al. suggested that communities of practice are formed whenever people work together and interact often, and as a result, “crucial learning and community building . . . take place” (p. 105).

Similar to the theory of teacher community referenced above, this theory focuses on learning. It suggests that by working closely together in the development of curricular and instructional strategies and assignments, teachers will learn more, simply because they are working together. During the interview process, it was interesting to see how the participants in the study viewed their personal learning curves about other disciplines, as well as their own discipline, while they participated in learning community classrooms.
All four of these theories are further grounded on the views of social theorists who maintain the following features must be present in order to establish community:

1. *Interaction and participation*. People have many opportunities and reasons to come together in deliberation, association, and action.

2. *Interdependence*. These associations and actions both promote and depend on mutual needs and commitments.

3. *Shared interests and beliefs*. People share perspectives, values, understandings, and commitment to common purposes.

4. *Concern for individual and minority views*. Individual differences are embraced through critical reflection and mechanisms for dissent and lead to growth through the new perspectives they foster.


I used these four theories discussed above to help guide the development of the interview protocol used in my research process. Noting the ways in which my findings complement each theoretical perspective, I also revisit them in detail in Chapter 6 when I discuss the implications of the study.

**Significance of the Study**

If this research is read and analyzed by institutions thinking about incorporating learning community initiatives, this study has significance for various reasons. First, if it becomes evident that faculty are impacted by their participation in learning communities and they experience growth and development, such knowledge might encourage more institutions to develop learning community initiatives simply because of the benefits faculty experience
in growth and development. In addition, institutions might also begin to develop learning community initiatives if they discover that faculty are more involved at all levels of the institution because they have been rejuvenated as a result of their participation in learning communities. Closely related, if these benefits focus on faculty development, institutions might reconsider how they design programs for faculty development because their existing programs/seminars are largely short-term or nonproductive. Another significance will be the discovery of how faculty feel they have been revitalized and perceive the ways in which they have altered their pedagogy.

This study also has significance for the academy and the scholarship of teaching because it will add to the body of research that focuses on faculty involvement with learning community initiatives. When Shapiro and Levine (1999a) “began collecting evidence on the impact of participation in learning communities on faculty, [they] came across anecdotal data, . . . but [they] found little real evidence of change in terms of teaching practices or organization attitudes toward teaching and learning” (p. 182). In addition, MacGregor (2000) maintained that “what we have yet to give emphasis to or evaluate is how [learning communities as teaching communities] affect the faculty, staff, and students who create and deliver them” (p. 58). In addition, in her doctoral research of faculty involvement in learning communities at four-year institutions, Ellertson (2005) maintained that “current national discussions about learning communities have illuminated the need for additional research on and assessment of faculty involvement in learning communities” (p. 8). As a qualitative study, this research has focused on how the participants interact with their world or, in this case, how the participants interact with their colleagues and students in their learning communities and how they perceive this interaction has impacted their growth and
development. As they described their experiences while teaching in a learning community, the voices of the participants has increased the available research and knowledge about how teaching and learning in community affect faculty and impact their development.

**Definition of Terms**

**Collaboration**—“In collaborative school environments, teachers engage in mutual decision making to resolve their problems of practice. . . . In collaborative settings, the relationships between teachers are not built solely around structures and tasks, but around the communal experiences and interests [of everyone involved]” (Kruse, 1999, p. 1).

**Collegiality**—“Mutual learning and discussion of classroom practice and student performance. Collegial teachers may share lesson plans around interdisciplinary theme units, or work toward common expectations of student work” (Kruse, 1999, p. 2).

**Faculty Development**—The “broad range of activities that institutions use to renew or assist faculty in their roles . . . to sustain their productivity and vitality” (Steinert, 2000, p. 2).

**Learning Community**—“Any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 19).

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations and limitations help to “establish the boundaries, exceptions, reservations, and qualifications inherent in every study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 147). The delimitations of this study include only using community college faculty members who have taught a minimum of three semesters in a learning community classroom. The scope was
narrowed further by using only one community college in the study. Not extending the study to additional colleges and not using faculty members who teach in four-year institutions are both delimiting factors in this study.

Choosing to do a qualitative study creates definite limitations. For example, because it is qualitative research, I will not be able to generalize the results to all community college learning community faculty. Also, it is possible that focus groups would elicit different types of responses than what are offered in the interview settings. Sometimes people are more willing to share their experiences in a group, rather than sitting alone in an interview setting. On the other hand, the opposite may also be true because some individuals would rather share their experiences individually than in a group setting. And finally, although not known at the time of participant selection, the fact that all of the participants, even the entire institution used, have only participated in coordinated or team-taught learning community environments may be considered a limitation or weakness of the study; however, such a condition paves the way for recommending additional research, which is suggested in Chapter 6.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction to the dissertation and contains a statement of the research problem, the purpose for the research and the research questions, the theoretical perspective for the research, definition of terms, a statement of the significance of the study, and the delimitations and limitations of the study.

In Chapter 2, I offer a review of the literature. This review is divided into six sections: a review of the community college mission, an overview of learning communities, a rationale
for learning communities, learning community models, learning community challenges and concerns, and learning communities and faculty.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology. This chapter is divided into seven sections: a discussion of the research design, a discussion of the pilot study, criteria for participant selection, data collection and analysis, the role of trustworthiness in qualitative research, ethical issues concerned with the research, and the researcher’s reflexivity statement.

In Chapter 4, I present a profile of the community college used in the study, a profile of that college’s learning community initiative, and individual profiles of the six participants who were selected to be involved in the study.

In Chapter 5, I present the analysis of the emerging themes that were discovered during the interviews. The following six themes are discussed: passion for teaching, attitudes about students, the importance of learning communities, the marriage metaphor and partner compatibility, altered pedagogy, flexibility, and faculty benefits.

In Chapter 6, I summarize the research by presenting the implications in the following areas: the research questions, the theoretical perspectives, past research, and trustworthiness. In this chapter, I also offer recommendations for how the research can be used, recommendations for additional research, and I draw conclusions by returning to the research’s purpose and significance as outlined in Chapter 1. And finally, I end with a brief section about my final reflections concerning the study.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review the available literature on a variety of topics that pertain to learning communities and this study. Because this study focuses on community colleges, I begin the literature review with a discussion of the mission of community colleges and how learning communities are appropriate learning initiatives for these institutions. In the literature review, I also present a basic overview and history of the learning community initiative, which I follow with a discussion of the rationale for creating learning communities and a discussion of models or types of learning communities. Because it is important to see the whole picture about learning communities and because it is very possible that one of the participants in the study will discuss some of the cautions or concerns related to learning communities, it is important to share what the literature has said about the negative aspects of learning communities.

In light of the fact that this study focuses on faculty participation in learning communities, in the final section of this chapter, I review the literature on the following topics concerning faculty: (1) the benefits of their participation in learning communities, (2) the factors that have initiated their rejuvenation as a result of participating in learning communities, (3) the effects on their pedagogy, and (4) how they have developed or grown as a result of teaching and learning in community.

Besides reviewing the literature, another purpose of this chapter is to analyze the available literature and to demonstrate what is known, what is not known, and how this particular study will extend the knowledge base; in other words, how this study adds information or offers new insights to enhance the academy’s understanding of learning
communities, especially learning communities and how they affect faculty growth and development.

**The Mission of Community Colleges**

According to Ratcliff (1994), “as a distinctively American invention, the comprehensive community college stands between secondary and higher education, between adult and higher education, [and] between industrial training and formal technical education” (p. 3). Several authors suggested that because of their positioning in higher education and their open admissions policy, community colleges are the only option for many who would otherwise not have participated in higher education (Bailey, 2002; Callan, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 1987; 1994; Lorenzo, 1994; Ratcliff, 1994; Smith, 1995; Sperling, 2003; Vaughan, 2000; Weisman, & Marr, 2002). “Community colleges have stood for open admissions, geographic proximity, and relative financial affordability to the potential students of the community and region served” (Ratcliff, 1994, p. 4). From their inception, comprehensive community colleges’ missions have focused on five arenas of education: transfer, career, general, remedial, and community (Lorenzo, 1994; Smith, 1995).

When discussing the community college mission, Vaughn (2000) claimed the following:

The mission of most community colleges is shaped by these commitments:

- Serving all segments of society through an open-access admissions policy that offers equal and fair treatment to all students.
- Providing a comprehensive educational program.
- Serving the community as a community-based institution of higher education.
- Teaching and learning.
As they have grown in size and importance, the comprehensive community colleges have changed. Tollefson, Garret, Ingram, and Associates (1999) maintained that the mission of community colleges changed in the last half of the twentieth century to include the following:

- associate-degree programs designed to lead both to immediate employment and to transfer to baccalaureate programs at four-year institutions,
- remedial/developmental education,
- noncredit continuing education,
- community service programs,
- financial and geographic access to equalize educational opportunity,
- special assistance for mentally and physically handicapped students,
- and more recently workforce and economic development.

Even as the twenty-first century begins to unfold, “community colleges in America find themselves at a point of intense reexamination, both from the public they serve and from the educators who shape their structures” (Lorenzo, 1994, p. 11). Indeed, undergraduate education is not the same as it was ten years ago. Several factors—changing demographics of student populations, more need for remediation, distance education, and increasing costs for education, to name a few—have led to the need for reform in higher education. Colleges and universities are also being challenged “to rethink traditional classroom structure and implement new models of teaching and learning that engage and partner students and faculty in the academic enterprise” (Levine Laufgraben et al., 2004, pp. 12-13). More than likely, according to Lorenzo (1994), “based upon emerging practices and changing societal needs, . . . three new elements will be incorporated into the missions of many American two-year colleges: customized education, advanced education, and adaptive education” (p. 118).
According to Laanan (2001), “as the nation’s community colleges make the transition to the 21st century, many issues about their missions, functions, and level of effectiveness remain at the forefront” (p. 57). In fact, in an attempt to present a new function or level of effectiveness, Jacobson (2005) maintained that “more than any other organization, community colleges are positioned to take advantage of broad changes in the nature of work and learning that have occurred over the past two decades” (p. 53). In what he claimed as “a new core competence” (p. 53), Jacobson believed that “learning communities and organizational partnerships are among the most promising reforms currently underway in contemporary American education—especially for community colleges—and they are spreading rapidly across all types of educational institutions” (p. 54).

**An Overview of Learning Communities**

When Gabelnick et al. (1990) and Shapiro and Levine (1999a) discussed the early history of learning communities, they traced influences back to John Dewey in the 1920s, Alexander Meiklejohn’s Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin between 1927 and 1932, and Joseph Tussman’s work at Berkeley from 1965 to 1969. These educational reformers emphasized community experiences, social learning, and collaborative learning as methods for “creating the kinds of curricular structures that support learning as integrated social experiences required, then and now, challenging traditional notions of teaching and learning” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999a, p. 17).

Learning communities and coordinated study programs similar to the ones being developed at today’s institutions began as early as the 1970s when The Evergreen State College opened its doors in Olympia, Washington. “The college was founded with a curriculum based on interdisciplinary coordinated studies program” (Shapiro & Levine,
It is the only institution of higher education in the United States where interdisciplinary courses form learning communities to teach every subject. “The most ambitious learning community initiative beyond single institutions is led by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, founded in 1984. . . . [It] is a consortium of forty-four colleges and universities in Washington” (Matthews et al., 1997, p. 461).

Although learning communities were designed for a variety of reasons and student populations, it soon became evident that learning communities were strong retention and persistence tools, especially for nonresidential community college campuses. Tinto and Goodsell-Love’s (1993) research at the University of Washington and Seattle Central Community College and Tinto and Russo’s (1994) research focusing on Seattle Central Community College reinforced the idea that learning communities have an impact on student learning, retention throughout the semester, and persistence towards graduation (Tinto, 2000). Although Tinto’s research on learning communities is often cited, it is important when referencing Tinto and his college persistence theories to also acknowledge Braxton (2000) and his colleagues’ analysis of Tinto’s interactionalist theory. “Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) conclude[d] that Tinto’s theory is partially supported and lacks empirical internal consistency” (Braxton, 2000, p. 3). Braxton and colleagues provided for the academy “various approaches to the revision of Tinto’s theory as well as new theoretical directions” (p. 3).

And finally, according to Gabelnick et al. (1990), “one of the strongest selling points for learning communities is their impressive record in retaining students” (p. 63). Retention is a natural byproduct of students making connections with other students and faculty
members who participate in the learning communities. The combination of student bonding, active learning, and social connecting that happens in learning communities supports Tinto’s (1987) observation that “membership in at least one supportive community, whatever its relationship to the center of campus life, may be sufficient to ensure persistence” (p. 68).

When Gabelnick et al. (1990) conducted a qualitative study of learning communities to listen to the voices of students involved, they discovered several recurring themes. For the most part, students commented on “their sense of involvement more than anything else—with their peers, their faculty, with college in general, and with themselves as maturing learners” (p. 57). Other themes that surfaced during the study were a “sense of belonging,” an appreciation for collaboration and working with other students who did not always have the same insights or ideas about classroom subjects and materials, an ability to establish connections between courses, and a deeper understanding and appreciation of self.

Besides the institution’s benefit of retention, research also supports that students are impacted in many ways. Student performance and development are increased because students bond through friendships and academic collaboration (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Learning communities are successful in establishing community for students in two major arenas:

Socially, participation in a learning community helps students feel comfortable, make friends, and develop a support network. Academically, the learning community experience facilitates communication between students and faculty and virtually guarantees the establishment of a working relationship with a faculty member around a shared interest. (Matthews et al., 1997, p. 467)
As higher education moves into the twenty-first century, it is becoming increasingly obvious that learning communities are not a fad. More and more college campuses are implementing learning community programs. When asked about the continued interest in learning communities, Cross (1998) suggested that learning communities continue to be relevant because “they are compatible with changing epistemologies about the nature of knowledge, because research generally supports their educational benefits, and because they help institutions of higher education meet their missions of educating students for lives of work and service” (p. 11).

**Rationale for Learning Communities**

The literature supports several reasons why learning communities should be considered as a viable option for higher education. Cross (1990) suggested three reasons for the high level of interest in learning communities: “*philosophical* (because learning communities fit into a changing philosophy of knowledge), *researched based* (because learning communities fit with what research tells us about learning), *pragmatic* (because learning communities work)” (p. 4). In their justification for learning communities, Shapiro and Levine (1999a) listed the following reasons for launching a learning community initiative:

- Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups
- Encouraging integration of the curriculum
- Helping students establish academic and social support networks
- Providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college
- Bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways
- Focusing faculty and students on learning outcomes
Providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs

Offering a critical lens for examining the first-year experience (p. 3)

MacGregor (2000) echoed Levine and Shapiro when she claimed that learning communities “create important pockets of community as well as a vision of deeper practice in our institutions” (p. 59).

In their second book on learning communities, Levine Laufgraben et al. (2004) maintained that besides a call for reform in higher education, changing demographics, new methods of curriculum delivery, and current information about how people learn all have influenced more colleges and universities to implement learning community initiatives. Ultimately, it is the fact that “we now have compelling evidence to suggest that creating learning communities on campuses leads to greater student success in college” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999a, p. 15), which is rationale enough to take the necessary steps to create a learning community program on any college campus. Also citing the need for reform in undergraduate education, Smith et al. (2004) made the following claim about learning communities:

At their best, learning communities embody an analysis of what is needed to reform higher education (curricular restructuring), a theory of learning (based on current research), a commitment to certain educational goals (putting student learning at the center of our work), and a commitment to the importance of community (a necessary condition for learning). (p. 22)

Schoem (2002) outlined his rationale for learning communities in the following comment:

The name, “learning community,” affirms two important principles: that of
learning and that of a community of learners. It suggests that course content, pedagogy and learning are inherently intertwined, and it explicitly puts forward the long-standing, though sometimes overlooked, notion of a community of scholars—both faculty and students—coming together for deeper learning. (p. 53)

And finally, Strommer (1999) stated that college and university campuses are introducing learning communities because they believe the linkages between classes are becoming “an effective way to address some of the most pressing concerns of the academy—disengaged, passive, and unevenly prepared students, a fragmented curriculum with little connection between and among courses, and a high freshman [sic] to sophomore year attrition rate” (p. 41).

Learning Community Models

As stated earlier, Levine Laufgraben et al. (2004) maintained “there is a sense that no ‘one size fits all,’ and classifications, as well as models of learning communities, vary as needed to adapt to distinct campus cultures” (p. 20). Indeed, the gamut as to types of learning communities runs from every class on campus being a part of a learning community, like the situation at Evergreen State College, to a learning community as simple as a Freshman Interest Group (FIG), which is a one-hour seminar attached to first-year students’ schedules to create multiple discussion cohorts from larger lecture-based classes. These FIGs help the students make connections because it is easier to have a discussion with 20 students, rather than 250 or more.

Learning communities can also be used in a variety of places in the academy. For example, large universities may use FIGs to break down large lecture courses into smaller cohort groups for discussion purposes, or universities may use living-learning communities.
in their residential halls. On the other hand, community colleges may use these cohorts of students in a combination linkage between an academic class, such as writing or speaking, with a vocational training program. Also common on community college campuses is the use of learning communities in their developmental education programs. My Midwestern community college has found it beneficial to attach a studies strategies class with a content-based course, as well as an orientation to college linked with a writing class.

According to Levine Laufgraben et al. (2004), the following four models are most often duplicated on college campuses when forming learning communities: “(1) paired or clustered courses, (2) cohorts in large courses or FIGs . . . , (3) team-taught programs, and (4) residence-based learning communities, models that intentionally link the classroom-based learning community with a residential life component” (p. 5). Each of these four models is briefly discussed in the following paragraphs. However, before discussing the models, it is important to recognize how Shapiro and Levine (1999a) further distinguish between the models by using four characteristics to describe each model in further detail:

**Curricular structure:** How courses and students are organized to form communities.

**Faculty role:** The levels of faculty development and ways faculty collaborate to achieve curricular integration.

**Cocurricular opportunities:** The ways that a learning communities [sic] approach integrates students’ in-class and out of-class learning experiences.

**Opportunities for peer leadership:** Leadership roles in learning communities for community members or upper-division students. (p. 22)
Because this study focuses on faculty participation in learning communities, it will be important to consider the faculty role characteristic within each of the four models.

**Paired or Clustered Communities**

For the purposes of integrating curriculum and helping students make connections with other students, as well as with curriculum, paired (sometimes referred to as linked communities) or clustered communities (clustered communities involve three or more classes) are the first model created on campuses. According to Gabelnick et al. (1990), these communities are the “simplest” to create. The classes are listed “in the class schedule so that a specific cohort of students co-register for them. The two faculty of the linked courses teach individually, but to some degree they coordinate syllabi and/or assignments” (p. 20). There are a variety of ways to link classes, but often the links involve combining a skill class, such as writing, with a content-based class, such as an introductory sociology or psychology class. “Linked courses or clusters also might become foundation courses for a major, a platform of courses for study in a minor, or a set of general education courses linked around an interdisciplinary theme” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 77).

However, because the classes are taught in isolation, it would be easy for faculty to simply link their classes. It is important that faculty who participate in paired or clustered learning communities do more than simply link their classes. Unfortunately, if the classes are only linked and have no apparent faculty coordination involved between the two classes, the learning community only becomes an opportunity for students to connect socially. Shapiro and Levine (1999a) defined faculty roles in paired or cluster courses in the following manner:

It is a mistake to think that learning communities can be created simply by linking courses through a registration process. A more accurate way to explain the
complex role of faculty in paired-course learning communities would be to use a sliding scale of involvement and investment. (p. 25)

Although the ideal situation would be faculty working together to plan syllabi and course activities that are integrated or shared, “achieving integrated teaching and learning in linked courses takes a commitment of time and resources” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999a, p. 25).

**Cohorts in Large Courses**

The FIG is the common type of cohort formed from larger classes. FIGs are more commonly found in large university settings and they are designed as a support group for the members in the FIG. Each member of a FIG attends two or three larger classes together and then they meet at least once a week, usually with a peer advisor, to discuss issues related to the larger classes or to share frustrations and concerns about the first-year experience (Levine Laufgraben et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2004; Gabelnick et al., 1990). “As a general rule, the student-led FIG seminar and its associated activities become the key place for building community. Therefore, the recruitment and training of FIG peer advisers is crucial” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 150).

For the most part, faculty members who participate in these types of communities work and teach in isolation and do little, if any, coordinating with the other faculty members in the FIG. If faculty do participate beyond the classroom with a FIG, it is usually with the peer advisor/teacher (Shapiro & Levine, 1999a). In addition to FIGs, Gabelnick et al. (1990) also discussed Federated Learning Communities (FLCs), which “‘federates’ diverse courses around an overarching theme, and invites up to forty students to co-register and travel as a small group within those larger courses” (pp. 26-27). However, what makes an FLC different from other learning communities is the use of a Master Learner, who is a “faculty member
from another discipline other than those of the federated courses. He or she is expected to become a learner with the students and to fulfill all the academic responsibilities of a student in each course” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 27). Master Learners are released from their regular teaching loads, except they usually facilitate an additional seminar that is used to unify or establish the theme of the federated courses.

**Team-Taught Programs**

Team-taught communities, also known as coordinated programs, can involve anywhere from two to five faculty members who work together in one coordinated effort (Levine Laufgraben et al., 2004). These types of communities demand the “most radical restructuring of typical course offerings. Here, members of the learning community—both faculty and students—are engaged . . . in interdisciplinary, active learning around themes” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 28). If the community involves four to five faculty members, this coordinated program would be a full load for both faculty and students for a particular semester; these communities also usually allow for opportunities to do creative scheduling. For example, “typical coordinated studies programs involve a mix of plenary sessions (lectures, films, or presentations) and small-group work (workshops, seminars, and lab session” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 29).

According to Levine Laufgraben et al. (2004), the faculty role in coordinated studies is much more involved. In fact, these “team-taught programs represent the most extensive approach in terms of curricular integration and faculty involvement” (p. 7). Shapiro and Levine (1999a) echoed the comment about faculty involvement, but they also stated that “team-taught programs are one of the most intensive models in terms of . . . faculty development” (p. 35). Faculty invest a serious time commitment to coordinated programs
before the classes begin because they must spend a considerable amount of time planning and coordinating assignments.

**Residence-Based Communities**

Resident-based learning communities, also known as living-learning communities (LLC), add another dimension to the curricular models. Besides registering in a cohort of classes, the students also live together (Levine Laufgraben et al., 2004). According to Schoem (2004), “living-learning programs represent two central ideals in higher education: learning and community” (p. 130). One of the benefits of living-learning communities is that academic discussions often spill from the classroom to the residence halls more so than in regular residential situations. Oftentimes, the classes are held within the residence halls and it is not uncommon for faculty to have their offices in the residence hall, or in some instances, even live in the residence hall (Shapiro & Levine, 1999a; Smith et al., 2004).

The faculty involvement in living-learning communities varies from institution to institution. One end of the spectrum has faculty very involved to the extent that they live in the residence hall, while minimal involvement might mean attending a program or sharing a meal with the students at the residence hall. Regardless of the level of involvement, it appears that faculty have more involvement in living-learning communities than just their classroom experiences. Shapiro and Levine (1999a) suggested that an additional benefit for faculty in these communities is the “opportunities for [them] to visit and meet with students in their learning environments” (p. 38). Garrett and Zabriskie (2003) maintained that “faculty members who are more intentionally linked to students through living-learning environments have the potential of increasing the richness of the LLC experience for the students” (p. 43).
Learning Community Challenges and Concerns

Although the majority of the research that focuses on learning communities is positive and discusses the benefits and productive outcomes of learning communities both for faculty and students, there has been some writing about challenges, cautions, and concerns, or negative aspects of learning communities. Time commitment is one of the first challenges that faculty face. Smith et al. (2004) commented on the extra time that it takes to plan for learning communities before implementation and during the course of the semester. They claimed that “not every faculty member is prepared to commit the amount of time necessary, nor is every teacher comfortable with the intense, public nature of team teaching, the give-and-take of collaborative planning, and the demands of designing and giving students feedback on integrative assignments” (pp. 88-89). Because of the increased demands on time, faculty “burnout potential” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999b, p. 5) is a challenge to consider.

Because learning communities are a paradigm shift and a change in the culture of an institution, several sources discuss issues of implementation; concerns about the administration’s role; the challenge of interesting and recruiting faculty, as well as supporting them once they are involved in the initiative; and finally, the challenge of sustaining a learning community initiative once it is established (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Levin Laufgraben et al., 2004; Shapiro & Levine, 1999a; Smith et al., 2004). A closely related issue to the culture of some institutions is the effect of learning communities on promotion and tenure (Smith et al., 2004).

Schoem (2002) maintained that “the challenges to integrating undergraduate initiatives are not insignificant” (p. 54). He outlined five challenges. First, collaboration has challenges of its own because it involves more time and the additional faculty members
complicate the work. Second, oftentimes there is little institutional support and limited resources. “Third, leaders are needed who are boundary-crossers, people who possess the skill and the necessary will—in spite of institutional barriers—to work in tandem with people and programs representing fields, initiatives, and perspectives that differ from their own” (p. 54). Fourth, Schoem also referenced the time commitment, and fifth, he claimed that “leaders can quickly become over-extended and frustrated because their effectiveness can be limited by having to work without an institutional infrastructure” (p. 55).

Jaffee (2004) has also outlined some negative aspects of learning communities. First, he claimed that first-year programs “potentially retard the students’ academic development” (p. 2) because they isolate young students from older students who are usually more mature, as well as more serious about their academics. Jaffé also discussed the problems that surface because of group dynamics. Because students in learning communities spend much more time together than students in stand-alone classes, they tend to form tighter bonds, which can develop into a tension between the instructor and the students. “Indeed, professors who teach in learning communities frequently detect a more adversarial, us-versus-them attitude among the students—a kind of class conflict. Students can appear less respectful, chattier, and more disruptive” (p. 2).

**Learning Communities and Faculty**

Because the focus of this study is on faculty participation in learning communities, it is important to consider the various topics addressed in the literature specifically related to faculty. This section will discuss the benefits of faculty participation, reasons or causes as to how they experience rejuvenation from their participation, how teaching in a learning
community affects faculty pedagogy, and how learning communities can be agents in faculty development.

**Faculty Benefits**

Besides benefiting the institutions’ retention campaigns and assisting students with learning and connecting, learning communities also have become very beneficial to the faculty members who participate in them. Originally, paying stipends for creating learning communities and reassigned time for teaching in coordinated, or team-taught, communities were the only obvious benefits and rewards for faculty participation. However, the list of faculty benefits, as suggested by Lenning and Ebbers (1999), is much more extensive:

- Learning communities allow faculty to work together more closely and effectively.
- Learning communities lead to increased continuity and integration in the curriculum.
- Learning communities constitute a valuable activity for faculty development.
- Learning communities help participating faculty to view their disciplines in a more revealing light.
- Learning communities encourage faculty to share knowledge with one another.
- Participation in learning communities broadens faculty members’ knowledge about pedagogy.
- Learning communities promote collaborative, active teaching.
- Participation in learning communities tends to increase collegial trust.
Faculty generally find their work with learning communities satisfying.

Faculty appreciate the results of learning communities on the amount and quality of students’ learning, students’ enjoyment of learning, and students’ values and satisfaction.

Faculty become less isolated when they participate in learning communities. (pp. 56-57)

According to MacGregor (2000), when faculty discussed the value of teaching in learning communities, they made the following claims:

They describe how team-planning or team-teaching a program opens fascinating windows on their discipline and their teaching. They speak about feeling connected to a larger enterprise. They reflect on the value of working closely with colleagues. They point to the sense of belonging they feel in a large, sometimes faceless institution. (p. 59)

In his dissertation research, Tollefson (1991) surveyed 118 community college faculty members from 14 institutions. An analysis of his research brought one strong theme to the surface: “Faculty members who have initiated, planned, and taught in collaborative learning communities feel empowered by their experience. They indicated that teaching in learning communities was invigorating” (p. 10). As a result of their being “empowered” and “energized,” Tollefson’s surveyed faculty claimed that their learning communities provided “improved teaching and learning environment[s] and better performance—by students and themselves alike” (p. 10).

Rye (1997) also focused her doctoral research on faculty and their professional development and “revitalization” while teaching in learning communities at community
colleges. Evenbeck, Jackson, and McGrew (1999) echoed Rye’s discoveries of revitalization. However, they expanded the development beyond the personal benefit to the institution. They maintained that “since participating faculty consistently assert that the experience of teaching in learning communities is personally rewarding and contributes to professional growth, faculty development itself must be defined as both an unanticipated individual reward and beneficial institutional outcome” (p. 53). They also suggested that the faculty development benefits are “transformative” and that the “transformative power of the learning community is perhaps the most unexpected and exciting outcome of all” (p. 53).

**Factors Causing Rejuvenation**

While not using the terminology of faculty or professional development, several other studies discussed faculty rejuvenation and vitality (Ellerton 2005; Hodge, Lewis, Kramer, & Hughes, 2001; Matthews et al., 1997; Minkler, 2000; Moore, 2000; Rasmussen & Skinner, 1997; Schadd, 1997). Most of the research suggested that faculty rejuvenation begins with the camaraderie that exists between the faculty members before they form a teaching/learning team. This camaraderie develops into a synergy, which does not exist in stand-alone classes; the synergy also produces collaboration, collegiality, and cohesiveness that are new experiences for the participating faculty members. These experiences are the factors that eventually lead to rejuvenation.

Besides camaraderie, collaboration also influences rejuvenation. When teaching and learning together, faculty must cooperate and work together in the planning, teaching, and assessing processes of the learning community experience, certainly more than when they teach in isolation in stand-alone classes. During the beginning planning stages when faculty have to discuss how they plan to integrate their curriculums, faculty need to know how to
work together. Levin Laugfraben et al. (2004) suggested that “a useful tool to stimulate the conversation [about integrating curriculum] is the Teaching Goals Inventory (TGI) from Angelo and Cross” (p. 81). This survey allows each member of the team to evaluate individual teaching goals. Ultimately, the faculty can share their similarities and differences about teaching goals and decide how to develop the learning community curriculum around their similarities and differences. Reason suggests that without camaraderie and collaboration, the teaching/learning experience would be painful for faculty and students involved.

Although the collaboration requires more time and energy than preparing for stand-alone classes, Rasmussen and Skinner (1997) made the following claim concerning the benefits of this collaboration:

Faculty consistently mention the pleasure they experienced working cooperatively with other faculty members in LC courses. They do not want to return to the isolation of more traditional classroom teaching. They feel revitalized, discover new possibilities in teaching, and see their subject matter in new ways. They feel braver, willing to take risks and are more creative in their approach to instruction. A kind of synergy emerges from the combined thinking of the team teachers. (p. 20)

Gabelnick et al. (1990) reinforced the consensus concerning the value of faculty collaboration in learning communities. They suggested that this type of collaboration affords faculty members the “opportunity to work with a team in a laboratory for improving teaching that is tangible, with daily opportunities for reinforcement” (p. 80). In their estimation, such “modeling, mentoring, and learning inherent in [these situations] are invaluable in faculty
development” (p. 80). And finally, Dodge and Kendall (2004) maintained that “regardless of
the format, faculty collaboration nearly always stimulates growth” (p. 153)

Yet another source of rejuvenation—collegiality—is an opportunity for faculty
members to experience learning together by discussing their students and their pedagogy.
According to Kruse (1999), the students, as well as the instructors benefited:

While collegial school settings provide much more in the way of consistent
expectations for students, as well as providing more intellectual and social
interaction for teachers, the most exciting forms of such interaction result in
genuine collaboration, the essence of which is codevelopment. (p. 2)

Along the same lines, Matthews (1994) used the term *colleagueship* and suggested that
faculty collegiality in learning communities “breaks down the isolation of faculty and the
essential loneliness of teaching as currently conceived and executed” (p. 187).

Finally, the issue of cohesiveness also empowers and revitalizes faculty members.
MacGregor (2002) defined cohesiveness as “putting people in the same boat.” She
maintained the following about cohesiveness:

[The] learning community idea takes the major building blocks of the given
structure: the curriculum, faculty members and student affairs staff, and often
graduate TAs, and other staff specialists, but it literally reforms how they do their
work to create both coherence and focus, and synergy and creativity at the same
time.

MacGregor also suggested that all parts of an institution—students, faculty, staff, and the
institution’s culture—change for the better.
Learning Communities’ Influences on Pedagogy

Strommer (1999) admitted that her work does not represent “a quantifiable research project” (p. 42). However, she discovered when she surveyed several University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College faculty members who have taught in learning community classrooms that “most faculty report that they do not change their basic teaching strategies for the learning community” (p. 43). On the other hand, Shapiro and Levine (1999a) discovered that “all of the professors interviewed for [a case study at Temple University] reported that teaching in a learning community had changed their pedagogy or philosophy toward teaching” (p. 182). The case study also revealed that many of the faculty involved in Temple’s learning communities program gained “a renewed sense of excitement toward teaching [and] were so pleased with the success of their learning communities courses that they implemented changes in their teaching styles in their non-learning communities courses” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999a, p. 182).

Similarly, Gabelnick et al. (1990) maintained that “it is virtually impossible to participate in a learning community without being transformed in some way” (p. 54). Lenning and Ebbers (1999) also claimed in their section on benefits for faculty that learning communities “constitute a valuable activity for faculty development [and that] participation in learning communities broadens faculty members’ knowledge about pedagogy” (p. 57).

According to Dodge and Kendall (2004), “learning communities move the focus of classroom learning from content-centered and teacher-centered to student-centered and learning-centered education, reinforcing current pedagogical trends” (p. 154). In other words, learning communities create excellent environments for active learning. Because “learning communities are often powerful vehicles for the practice of collaborative learning and the
promotion of various forms of active learning [among the students], . . . their impact on pedagogy is usually critical and long lasting” (Gabelnick, et al., 1990, p. 85). If the impact is “long lasting,” it only stands to reason that the changed pedagogy is carried into the non-learning community classes that the learning community instructors teach. In addition, the team teaching situation creates an environment with a “new window on pedagogy through which [learning community faculty] can directly observe how other skillful teachers think and act” (Gabelnick, et al., 1990, p. 80). Levine Laufgraben et al. (2004) maintained that “good pedagogy in learning communities requires moving from teaching alone to teaching with others. Team teaching requires team building, collaborative skills, and collective responsibility” (p. 68).

When Smith et al. (2004) discussed the roles of teachers in active learning environments, especially learning communities, they suggested that teachers assume several different possible roles:

- *designers* of environments that engage students’ curiosity and motivation, . . .
- *observers*, . . . *coaches* in the sense of providing both encouragement and feedback, . . . *midwives*, assisting at the birth of inchoate ideas, . . . *facilitator[s]*,
- . . . *referee[s]*, . . . [and] *co-learners* with other teachers and students as they engage in mutual inquiry. (p. 121)

Once faculty see the level of activity and participation that occurs with active learning in learning communities, it is not uncommon for them to adapt these pedagogical strategies in their stand-alone classroom environments.
Faculty Development

Several sources (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Levine Laufgraben et al., 2004; Matthews, 1994) that focus on learning community research discuss faculty development in terms of working with faculty and offering developmental opportunities for them while participating in a learning community teaching experience. While this is a valuable form of faculty development, for the purposes of this study, faculty development is being defined as the “broad range of activities that institutions used to renew or assist faculty in their roles . . . to sustain their productivity and vitality” (Steinert, 2000, p. 2).

Watts and Hammons (2002) maintained that several factors heralded the need for faculty development in the community colleges in the early 1970s. For example, the growing demand for “increased effectiveness and efficiency due to competition for limited tax dollars, and beginning public demands for accountability [and] the development of a technology of instruction with potential for improved instruction unknown to most faculty” (p. 5) are some of the factors at the top of the list that cemented the need for increased faculty development. And now, after 30 years of working towards an improvement of faculty development, “programs are running the gamut from fledgling programs to programs that are comprehensive” (Watts & Hammons, 2002, p. 7). In fact, O’Banion and Associates (1994) maintained that “no segment invests . . . [more] time, money, and energy in faculty development to enhance instructional effectiveness” (p. 123) than community colleges.

According to Angelo (1994), “improving the quality of teaching and learning [was] the primary mandate for community colleges in the 1990s. To fulfill that mandate, they must find ways to realize the promise of faculty development” (p. 116). Bellanca (2002) claimed that “more than at any other time in their history, community colleges need to plan and
provide comprehensive ongoing professional development programs for their faculty and staff” (p. 35). Grant and Keim (2002) stated, “If community colleges are to recruit and retain quality faculty, a formal, comprehensive development program to orient, enculturate, renew and develop all faculty is crucial to the success of institutional missions and individual faculty goals” (p. 805).

Although the need for faculty development has been recognized, Angelo (1994) maintained that “there is little evidence that it has effectively improved teaching and learning” (p. 116). Besides a lack of evidence for effectiveness, most community colleges face multiple challenges in developing successful faculty development opportunities. Some of these challenges are the constant struggle for adequate funding, pressure from the public for improvement in higher education, the influence of the consumer mentality, and a constantly changing and growing diverse student population (Angelo, 1994). In addition to these challenges, Watts and Hammons (2002) cited two additional challenges for faculty development in the twenty-first century: “As a programmatic challenge, [faculty] development should be a considered a means rather than an end, . . . [and] it should include personal development” (pp. 8-9).

Various programs and activities can be designed to initiate or improve faculty development. Burnstad (1994) maintained that faculty development “refers to the programs that focus on the training, development, and revitalization of faculty. They are often comprehensive in that they include orientation, teaching skills training, recognition programs, career development programs, and preretirement planning programs” (p. 388). Angelo (1994) suggested that because “teaching and learning are at the heart of the community college mission, . . . instructional development—aimed directly at improving
teaching effectiveness—should be the primary focus of faculty development efforts in the 1990s” (p. 118). In addition, Smith et al. (2004) made the following claim about faculty development:

Coplanning and team teaching are themselves legitimate faculty development opportunities. . . . Indeed, many faculty involved in team teaching regard it as the most important form of faculty development that they undertake because it is continuous, day-to-day, and executed in the context of real classrooms with real students. (p. 293)

While researching and writing on the need to create a sense of community among community college faculty, Weisman and Marr (2002) considered opportunities for faculty development as one of the “factors that affect faculty’s sense of belonging” (p. 100). When they offered strategies for community building, Weisman and Marr suggested that faculty need opportunities for lifelong learning that will enhance their classroom performance. Weisman and Marr also focused on the need to improve opportunities for collegiality—one of the faculty benefits of participation in learning communities—because it enhances community building.

Murray (2002) made the following observation:

Faculty development in the community colleges is a mixed bag. Numerous examples of effective programs can be found in the literature. However, these programs are short-term and highly idiosyncratic and neither transfer well to other campuses nor have lasting effects. Faculty development programs rarely reach the faculty most in need of assistance and frequently irritate them. They are rarely tied directly to the institution’s goals or mission and are not usually evaluated in
any meaningful way. (p. 96)

According to Cohen and Brawer (1996), the issue of faculty development becomes even more complicated because there is a difference between what the faculty constitute as appropriate faculty development opportunities and what the administration deems adequate programming. Faculty would prefer to attend “discipline-based institutes, released time, sabbatical leaves, and tuition reimbursements for . . . workshops on pedagogy, [whereas] administrators, in contrast, [prefer] workshops and seminars offered on campus for the instructors, with the content centering on pedagogy and community college-related concerns” (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 81).

Watts and Hammons (2002) discussed the challenges that faculty development programs face. They claimed that “there are still colleges in which [faculty development] is viewed more as an ‘add on’ than a necessity” (p. 8). Watts and Hammons suggested that buy-in from the institutions’ presidents is a prerequisite if faculty are to see the need and value of development programs as vital to the institutions’, as well as their own, success. When the presidents support faculty and staff development, these developmental opportunities and programs are considered “part of the cost of doing business and too important a function to be left until last in budget allocation” (Watts & Hammons, 2002, p. 8). In other words, these programs need to be institutionalized. Besides the challenges referenced above, community colleges have to respond to other problem areas. For example, Watts and Hammons (2002) maintained that personal development—“parenting, money management, preparation for retirement, diet and weight control, and physical fitness” (p. 9)—needs attention along with professional development topics and issues. One final challenge they discussed was who and how to coordinate these faculty development programs.
O’Banion and Associates (1994) identified the following seven barriers that hinder faculty involvement in faculty development programs:

· Most faculty development efforts focus primarily on improving teaching and only secondarily, if at all, on improving learning.

· Many programs try to “develop” faculty, rather than helping them become truly self-developing.

· Many programs do not recognize the importance of discipline-specific “ways of knowing,” teaching, and learning in colleges.

· Many teachers fail to recognize the need for and potential usefulness of faculty development activities in their own teaching.

· Many programs fail to capitalize effectively on faculty motivation.

· Many programs are perceived to lack intellectual substance.

· Many programs are not planned and organized for success. (pp. 126-133)

Because of the necessity of collaborative work involved in coordinating a learning community, Evenbeck et al. (1999) maintained that “learning communities . . . present themselves as outstanding venues for faculty development” (p. 56). Furthermore, they claim that faculty development should be considered an “outcome” of a learning community initiative that should become a “highly desirable institutional goal” (p. 57). Also, because learning communities depend on working collaboratively and provide opportunities for faculty members to teach and learn in community, they become one of the techniques suggested by O’Banion and Associates (1994) for institutions to eliminate the barriers that hinder faculty development. They believe there needs to be a move to change the “focus from individuals to communities. [Institutions need a] shift from assisting isolated individual
faculty members to assisting faculty as members of departmental, program, and institutional
teaching-learning communities” (pp. 134-135). In other words, faculty need to work more
together than in isolation, and teaching in learning communities is an excellent venue for
such experiences. Indeed, Matthews (1994) believed that “participation in a learning
community is a faculty development activity [because] it gives faculty a different lens on
their disciplines and facilitates their working with each other—an opportunity many welcome
with relief” (p. 188).

Conclusion

The literature supports not only the need for quality faculty development programs,
but also the fact that faculty who participate in learning communities become change agents.
Students are changed, faculty become empowered and are changed radically because of their
revitalization, and institutional cultures are redefined because learning communities create
opportunities for collaboration, collegiality, and cohesiveness. As Gabelnick et al. (1990)
maintained, “a learning community’s extended association circumvents many of the real
problems that surround traditional faculty development offerings on campuses, which tend to
be superficial, exclusively related to research, or detached from a faculty member’s
disciplinary settings” (p. 80).

Although the literature, such as Tollefson’s (1991) and Rye’s (1997), indicates that
faculty are rejuvenated or revitalized as a result of their participation in learning
communities, these ideas of rejuvenation and revitalization, as well as such concepts as
synergy and camaraderie that are discussed in the literature above are end results and what
faculty experience in their teaching and learning in community experiences. However, the
literature doesn’t discuss how this rejuvenation, revitalization, synergy, and camaraderie
occur because this information about faculty participation in learning communities has been gathered through surveys; anecdotal comments; or one-time, stand-alone interviews. Because of the in-depth phenomenological interview process, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 3, and the rich description that evolved from the interviews, this study has added new insights and depth to the existing body of literature. The participants involved in this study were asked to make meaning of their pedagogical changes that have occurred because of their teaching and learning experiences in their learning community classrooms. Although a list of faculty benefits, such as the one referenced earlier by Lenning and Ebbers (1999), can be helpful to some extent, such a list only references the benefits, such as promoting collaboration and active teaching. Such a list does not explain how or why such benefits are manifested in teaching careers. It has been, in fact, the purpose of this study to show, rather than merely tell, how and why faculty development can be enhanced through the engaged pedagogy of a learning community environment.
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the research design. In this chapter, I will define qualitative research and explain why it was effective for this study. Specifically, I will address phenomenology as the appropriate lens for this study and explain how the method of in-depth interviewing was used to collect the data. Participant selection is discussed, as well as data collection and data analysis. The issues of trustworthiness in qualitative research, ethics in interviewing, and the researcher’s reflexivity are also addressed in this chapter.

Qualitative Methodology

“The issue in any qualitative research is not whether another investigator would discover the same concepts to describe or interpret the data but whether the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to” (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992, p. 1358). Indeed, because of the rich description from the voices of the participants, it was my intent with this study to discover data that is “worth paying attention to.” Merriam (2002) listed four characteristics of qualitative research: “Researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experience. . . . The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. . . . The process is inductive. . . . The product of qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive” (pp. 4-5). It was because of these characteristics that I chose a qualitative study. I wanted to record and analyze the stories—the rich descriptions—of faculty members who have participated in learning communities, and I am, as a researcher, attracted to the inductive process, as well as my role as the “primary instrument” in the collection of the study’s data. According to Merriam (2002), “the key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by
individuals in interaction with their world” (p. 3). By using the method of the in-depth interview process, which is described later in this chapter, I was able to record the “rich descriptions” of my participants as they attempted to make meaning in the three following areas:

- Their life histories in education
- Their participation in learning communities
- Their perceptions about the effect of learning communities on their pedagogy and development as a faculty members.

Creswell (1998) offered the following eight reasons for using qualitative research as an appropriate method for conducting research:

- First, select a qualitative study because of the nature of the research question. In a qualitative study, the research question often starts with a how or a what so that initial forays into the topic describe what is going on.
- Second, choose a qualitative study because the topic needs to be explored.
- Third, use a qualitative study because of the need to present a detailed view of the topic.
- Fourth, choose a qualitative approach in order to study individuals in their natural setting.
- Fifth, select a qualitative approach because of interest in writing in a literary style.
- Sixth, employ a qualitative study because of sufficient time and resources to spend extensive data collection in the field and detailed data analysis of “text” information.
• Seventh, select a qualitative approach because *audiences are receptive* to qualitative research.

• Eighth, and finally, employ a qualitative approach to emphasize the researcher’s role as an *active learner* who can tell the story from the participants’ view rather than as an “expert” who passes judgment on participants. (pp. 17-18)

Indeed, I selected qualitative research for my dissertation research because I could adopt these eight reasons. First, my primary research question, as outlined in Chapter 1, focuses on the *how*: As a result of teaching in a learning community, do faculty perceive that they have altered their pedagogy? If so, how does the altered pedagogy affect their stand-alone classes? The other three research questions under this umbrella question also employ *how*. Because I was interested in their perceptions about their pedagogy, I was focusing on the “emic view,” or as Krathwohl (1998) suggested, I was interested in how my participants “perceive[d] the meaning of the world around them, [specifically their involvement in learning communities], and [I sought] to view it through their eyes” (p. 235).

Although the amount of research on learning communities increases each year, there continues to be a need for more exploration. As referenced earlier in this document, in her doctoral research, Ellertson (2005) maintained “current national discussions about learning communities have illuminated the need for additional research on and assessment of faculty involvement in learning communities” (p. 8). By capturing the rich descriptions offered from the interviews, I have been provided with the opportunity to record and analyze details concerning the participants’ interpretations of their involvement while teaching in learning communities.
As a form of natural inquiry, I intended to interview my participants in their natural setting. These interviews were either conducted in their offices or classrooms on their campus. The informal literary style that allows the use of first person in writing is very inviting to me because it allows me to be an intimate part of the study. Because I intended to employ multiple in-depth phenomenological interviews, I was involved in “extensive data collection.”

My involvement with the learning community initiative on a national level has assured me that interest exists in all scholarship about learning communities. Once again, it was the capturing of the rich descriptions that further invites audience interest both at the national level, such as at the Washington Center in Olympia, Washington, and the local level at various colleges and universities that are thinking about becoming involved in learning community initiatives. And finally, the eighth reason for conducting qualitative research also involves my role in the study and my opportunity to be an “active learner” in this research process.

**Phenomenology**

The specific qualitative lens that I applied is phenomenology. Because “a phenomenological study focuses on the essence or structure of an experience” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7), it was the best lens to use when studying how faculty members interpret their learning community experiences. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) maintained that “researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interaction to ordinary people in particular situations” (p. 23). It is, in fact, how individuals construct their reality that is important in a phenomenological study. “Phenomenologists believe that multiple ways of interpreting experiences are available to each of us through interacting with
others, and that it is the meaning of our experiences that constitutes reality” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 23).

The only possible data sources in phenomenological research are those “informants who have lived the reality being investigated” (Baker et al., 1992, p. 1537). This information can be obtained via oral transmission, such as in a focus group or interview, or it can be obtained from written artifacts, such as journals or reports. In phenomenological studies, the sampling is determined by the phenomenon being studied, which means the “sampling is purposive. In keeping with its aim of illuminating the richness of individual experience, the sample size is kept deliberately small” (Baker et al., 1992, p. 1538).

Method of Research

According to Seidman (1998), the “primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the ‘others’ who make up the organization or carry out the process” (p. 4). Seidman suggested that an interview is one of the best methods for comprehending the “meaning people involved in education make of the experience” (p. 4). This study followed Seidman’s process of “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing” (p. 9). By the use of open-ended questions, interviewers use multiple interviews “to build upon and explore their participants’ responses” (p. 9) to the phenomenon being studied. Because of the subjective nature of a phenomenological study, Baker et al. (1992) suggested that the “interview questions [be] broad, open-ended and designed to avoid influencing the respondents’ answers in any way” (p. 1358). Because he maintained that “interviewers who propose to explore their topic by arranging a one-shot meeting with an ‘interviewee’ whom they have never met
tread on thin contextual ice” (p. 11), Seidman (1998) used three interviews to accomplish this in-depth approach.

Seidman (1998) indicated that “the first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience” (p.11). The purpose of this interview is not to ask “why?” but “how?” Seidman identified this interview as a life history, which sets the stage or prepares the way for the second interview. For the purpose of this study, the first interview focused on how the participants became involved in teaching, specifically in the community college arena. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were designed to draw out teaching experiences that satisfy and frustrate the participants, as well as discuss their challenges in the community college setting and what advice they would offer soon-to-be community college instructors.

“The purpose of the second interview [was] to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants’ present experience in the topic area of the study” (Seidman, 1998, p. 12). In other words, for this study, I wanted the participants to focus on their experiences while teaching in learning communities. Here, the interview questions were designed to collect details about their participation in learning communities. For example, how did they become involved in learning communities and how has collaboration, collegiality, and camaraderie with other faculty members been affected as a result of their participation in learning communities.

And finally, the purpose of the third interview was to ask participants “to reflect on the meaning of their experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 12). As a result of their life history as an educator and, specifically, their experiences in the learning community classrooms, I asked the participants to make meaning of these experiences and to reflect on how they perceived
that their pedagogy and participation in “other” college responsibilities were affected as a result of participating in learning community environments. I wanted them to reflect on how they grew professionally because of their learning community experiences and whether or not they perceived learning communities as effective vehicles for faculty development.

Seidman recommended that each of the three interviews last 90 minutes and that they be spaced from three days to a week apart. However, Seidman further maintained that “as long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure and the duration and spacing of interviews can certainly be explored” (p. 15). Until participants for this study were identified, the issues of “duration and spacing of interviews” could not be determined. Because no community college in Iowa besides mine has had a learning community initiative up and running long enough to meet the participant criteria, the interview participants had to be from out of state. Ultimately, the participants were selected from a community college in a metropolitan area in the Southwestern United States.

**Pilot Study**

During the summer semester of academic year 2006, I conducted a pilot study with one of my colleagues from my Midwestern community college. I used the interview protocol approved by the IRB for the interview. The pilot study gave me the opportunity to test the interview questions and work with my equipment. As a result of the pilot, I added several questions to the first two interviews. While completing the pilot study, I also realized that the first two interviews wouldn’t last 90 minutes each, as Seidman (1998) suggested. Concerned about the shortness of the interviews, I consulted with my Major Professor, and she made the following remarks: “The point of the pilot is to determine if the questions work, what
questions are missing, what needs reordering and what needs to be rephrased. Do not worry about the length of the interview. It is the responses that you are concerned about” (N. J. Evans, e-mail communication, July 20, 2006). As a result of the two interviews lasting about 40 minutes each, I decided, since I would be traveling out of state to conduct my interviews, I would arrange to conduct the first two interviews back-to-back. The pilot study also gave me an opportunity to work with my transcriber and to read and analyze interview transcriptions.

Participant Selection

There are several cities in the Midwest—Chicago and Kansas City, to name a couple—that have community colleges with very active learning community initiatives. Originally, I intended to contact the coordinators of these learning community initiatives and obtain the names and e-mail addresses of potential participants. However, while attending the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities in Olympia, Washington, in June of 2006, I met faculty and administration from [Casper County] Community College, a three-campus community college located in a metropolitan area of a Southwestern city. Because these individuals were in our team cluster, I had several opportunities during the week to learn about their learning community initiative, as well as share about our learning community initiative and my current involvement in research for my doctoral program. When I shared my need to have participants for my interviews, the coordinator for [Casper County’s] learning community initiative volunteered to become my gatekeeper. She was sure that several people from her college would be willing to participate.

Later in August, after explaining the in-depth interview structure and that the first two interviews would be conducted in person and the third via the telephone, my gatekeeper identified a variety of volunteers who were willing to participate in my research. Out of the
volunteers, I purposefully selected six individuals—three women and three men—who each represented a different teaching discipline: political science, math, sociology, history, English, and humanities. Besides fulfilling my original criteria—community college faculty with more than three semester of teaching in a learning community—I allowed two additional criteria to guide my selection: gender equity and variety of teaching disciplines. I was not concerned about additional factors such as age or years of teaching experience.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

In early September, I traveled to [Casper County] Community College and conducted the first two rounds of interviews. The participants were from all three campuses—three from the [Princeton] Campus in [Freeport], two from the [Conner’s Peak] Campus in [Maynard], and one from the [Spartan] Campus in [Parkersburg]. On Thursday, I interviewed the three from [Princeton] Campus, and then on Friday, I traveled in the morning to the [Conner’s Peak] Campus, and I wrapped up the interviews on Friday afternoon with the one participant from the [Spartan] Campus. All participants signed human consent forms before beginning the interview. As explained above, I conducted the first two rounds of interviews back-to-back. Each session lasted between an hour to an hour and twenty minutes. The interviews were conducted either in their individual offices or in a conference room. Each interview was recorded. During the interviews I kept field notes that were used later for checking the accuracy of the transcriptions and for filling in gaps where the transcriber wasn’t able to hear a word or phrase. The field notes became extremely valuable with the fifth interview because the taped interview had a fair amount of interference and the transcriber had difficulty hearing parts of the interview. My transcriber used the term “muddy” when she returned the second interview’s tape (A. King, e-mail communication, October 5, 2006).
Although I had offered to share the interview protocol with the participants before the interviews, none of them requested to see it. In my Research Journal on September 7, 2006, I made the following comment about the interview protocol: “I’m glad none of the participants asked to see the interview protocol ahead of time. By not having access to the questions ahead of time, they have had to be spontaneous in their responses.” I also noticed during the first two interviews that the participants struggled in their responses to the question about collegiality. Although I read the definition from my dissertation, which came as a suggestion from the pilot study, both [Jennifer Davenport] and [Andy Blackwell] hesitated with their responses and both basically began discussing collaboration. However, by changing the question for the third interview, the remaining participants focused on collegiality, as opposed to additional discussion about collaboration.

Before conducting the third round of interviews, I sent the tapes from the first two interviews to be transcribed by my paid transcriber, who was included in my human subjects IRB form. After I received these transcriptions back, I used them to write the first-person narratives for the profile section of Chapter 4. Once the narratives were completed, I e-mailed copies of each individual participant’s transcribed interviews and his or her profile for member checking. Also, it was necessary to have the first two interviews transcribed and analyzed before the third round of interviews. Although an interview protocol preexisted for the third round of interviews, the analysis helped prepare me for assisting the participants to reflect and make meaning. This analysis also gave me an opportunity to seek clarification from the first two interviews if it was necessary.

In December of 2006, I completed the third round of interviews. These interviews were conducted over the telephone. By using a speaker phone, I was able to record the
questions and responses. Once again, these tapes were sent to the transcriber, who later e-mailed the transcriptions to me. Also, these transcriptions were e-mailed to the participants for member checking and once Chapters 5 and 6 were completed, they were also e-mailed to the participants for potential feedback.

The participants received pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality. With the exception of each participant who had the privilege of reading his or her transcribed interview for member checking purposes, only my paid transcriber and I had access to the taped interviews and the transcriptions. However, the identities remained protected from the transcriber because the participants had pseudonyms. Originally, I had hoped to find additional archival documents, such as teaching journals kept by the participants, or other anecdotal sources, such as institution reports, to support the information collected from the interviews. However, no archival documents were available. Once the dissertation was successfully defended, the tapes and all transcriptions were destroyed.

As indicated above, once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed word-for-word, and via e-mail, I asked my participants to read the transcriptions and complete a member check for completeness and accuracy. I used Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) constant comparative method to process the data. They maintained that “the analyst need not have an explicit reason that he or she can state propositionally to justify assigning an incident to a category, but it is incumbent that the analyst engage in making comparisons” (p. 341). The themes that emerged are interpreted and discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the analysis and implications portions of this dissertation. Once the analysis and interpretation were completed, I shared the preliminary analysis with my participants, so that I could incorporate any comments or feedback that they had about the analysis. I also enlisted the expertise of
my peer reviewer who used the Peer Review Checklist (See Appendix C) to read and comment on my research and analysis. At the suggestion of my Major Professor, I selected my peer reviewer from the ranks of my colleagues. We decided that the two criteria to be the peer reviewer would be an individual who was familiar with both the learning community initiative and qualitative research.

**Trustworthiness**

When it comes to the issue of validity and reliability, which is very important for establishing rigor in quantitative research, “many qualitative researchers disagree with the epistemological assumptions underlying the notion of validity” (Seidman, 1998, p. 17). Indeed, some qualitative researchers, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985), have advocated for a “new vocabulary and rhetoric” (Seidman, p. 17) for discussing the notions of validity and reliability. Closely tied to the validity and reliability is the issue of objectivity. Kvale (1996) suggested that “validity comes to depend on the quality of craftsmanship during investigation, continually checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting the findings” (p. 241). For the purposes of this study, I found Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) “new rhetoric” to be the best way to handle the issues of validity and reliability appropriately.

In conventional inquiry, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), researchers have been concerned with and asked questions about “truth value,” or internal validity; “applicability,” or external validity; “consistency,” or reliability; and “neutrality,” or objectivity (p. 290). However, in naturalistic inquiry, these criteria are inappropriate. Instead, Lincoln and Guba suggested that acceptable rigor can be established by ensuring “trustworthiness” (p. 290), and they have asked the following questions about trustworthiness:
The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue? (p. 290)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered the following criteria to establish trustworthiness with qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. “The four terms ‘credibility,’ ‘transferability,’ ‘dependability,’ and ‘confirmability’ are, then, the naturalist’s equivalents for the conventional terms ‘internal validity,’ external validity,’ ‘reliability,’ and ‘objectivity’” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 300). In this section, I will define these four criteria and transfer Lincoln and Guba’s suggestions and activities to my research.

**Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested multiple “activities that make it more likely that credible findings and interpretations will be produced” (p. 301). Out of their suggestions for establishing credibility in this qualitative research process, I used prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks. First, by involving people whom I met at the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities in this study, I became involved in prolonged engagement because I lived and worked with them at the institute while our teams worked on our institutions’ learning community initiatives. Also, by spending time on their campuses and conducting the first two interviews in person, I continued to develop the concept of prolonged engagement with all of the participants. In fact, the nature of Seidman’s (1988) in-depth interview process, which is discussed above, allowed me the opportunity to invest a fair amount of time with the participants in their cultural arena, as well as permitting
an opportunity to build trust between my participants and me. Also, by ensuring anonymity and by allowing participant participation through member checks, I was able to build trust between my participants and me.

Secondly, I established credibility through the use of triangulation. One way that I achieved triangulation was by having multiple participants involved in the research project. As discussed later in Chapter 5, the discovery of repeated themes from multiple sources triangulated the evidence. Also, by using the in-depth phenomenological interview process, triangulation occurred because multiple interviews with the same participants allowed issues and concepts to be revisited in the various interviews. I also used a peer reviewer as a form of triangulation, or verification, of the data that was collected and the analysis of those data. My peer reviewer used an adaptation of Rowan and Huston’s (1997) qualitative research peer review checklist (See Appendix C) to read and evaluate my research. And finally, my use of a reflexivity journal, where I reflected about my feelings about myself and my research, as well as my feelings about my involvement with my data collection and analysis, was a form of triangulating the research.

A third method of establishing credibility was the use of peer debriefing. Colleagues who are not only familiar with teaching in learning communities, but also familiar with qualitative research were used as my peer debriefers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined peer debriefing as the “process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit with the inquirer’s mind” (p. 308). In other words, peer debriefing is a technique that allowed the researcher an opportunity to be “honest.” Peer debriefing is similar to peer review; however, peer debriefing took place during the
research/writing process and peer reviewing occurred after the research and document was completed.

And finally, I utilized member checks, which is a process that allowed the participants to actively be involved in the research process. By member checks, participants were asked to read the transcriptions of their taped interviews to check for accuracy. Participants were also asked to read the first-person narratives that I wrote about each of them for Chapter 4. It was important for them to read these narratives to check me for accuracy and to determine whether or not I had captured their voice and stories as if they had written the profiles themselves. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained that member checking “is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). The transcriber forwarded the transcriptions to me via e-mail, and I, in turn, sent the transcribed interviews and the profiles based on the transcribed interviews to the participants via e-mail attachments. Each participant had the opportunity to read the transcribed interview and profile to supply feedback concerning the accuracy of the documents. Of the six participants, only one returned written feedback from the member checking of the first two interviews and the profiles. In his feedback, he simply replaced the word math lab wherever I had used math class. He also changed a couple of we’s to they’s. Otherwise, he was pleased with what the profile presented. During the third interview with another participant, he informed me that any changes he would make wouldn’t make any alterations to the overall message, so he was fine with how the profile read. Also, during the third interview process, another participant asked me to make a minor change in her profile. At first, this lack of response concerned me. However, Stake (1995) made the following claim about member checking: “In long use of member checking, I typically get little back from the actor—not very satisfying but entirely
necessary. . . . The most frequent response of the actors to whom I have sent drafts is not to acknowledge that I have sent anything” (p. 116). I did receive an e-mail message from my gate keeper, who informed me that the profiles that I wrote about the college and their learning community initiative were fine.

**Transferability**

It is not the intention of qualitative research to be able to establish external validity by being able to generalize to the general public. Instead, it is the hope that the information is capable of being transferred. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “the establishment of transferability by the naturalist is very different from the establishment of external validity by the conventionalist” (p. 316). In fact, Lincoln and Guba do not feel it is the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to ensure transferability. Instead it is the naturalist’s “responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers” (p. 316). The data base referenced above is established through the “thick description” or voices of the participants. In this study, I provided necessary and essential thick description “to provide a sufficient base to permit a person contemplating application in another receiving setting to make the needed comparisons of similarity” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 359-360). In other words, it was my responsibility as the inquirer in this study to ultimately supply sufficient thick descriptions, so that readers at other colleges and institutions would be able to determine if the settings are similar enough to allow for the transfer of the information, as well as transfer the information and ideas into their individual academic environments.
Dependability

Dependability refers to the collected data and answers the question of whether or not the information was dependable to be used as supportive of the recommendations that ultimately surfaced as a result of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer a variety of methods for ensuring dependability. First of all, they suggested that “since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter” (p. 316). However, they also suggested that such an argument is weak and that “a strong solution must deal with dependability directly” (p. 317). Out of all the methods suggested by Lincoln and Guba, the two best ways to ensure dependability for this study were the use of “overlap methods” (p. 317), which is their term for triangulation, and by maintaining an audit trail throughout the research process. As referenced above, I triangulated the research by using multiple participants, multiple interviews, member checking, peer review, and my reflexivity journal.

The purpose of an audit trail is to track, examine, and analyze the research process. “The inquiry auditor also examines the product—the data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations—and attests that it is supported by data and is internally coherent so that the ‘bottom line’ may be accepted” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318). Merriam (2002) maintained that the “audit trail or transparency of method [and how detailed the trail is] is . . . one basis for assessing the value of the study” (p. 21). Merriam also suggested that dependability has to do with consistency. In other words, “the more important question for qualitative researchers is whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 27). For the purposes of this study, I created my audit trail by maintaining two journals throughout my investigation. My first journal was my research journal, where I recorded my
“reflections, questions, and decisions on the problems, issues, ideas [I] encounter[ed] in collecting data” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). My second journal was my reflexivity journal, where I recorded my reflections on the following: feelings about myself as a researcher, feelings about my involvement with the data collection process, and feelings about my analysis process.

**Confirmability**

In order to ensure the conventional concept of objectivity, Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to their concept of confirmability, or the necessity for maintaining neutrality. They suggested that three major techniques are available for establishing confirmability: an audit trail, triangulation, and a reflexivity journal. All three of these techniques were discussed above. It was by using these techniques that I was able to ensure confirmability.

**Ethical Issues**

Because Kvale (1996) maintained that “an interview inquiry is a moral enterprise: The personal interaction in the interview affects the interviewee, and the knowledge produced by the interview affects our understanding of the human situation” (p. 109), it is important to highlight some of his guidelines for maintaining ethics while being involved in an interview inquiry. Based on Kvale’s suggestions, I used informed consent, confidentiality, and member checks as methods for ensuring ethical standards throughout the study.

**Informed Consent**

“Informed consent entails informing the research subjects about the overall purpose of the investigation and the main features of the design, as well as any possible risks and benefits from participation in the research project” (Kvale, 1996, p. 112). As part of the process for preparing to present my dissertation proposal, I submitted my IRB and Human
Consent forms to the Office of Research Assurances at Iowa State University and received approval for my research (see Appendix B for a copy of the Informed Consent Document). Informed consent is a part of the research design and it is a part of the actual interview because it outlines the purpose of the study, ensures confidentiality, and outlines the consequences for the participants. The informed consent also allows participants to withdraw, without suffering any consequences, from the study at any time.

**Confidentiality**

“Confidentiality in research implies that private data identifying the subjects will not be reported. . . . The protection of subjects’ privacy by changing their names and identifying features is an important issue in the reporting of interviews” (Kvale, 1996, p. 114). Issues of confidentiality in my study were considered in the research design, the interview process, and in the transcription of the interviews. I assured my participants in the Human Consent Form that I would maintain their confidentiality and, if necessary, in the reporting process, preserve their identity through the use of pseudonyms. Even though my transcriber had access to the interview information, I assured my participants that I would maintain their privacy and confidentiality via the use of pseudonyms while reporting my findings. In fact, one participant changed a pseudonym to his actual name when responding to a member check. After I reminded him about the use of pseudonyms in the dissertation, he understood why I had changed and bracketed the name.

**Member Checks**

Because Kvale (1996) believed that it is an important ethical issue to include the participants in the transcription and analysis stages, I used member checks in both the transcription and analysis processes. I e-mailed my participants copies of their transcribed
interviews, so that they could have the opportunity to decide if the accuracy and integrity of the interviews had been maintained. Participants also had the opportunity to read their profiles and the profile of their institution and their learning community initiative. Their input helped ensure accuracy in my descriptions of them and their institution. I also decided that my “subjects should have a say in how their statements [were] interpreted” (Kvale, 1996, p. 111), so I e-mailed my participants copies of drafts of Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, the analysis and implications sections, and I encouraged them to offer feedback concerning my analysis and interpretation of their interviews.

**Reflexivity Statement**

I brought to the study several semesters of practical experience from working in a collaborative and collegial environment of both linked and coordinated learning communities. My experiences mirrored the claims of revitalization and rejuvenation stated in the literature. It was also my belief that some of the best teaching that I had experienced was from my learning community classroom experiences.

Several factors contributed to my revitalization. The act of collaboration and nearly daily collegiality with learning community colleagues were two sources that supplied new academic energy. The practice of “performing” in a classroom with a colleague was also crucial. Most instructors would admit that when teaching in a stand-alone classroom, they can manage a class on days when they are preoccupied with personal or professional agendas. However, when teaching with a colleague in a team setting, a new sense of preparedness and responsibility surfaces, and the need to be one hundred percent active becomes evident. Levine Laufgraben et al. (2004) claimed that the success of a learning community depends on this type of team teaching. They stated, “From presemester planning
to reinforcement of the curricular theme to assessing student learning, teaching in learning communities is a collective responsibility” (p. 69). One additional revitalizing ingredient was that the students in learning communities seem to be much more engaged and energized than the students in stand-alone classes. I found it exciting to walk into a classroom where the students were already engaged in discussion before the class began, and they usually left the classroom involved in discussion about the day’s topic.

Previous to teaching in learning communities, my teaching style was the Sage on the Stage pedagogy, where lectures and I were the center of the classroom experience. It was important that all of the desks were neatly aligned in rows and that students would sit facing the podium. These teaching experiences were similar to what Tinto (2000) described as “spectator sport[s] in which faculty talk dominates and where there are few active student participants.” However, while teaching in learning communities, I learned to become a facilitator of learning who actively created opportunities where students learned by participation, often in teams or small groups. Even in stand-alone classes, I began to encourage active learning by students, rather than my doing all of the work through lectures.

As I interviewed new and seasoned learning community faculty for this research project, I discovered how they also had experienced revitalizing experiences as a result of participating in learning community environments. Consequently, because of their revitalization, most faculty will admit that these teaching experiences are, indeed, “special faculty development [opportunities]” (Matthews et al., 1997, p.471), which need to be supported and encouraged by administration in community colleges where they have the charge to administer faculty development programs in lieu of state licensure.
Although I recognize my biases and strong beliefs in the value of learning communities and how they influence faculty in a positive way, I have allowed the data collected from the in-depth interviews to be the voices of the participants. By using member checks, an audit trail, peer debriefing, and a peer reviewer, I was able to maintain the necessary objectivity required for quality qualitative research. Regardless of my own experiences in learning communities, I have discovered what others have experienced and how they perceived that their pedagogy has been altered because of their participation in learning community environments. Being aware of my biases before the research began was important. According to Merriam (2002):

phenomenological researchers usually explore their own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of their own prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions. These prejudices and assumptions are then bracketed, or set aside, so as not to influence the process. (p. 94)

Conclusion

In summary, in this chapter I have discussed the research design for this study. I have explained why qualitative methodology, the specific lens of phenomenology, and the method of in-depth phenomenological interviewing was appropriate for this study. I also presented how the participants were selected and how the data were collected and analyzed. Finally, how trustworthiness in qualitative research was applied to this study, along with interview ethics, and the researcher’s reflexivity were discussed.

According to Seidman (1998), “there is no right way to share interview data” (p. 102). However, one of the techniques that Seidman finds valuable in sharing interview data is to write profiles of the participants. Because these profiles are first-person narratives that use the participants’ words, Seidman believed that they possess a certain “power” (p. 103) that adds a dimension to the study over and above an analysis of the themes discovered in all of the interviews involved. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a brief profile of [Casper County] Community College, the college used in the study; a brief profile of [Casper’s] learning community initiative; and a profile of each individual who participated in the study. The profiles of the individual participants are first-person narratives. I have used their words from the first two interviews to structure the narratives and each participant has read (member checked) the narrative and approved its content. The first interview was the participant’s “life story” as a teacher and the second interview focused on learning community teaching experiences.

Profile of [Casper County] Community College

According to Smart Move (2006), the most recently published student catalog, [Casper County] Community College first started offering college credit classes in the high schools of [Casper] County in 1985. Since then, the college, which is the “only public college in the county,” has grown to “more than 40,000 credit and continuing education students each year” (p. 12). [Casper County] offers classes on three campus sites and three centers. The college’s mission statement says, “[Casper County] Community College District is a student and community-centered institution committed to developing skills,
strengthening character, and challenging the intellect” (Smart Move, 2006, p. 13). Student tuition and fee costs range from $37.00 a credit hour for in-county residents to $212.00 a credit hour for out-of-state students. [Casper County] maintains an “open door” admissions policy. However, the “college reserves the right to guide the placement of students through assessment, which may include interviews and a review of past academic achievement” (Smart Move, 2006, p. 16).

According to [Casper County’s] QEP Plan (2006), “the number of faculty teaching in the Learning Communities program at [Casper] each semester is approximately 10% of the total number of full time [sic] faculty employed at the institution” (p. 7). [Casper’s] faculty demographics include “approximately 255 full time [sic] faculty and 600 part-time” (p. 7). It is the college’s plan to offer an average of 15 learning communities during each semester. By limiting the number of learning communities each semester, [Casper] is able “not [to] place undo overload on faculty” (p. 7), while maintaining their average class size of 19 students.

Profile of [Casper County’s] Learning Community Initiative

The nationally recognized and award winning learning community initiative at [Casper County] Community College has been in existence since 1994. (In 2001, the college received a national Bellwether Award for its innovation in combining their learning community initiative with their service learning program. According to the Community College Futures Assembly (n.d.), “the Bellwether Awards annually recognize outstanding and innovative programs and practices that are successfully leading community colleges into the future” [n.p.]). As with most institutions that begin learning communities, the initiative was slow in taking off and often some of the classes had to be canceled because of low enrollment. However, throughout the initiative, one of the advantages that [Casper County]
has had is support from their administration. All of the learning communities are coordinated communities, where both faculty members team teach in a block schedule. Student transcripts record two separate grades as if the students took two separate classes, even though many of the students receive one common grade for the learning community experience. Usually, faculty are allowed to teach in only one learning community each academic year. Recently, [Casper County] has expanded their learning community initiative into the summer curriculum and there are hopes in the future to have a summer learning community be an off-campus and traveling experience that will investigate the historical and sociological influences of race and discrimination in certain Southern towns and cities.

According to [Casper County’s] Learning Community Faculty Guide (n.d.), they define a learning community in the following manner:

Learning communities pair two classes around an interdisciplinary theme or central question. This represents an intentional restructuring of student’s [sic] time, credit, and learning experiences to foster more explicit intellectual connections between students, between students and their faculty, and between disciplines. Students must enroll in both classes and cannot withdraw from one class without also dropping the other. The course is offered in a block of time equivalent to that of the two classes, with both faculty members present for the entire time. Students receive academic credit for the two classes. (p.1)

Some of the operative words they use to enhance their definition are “integrated curriculum and integrated learning,” which means the classes are “interdisciplinary,” “team-taught,” “theme-based,” “collaborative,” and “designed to build community.”
[Casper County] includes the following in their list of faculty benefits for teaching in a learning community:

- Learning communities create opportunities for community building among faculty, overcoming the isolation imposed by discipline-bound structures.
- Learning communities facilitate new relationships among faculty, supporting and sustaining each other in collaborative learning.
- Faculty members have an opportunity to work more closely with students in an academic setting.
- Learning communities promote intellectual vitality.
- Learning communities create the opportunity for in-depth analysis of discipline.
- Learning communities foster innovative teaching. Instructional techniques developed in learning communities at [Casper County] Community College have been utilized in other courses as well. These include collaborative learning projects, expanded use of the Internet, development of new research assignments, and improved delivery of course content by the students and professors. (p. 2)

In the section “Getting Started,” the Learning Communities Faculty Guide (n.d.) stresses the importance of teaching with the “right” partner, creating the “right” theme, piecing the community together, and understanding learning community pedagogy. Before forming a learning community teaching partnership, the two instructors are encouraged to spend time together—perhaps even visit each other’s classrooms—and discuss classroom management practices and pedagogy, as well as how they work with students. Even such seemingly minor classroom management issues such as late papers and tardiness need to be
balanced between the two instructors involved. [Casper] also emphasizes faculty personalities and they use the metaphor of a marriage when they discuss the pairing of learning community partners. The guide claimed, “as with any successful marriage, the team members should be comfortable with each other” (p. 3).

The guide emphasized the importance of establishing a theme that both instructors “feel passionately” about and that can connect both classes. Another purpose of the theme is to create student interest in the two courses. Besides having a theme that links both classes, the instructors also need to marry their two separate syllabi into one common syllabus for the learning community. They also need to make decisions about collaborative assignments and how students will be graded in the community, one grade for both classes, or two separate grades.

In addition, both faculty members, according to the guide, need to have an understanding of learning community pedagogy and how it is different from the pedagogy that is usually found in stand-alone classes. The guide takes the following stand on learning community pedagogy:

Learning communities provide structural changes in time and space but what happens during that time and in that space is what matters most. Learning communities provide a structural platform for implementing active learning pedagogies, creating a sense of community, understanding issues which cross subject matter boundaries, and exploring diverse perspectives. (p. 4)

Because of the block of time used for learning communities, faculty have more time for collaborative and creative activities, such as taking field trips and in-depth research assignments.
While faculty members have the privilege of selecting their teaching partners and there is a process for forming a new learning community in the faculty handbook, there are additional faculty development or training opportunities for all [Casper County], as well as workshops designated for faculty members just beginning the planning process. For example, every semester they offer a “nuts and bolts” workshop for anyone interested in participating in the learning community initiative. This workshop functions as an orientation to learning communities. Also, each semester the learning community coordinator offers a workshop for learning how to write blended outcomes for interactive learning based on two different disciplines and the theme of the new learning community.

Profile for [Jennifer Davenport]

Currently, I am a political science instructor at [Casper County] Community College. I have taught a variety of classes through the years. For example, I have taught government classes and public administration courses both at Texas Women’s University in the summer and the University of Oklahoma, while working on my doctorate. I also teach leadership courses, such as Introduction to Leadership Theory and Advanced Leadership Theory. I am beginning my eighth year at the community college, and prior to that I taught for nine years in a secondary high school, junior high, or alternative high school, where I taught U.S. History, Texas History, and other classes in the fields of geography and economics.

I have wanted to be an educator from the time I was in junior high. I usually tell people that I cannot not teach because I love knowledge and I think that teaching is fun. Once I discovered political science and history, I knew that those were the subjects I wanted to specialize in while going to college. I became a college instructor because after nine years of public education, especially the years at the junior high and alternative high school levels, I
became tired of dealing with discipline issues rather than with academics, which are, in my estimation, priceless. I guess what pushed me over the edge was the summer I went to Texas Women’s University to take a class and ended up teaching a class. Once I tasted the experience of teaching a college level class, it was a done deal. I loved it and knew that was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Specifically, I chose the community college environment because I have a passion for the classroom and for teaching. Although researching and publishing are welcomed and encouraged, it is not a requirement for me to keep my job.

Teaching is a passion for me; it is a priceless experience. As a political scientist, I believe teaching is a quintessential element of our democracy. Teaching also helps me to have a better grasp of the world around me. Teaching also makes me more confident and it is the one experience in life that I truly own. While I love teaching, it has its challenges. I think one of the greatest challenges is teaching more than one section of a course during a semester and keeping everything organized. Sometimes I wonder if I am repeating myself or telling the same jokes. Along with the challenges, I have also experienced many joys as a teacher. Probably the greatest joy is watching students who didn’t think they could be successful overcome their negative attitudes and actually excel here and continue to excel in a four-year institution. I remember receiving a card recently from one of these students. The card said, “You may not know it, but the day you said ‘yes you can,’ made all the difference in my life.” Professionally, I enjoy being respected by my colleagues, and I’ve been Teacher of the Year for my division.

One of the most teachable moments I’ve ever experienced has been with Dr. [Thompson] and in a learning community where we used the politics of gender and sexuality
as our theme. We had taken our students on a field trip to a gay and lesbian center in Dallas to listen to a talk given by the director. Just being in the gay community and hearing someone besides a teacher discuss gay issues helped some of the students have a better understanding and tolerance for gays and lesbians. It’s when I see the light bulb come on because students are stretching their minds beyond what they normally think, then I know I am experiencing a teachable moment.

If I were to mentor soon-to-be teachers, I would give them the following advice:

· Be human and be willing to admit your mistakes

· Show your passion

· Never lose sight that education is about the students

· Don’t be afraid to try new things; not trying is the problem.

When I think about students and my preferred type of student, I immediately think about the students who come to class prepared and come by my office every now and then to share a giggle. However, I don’t think there is an ideal student. Of course, I enjoy the students who don’t seem to want to engage and yet for some reason, I am able to spark some interest and help them turn a corner and begin to be serious and involved in the course. These are the students, the ones who challenge me, who have become my favorites in the classroom.

As I look back on my teaching career, I think my greatest area of improvement has been my ability to be more tolerant and understanding. I’m also not as hard on myself about thinking that I’m not getting through to some students. I will always have students who won’t give me their all in the classroom, but I need to keep reminding myself that I’m getting through to more than I think. Teaching is a passion for me, so I’d like to think that I am
always working on improving the way that I present material and write tests. I love teaching and I enjoy watching the light bulbs come on. I enjoy having students question me on things, so we can have discussions and agree to disagree. I tell my students that I don’t care what they believe politically, but I do care that they know why they believe the way that they do.

If I could wave a magic wand and create an ideal teaching experience, it would be another experience very similar to the learning community I taught in last summer. The students were open and very communicative. They were concerned about each other and would even call each other if someone was missing from class. No one dropped the class. Day after day, four hours a day, we laughed, we cried, and we discussed the issues. It was truly a totally engaged class where I was learning right along with my learning community teaching colleague and the students.

I had never heard of learning communities until I came to [Casper] County, but by my second semester here, I was ready to jump right in, and I did with a well-seasoned member of the faculty. I have been teaching in them ever since. I have taught at least one a year and this past summer I taught in the first one offered during the summer. This academic year, I will be teaching in one community each semester. I have taught with five different colleagues. Originally, I decided to get involved in learning communities because they were promoted and other faculty members were enthusiastic about teaching in them. I was, however, a little skeptical at first because I am, by nature, selfish with my classroom, and I was afraid to give up my space and time in the classroom. However, it didn’t take me long to realize that I actually gained more than I lost. I became richer in my discipline and I had fun experimenting with pedagogy. I don’t hesitate to encourage other faculty to get involved with
learning communities. Not only do I learn another discipline, but I also learn my colleagues’
teaching styles, and I learn to appreciate and respect their knowledge and skills.

Without a doubt, learning communities are richer teaching experiences. Because our
learning communities are theme-based and involve two different disciplines, they become
greater learning experiences than when we teach our core objectives in a stand-alone class.
Even though they are, for the most part, great teaching experiences, learning communities
could have a huge disadvantage if you don’t enjoy your teaching partner. For example, if
your teaching partner has a different pace or if I think my partner is going to dominate the
time, it can be frustrating. However, I think learning communities are like a marriage, and
like in all marriages, you have to work at them if you want them to be successful. In fact,
sometimes the students enjoy it when the teaching colleagues don’t necessarily see eye-to-

Collaboration is a huge part of our learning community experiences. All of our
assignments are together, essay questions are related to both of the fields being studied, and
often we have a collaborative field trip early in the semester that will include lunch away
from campus, so that we can get closer to the students and the students can get closer to each
other as well. In fact, sometimes students will be confused about who is teaching what and
will ask me if I can answer a sociology question, only to discover the question really is a
political science question. Our collaboration begins when we write the syllabus for the
course. We also write common exams and the majority, if not all, of the assignments are
collaboratively created. There is definitely a lot of synergy happening in these classrooms.

I would definitely encourage other faculty members to become involved in learning
communities. In fact, I’m usually the first to tell anyone who comes on the scene with
questions about learning communities that they need to get involved. Anytime we have a new faculty member, I start watching them to see if I might like to teach a class with them. Of course, it’s self-serving when I’m doing that, but what’s wrong with that? I tell other faculty members how learning communities can help break the monotony and they allow you to hone in on your particular passions. I also encourage other faculty to get involved because teaching in a learning community is a great way to observe other teaching styles. However, I always warn them that they need to know the personality of the other person they are considering as a teaching partner because they need to have compatible personalities. Remember that marriage metaphor? This small piece of advice about compatibility is like dating before marriage sort of thing.

Whenever I have the chance to encourage another faculty member to get involved in learning communities, I often brainstorm possible ideas for different learning communities. I usually do this brainstorming if they show an interest, yet they claim they don’t know of anything that matches up well with their course or discipline. I have encountered some faculty who have been here for quite a while and they have a tendency to maybe be a little more grumpy and set in their ways. They’re the ones who don’t like new ideas shoved down their throats, so to speak, yet I keep on talking because I don’t know how I could be around faculty and not talk about something exciting that’s happening in my classrooms.

With all of that said, I have to admit that there are some faculty who probably just shouldn’t teach in a learning community. For those who are not willing to give and take, compromise, collaborate, or share their pedagogical bag of tricks with others, they probably need to teach in their stand-alone classes. Some personalities just aren’t compatible and it can be miserable for the faculty involved, as well as the students, so not everyone can teach in a
learning community. However, I do think anyone who shows an interest should try. I really think they should try and give it a shot, but they need to shop around and make sure they understand what it’s all about before they jump into it.

Actually, the idea of camaraderie or a special bond between faculty members in a learning community is important. You have to feel comfortable, so if your styles are so different or your philosophies aren’t similar, it may be more painful than it’s worth. Granted, if you’re defining teaching as getting information out there, yes, you can do that with anyone, but teaching in a learning community is doing much more than getting information out there. Several people I’ve taught with I would teach with again. I would say there’s probably one that wasn’t the greatest experience, but I would give it a try again. It was my very first one. I had another one that I will never teach with again, not because I don’t think they were a good teacher, but their approach to teaching in a learning community goes totally against what I think a learning community is. And then there are those I would love to teach every learning community with because we just flow; we’re e-mailing each other ideas in the middle of the night.

Profile for [Andy Blackwell]

My story of how I decided to become an educator basically boils down to the fact that I just fell into teaching. Incidentally, this is my twentieth year—including part-time and full-time—of teaching mathematics and I have only had experience of teaching at the community college level. In fact, I began my own college experience at a community college. I started off just taking the basics, like English 101 and college algebra. I did well in that first algebra class and my instructor encouraged me to take the next level of math. Finally, one of my instructors asked me if I could work in a math lab and tutor other students with their
assignments. However, the part-time job I had at the time wouldn’t allow me to accept the offer. When the second person asked me to work in a math lab, I was taking calculus and ready to give up that other part-time job. So I started work in the math lab as a tutor. This job not only helped me as I took my own math classes, but also it helped me to realize that I enjoyed talking about math and I enjoyed teaching, so that was when I was initially looking at teaching as a profession.

I finished up my first two years, went on to major in math and continued working in a math lab, while I completed my undergraduate work. When I neared graduation, I knew that I wanted to teach and specifically teach at a junior college or community college, so I knew I had to have a master’s degree. After graduating from the four-year institution, I went right on and got my master’s. I continued to work as a tutor and work in the math lab while I worked on my master’s. Once I graduated, I started teaching as a part-time instructor until I became a full-time instructor here at [Casper County] Community College. I guess if I could point my finger at a particular influence that led me into the teaching profession, it would be my college math instructors, who were very good instructors.

I chose the community college level of teaching because that is what I was familiar with because of my background. I knew I didn’t want to teach high school because I remember what I was like in high school and I knew I did not want to deal with students like me. Actually, I liked the subject level of teaching college algebra or calculus and the range that I could teach. I find all of the courses fun to teach, and I like teaching the students because unlike high school, most of them more or less want to be here. Granted, there are some students whose parents are making them go to college, but it is not like high school
where everybody has to be there. I also like the flexibility here of being able to pick my own schedule each semester.

I didn’t even consider teaching at a four-year institution because the focus for community college faculty is teaching. If I would have taught at a four-year institution, I would have had to continue my education to earn a Ph.D., but the truth is, I want to teach, which is the whole reason that I like teaching at the community college. Here, I can focus on teaching. I can play around and experiment with things and try new things and new ways of teaching classes because that is encouraged. At the four-year schools, it gets to be research and publish. Again, you know at the community college level our focus is on the teaching and on the students, so that is one of the key points.

When I’m asked what my philosophy of teaching is, I can never think of just something fancy to say. I know that I try to have fun and I try to put the students at ease because mathematics does intimidate a lot of people who have had bad experiences either in high school or somewhere, or they are just convinced that they cannot do math. Part of what I try to do is make them feel more at ease and also get them, or at least try to help them, to see that math is useful and it is not as bad as they think it is. I want my students to see that math is needed and that there are a lot of different kinds of uses for it.

I think probably the greatest challenge I have to overcome as a community college instructor, especially with math, is the number of classes that have various levels of preparation. Some students may not quite be up to speed where they should be, even if the assessment tests say they are, so dealing with the different levels. There are also different levels of interests. For example, some people would rather be getting a root canal than being in a math class, so I have to try and work around these interests. I don’t want to leave people
who are struggling behind, but at the same time, I want to keep my good students on track and help them have a good experience as well. So I guess that the greatest challenge has to do with finding the happy medium and try to catch as many people as possible and give them all the kind of experience that they want and need.

I think the greatest joy of teaching is when students succeed. They think that they’re successful because of me and they come up and say things like, “I got through this class because of you,” but I tell them they got through the class because of their own efforts. So just seeing students succeed, I think, is the most, the biggest thing for me as a teacher. Besides that kind of joy as a teacher, I have also had teachable moments, those times when I get a class where everybody is doing the work and where everybody is having fun. I get one of these classes every so often and I just go in and it doesn’t even seem like teaching. I go in and I do what I do, but it is just so effortless. They are learning while I am working through the problems. When it is time to get serious, they get serious, but they also have a good time. It is hard for me to explain, and it is just a class I get every once in a blue moon.

If I were to offer advice or mentor a soon-to-be teacher, I’d make the following suggestions. Do not try to do too much the first year. It is easy to think that you can go in and be able to do everything. I’d suggest that they experiment and try new things. They also need to know how to roll with the punches. If something does not go as planned in class, be flexible enough to go to Plan B or go to Plan C or even Plan D if necessary, so that you don’t lose a day or get flustered. Actually, flexibility comes with experience. I’d also suggest that they listen to their colleagues, and not just the colleagues in their discipline. In fact, I recommend that they get to know colleagues outside their discipline because they can learn
quite a bit from people who teach another discipline. There are things I wouldn’t have experienced if I had just talked to math people.

If I were to describe ideal students, I know one thing: they don’t necessarily have to be A students, as long as they work; that’s all I ask of students. Sometimes I get the A students who just don’t want to do anything, but I also get B students who work real hard and ask questions. I know they’re trying and they’re pushing themselves, as well, and they’ll come and ask me about how to complete a particular math problem. I appreciate their efforts and I think they add a lot more to the classes than say an A student who just never says anything, but just attends to get the A.

As I look back on my teaching career, I can see a variety of changes I’ve made. Probably the biggest change I’ve made to improve my teaching has been to integrate technology into how I teach now from when I started teaching 20 years ago. Now, it’s almost impossible not to incorporate technology. I think I use more technology than most. I try to pull it in wherever I can. I’ve also learned to be more flexible and I’ve made it a point to learn from my colleagues. I’ve also learned to evaluate each semester. I mean, every year, every semester, I look back and try to see what went right, what worked, and what didn’t work. If something didn’t work well, I evaluate whether or not I should try it again, and if something worked well, then I go ahead and plan to do it the next semester.

The ideal teaching experience as far as students are concerned would be when I have that perfect group. Like I said earlier, it’s the group of students who all work hard, ask questions, come to class prepared, and I’m teaching in a classroom that has technology that I can use. More than likely, this group is a learning community because there would be more interaction than in a stand-alone class because of the combining of the two disciplines and
the students spend more time together. Actually, teaching in a learning community is something I could have added with how I’ve changed. Teaching with someone else is far different than teaching by myself in a stand-alone class.

What keeps me in the classroom? It’s fun. I enjoy it. I like talking about math, and as long as I can do that, and as long as it’s still fun, then I’ll keep doing it.

I have quite a history with the learning community initiative. The first one I taught was back in 1995 and that was when this particular campus opened. We created a learning community with what is frequently referred to as finite math with microeconomics. The program had been at the college for a year or two, and that was the first one on this campus. The class had small enrollment. I think it was a little less than ten students, so the next few years, I didn’t do it just because it was all about enrollment. They let that first one go because it was the first time. We offered another one in the spring, but it only had five enrolled in it, so it didn’t make. I waited a few years until the enrollment increased on the campus and we could have multiple sections of courses, so that I could set one aside to teach as a learning community. It was important that students had enrollment options. So in 2002, I tried one again, but at that time I also got stuck being the learning community coordinator, which is an experience I’m trying to forget because the coordinator is like being a chair, but I did it for two years. I combined a statistics class with a political science class, which meant the class was tied into a governor’s race and also a senate race, as well as other local races for the state legislature and the house. We had good enrollment with about 15 students. The third learning community I taught in was in 2004, and since then I’ve been fairly regular about offering, or at least attempting to offer, a learning community almost every semester. The 2004 learning community was statistics with sociology.
I decided to teach in a learning community because I liked the idea of combining two disciplines because the disciplines don’t really exist separately. For example, when I did the one with finite math and economics, I knew that the economics course was geared toward students who will major in business and economics, so a lot of the math applications were geared towards the economics. I could also see the value of combining statistics with so many other disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and biology, because statistics are used in those disciplines. I think it helps students make more of a connection with the mathematics that I’m trying to teach them. It’s one thing to go into a stand-alone stat class and use examples from psychology, but it’s a completely different teaching experience if I’m in a learning community with another instructor, who can help show the relevance of the statistics to the psychology or sociology.

I think the benefits of teaching in a learning community go back to the integration of the two disciplines with two faculty together. Sometimes students will ask a question about the other discipline that I’m using as an example, but if I’m teaching alone, then I might not know the answer, but with the other faculty member, he or she can answer the question right away. Another good benefit is having discussions with other faculty members right in the classroom. These discussions have helped my knowledge base. I know a lot more biology now than I did ten years ago. I also know psychology now, and I never knew much about that discipline. Also, seeing other teaching styles is good because it’s helped me to change my teaching style over the years. In math, we all do things fairly similarly, but by teaching with psychology and sociology, I’ve learned some new teaching techniques. I definitely believe that teaching in a learning community is a richer teaching experience. It’s almost another form of professional development. Even when I teach in a stand-alone class now, I have a
richer teaching experience because I bring into my classrooms [a] wider knowledge base that I gained from the learning community experiences.

I don’t know if I’d say there are any difficulties or disadvantages of teaching in a learning community. I’ve been lucky that I’ve been able to work with all of my partners, so there’ve never been any difficulties with them. I certainly believe there has to be a level of flexibility that probably doesn’t exist when I teach alone. One day one of us may need more time, so we learn to work with each other and shape the class time around what needs to be accomplished each class. The only disadvantage, and this may just be because of the way we set up the learning communities, concerns the students. If they want to drop one class, they have to drop both classes. I can’t think of any key disadvantages. I guess there would be if you didn’t like your teaching partner, but I’ve been very lucky in that area.

Collaboration is a natural part of teaching in a learning community. Sometimes, there is only a need for one of us to be lecturing at a time. However, there have been times where we would both be lecturing at the same time because there is a definite overlap between the two classes. For instance, this last week we were talking about a stat in biology and we were both up front together. I was looking at the statistical point of view, and she was looking at it from the biological point of view. We were really coming together in that sense, so that would be an example of collaboration as far as lectures are concerned. I’ve also used collaboration in other ways. For example in psychology and sociology, we would have the students design a study, do the research, collect the data, and present the information. Actually, when I’m teaching statistics with another discipline, I try to focus all of my examples on the other course, so this semester, all of my examples, or at least the great majority of them, will be biological or health related. If I’m paired with a sociology
instructor, I try to make sure most of my examples combine the sociology class. Before I taught in learning communities, I might use some collaboration with students and have them work together in groups, but I can’t think of any examples of collaborating with other faculty members.

I’m not sure about the role of collegiality. Listening to your definition, it sort of sounds like a lot of what we do. We try and integrate as much of our lecture as possible, so I know with many of the partners I’ve taught with, we usually would sit down the day before and look at what we’re going to cover in class and try to decide where we could integrate the two disciplines. Of course, if there is a concern about a student or group of students, we will talk about that. We also work on our tests together; I grade half and my teaching partner grades the other half. The student gets one grade, so we work together on creating the test and then we also spend time after the test to analyze the results and look for trends and discuss how the class as a whole, and individuals in particular, performed on the test.

I would encourage other faculty to become involved in learning communities as long as they are willing to buy in to the philosophy. Some faculty just want to teach their course their way and that’s it, so I wouldn’t encourage those individuals to become involved. I guess what I’m saying is that it would depend on the individual. Certainly, if it’s somebody who is innovative and always willing to try new things, as well as being a person who plays well with others, yes, I would highly recommend that they get involved in the learning community initiative. In fact, I have encouraged others to get involved. Every semester we have an introduction to learning communities workshop, and I have encouraged various math faculty to attend to see what learning communities are about and what’s involved. For those who are
somewhat hesitant for whatever reason, I try to find out what their concerns are and see if I can address them or if their concerns can be addressed by attending the workshop.

Even though I have encouraged some faculty to become involved, there are some, like the ones I mentioned earlier, who just want to do their thing their way. I would not encourage these faculty to get involved. The last thing we want is to have someone who is forced to teach in a learning community when they don’t want to teach in one. The students will not appreciate that kind of experience.

You asked about camaraderie or special bond that exists between teaching partners. Yes, one of the analogies [Ellen] uses is that teaching in a learning community is like a marriage. You want a good marriage, so you do need to know that you can work with that person. However, like a marriage, there are some things you don’t find out until you actually do get married, but you want to know that you can work with that person and teach with that person. They don’t necessarily have to have the same style as you. In fact, sometimes it’s better if the teaching styles are different, but you have to make sure that the two of you can work together because if there are issues that arise, you need to know you can handle them. Of course, this reminds me of what I said about flexibility earlier, and also, because you do have two people in the classroom, you don’t want any ego problems taking over, such as one person taking too much time and thinking his or her discipline is the most important of the two.

Profile for [Ellen Thompson]

My discipline is sociology and I’ve been teaching—always at the community college level—for eight years full time at this college, but before that I taught eight years part time at another community college.
When I entered college right out of high school, I thought I wanted to be a high school teacher. I think I based that decision on the fact that I loved my high school literature teacher and I always loved school, so I wanted a job in a school. When I was about to finish my English literature degree, I stumbled across sociology. I went ahead and finished my English lit bachelor’s degree, but then I continued on to study sociology. At about the same time I discovered sociology, I decided to change my focus to teaching at the college level.

Actually, I think I ultimately decided to become a college teacher rather than a high school teacher because in high school, my perspective was shorter, or not quite as broad in terms of what I wanted to do in terms of going on and getting a Ph.D. I liked high school, so I thought I would teach high school. However, once I had a taste of college, I loved college and really enjoyed it. I went to a community college for the first part of my bachelor’s degree and I really liked the community college. I don’t really remember just deciding I wanted to teach at a college instead of a high school, but I do remember deciding I wanted to be in a two-year, a community college, rather than a university for a teaching environment. As soon as I got my first part-time teaching job at a community college, I knew that’s what I wanted to do. I loved the diversity in the students and the focus on teaching and learning. I just think it’s really an important stage to be involved in students’ lives in college. I fell in love with my discipline and I believed that everyone should be exposed to sociology. I found it exciting to talk with students who hadn’t had a sociology class and watching them grow and learn because I knew my class would make a difference in their lives.

I don’t know where to start when talking about my philosophy of teaching. I guess to begin with, it’s important for me to focus on the learning more than the teaching. I want to make a difference in their lives, how they see themselves, how they see others, and how they
interact. I want them to leave my class different than when they walked in. I want my students to discover how they need to be active participants in our society and to feel responsibility for each other. So in my teaching, I make them active participants in the class. As a teacher, I love lecturing and I struggle with the amount of lecturing, but I know today’s students learn by doing. I try to have teaching methods that address different types of learners in the class and I try to work on getting them invested in their learning.

I think the greatest challenge that I have had to overcome as a community college instructor is the negative stigma against community colleges. First, I believe so strongly in the community college and what it can do for students, and it’s my love for the community college system that helps me fight the negative stigma. We have such a diverse population of students in terms of age. We have many students right from high school and we have to resocialize them and help them to understand that this isn’t high school, but this is college and it’s a real college. We have to get them adjusted to college and help them recognize the quality of education they’re getting here and the expectations we have for them. Another challenge here is the fact that we have so many different levels of experience and levels of education. I have had students who already have two bachelor’s degrees and they came back to the community college to get a nursing degree, and then I have had students who haven’t even graduated from high school. I’ve had students who are coming back to college who haven’t had a sociology class, and so they’re scared, especially the women. So trying to adjust to the needs of the many different students will always be a challenge.

However, everything isn’t a challenge when it comes to teaching. I have also known some joys. Actually, as far as I’m concerned, everything about teaching is a joy. Specifically, it’s a joy in the classroom when I see students critically analyzing things they used to take for
granted or learning how to respectfully debate controversial issues. It’s a joy when I see them apply the concepts to their lives and explain what they’re doing and what’s happening to them. All of this is a lot more perspective than they might have had before the class and a greater understanding of the social world. But what’s really cool is when they come back to you and say that my class made a difference, or when I get a graduation announcement from a former student getting a four-year degree and they thought of me. But I think the best is seeing those who struggle and didn’t think they could do it and they do. Now that’s really a joy.

I think one of the most teachable moments I have ever had was when a student told us she was raised in the KKK. I used that teachable moment to talk about her socialization and I let her tell the class. We were talking about symbols and my focus was on race and ethnicity. She told us about how she grew up around the KKK and we discussed norms and values and symbols. She explained to the class about burning the cross and then she said she really believed all that her parents had taught her. However, she had discovered that once she came to college, she was starting to wonder. She didn’t say she had changed her mind, but that she was wondering. I pat myself on the back because I was kind of floored when she told us everything. I think I did okay that day by pulling her in, rather than closing her down. She stayed in the class and I think the students kind of followed my lead on not stigmatizing her.

It seems that students create teachable moments without being aware of what’s happening, especially when they bring out a lot of tough stuff or experiences that they have gone through. I try to not ever be shocked or surprised, but I roll with it. I think I’ve had students before who thought they were going to surprise me or shock me, and they were testing me to see, “Is she going to judge me, is she going to lecture me?” Something happens
in the classroom when students are willing to talk and share from their experiences. More than once, I’ve had students who have shared about being raped or victimized in some way. I want to be a mentor, but I’m not a counselor. I refer students to our counselors. However, I want to make sure that the classroom environment is comfortable, so I’ve started making sure that anytime I start a class that I set some ground rules to create a safe environment, so no one has to reveal any personal information at all, but if they do, the class has to promise them that they will treat each other with respect.

If I were to be a mentor for a soon-to-be-teacher, my first advice for them would be to remember what it’s like to be a student. I try to remind myself that even though my lecture material is important, I need to remember what it feels like to be a receiver and what the goal is. The goal isn’t to teach; the goal is for them to learn, to really think about how they learn. I can’t pay attention when an hour goes by or two hours in a monotone soft voice, no discussion, no interaction, and I know, even for me, how hard it is to stay there, so I think that’s one thing—to focus on the learning and not just the teaching. Another thing I think is important is when I’ll have 200 students and one of them does something to rub me the wrong way, and what do I do, I think about it all the time. I think about the one student who didn’t understand what I said or the one student I don’t think is getting it or acts inappropriately and I have to remind myself, don’t categorize all students by this one who didn’t study or the one who cheated. Remember the good ones.

I don’t know what an ideal student is. I’ve had students whom I felt were really not grasping at what I’m getting at, yet they were excellent students in terms of knowing how to be a student, and they knew how to study and they knew how to do tests; they know what they’re supposed to say and that’s fine. They’re going to be successful through college, but I
don’t know if I’d call that an ideal student. The ideal student for me is the student who really wants to learn, not the student who just wants the credit. That excites me, the student who wants to learn and asks questions.

I have changed a lot since I began my teaching career. I’ve changed how I teach and I have changed my assignments a lot. I was so insecure when I began teaching. I’ve learned to be honest when I don’t know something. There’s no way I can know some things because they ask all kinds of stuff, so I’ve become real good at telling them, “I don’t know; let’s find out together.” Now, I focus more on the depth of the content, rather than making sure I get everything covered. There’s things I have to cover, but I allow myself a little more flexibility, so that I don’t get caught up in “we’re supposed to finish this Unit Five this week,” and I let myself kind of go with the class. If there’s something that somehow slowed us down, we can slow down if they’re real interested and they contribute more and talk more, and if that happens, fine. I think I’m more relaxed. I know that life happens in the world or in their social world, so we’ll deal with that that day, rather than what’s on my calendar.

What’s the ideal classroom? Well, physically, I think we might be working closer towards this because we’re going to be making some presentations for purchasing moveable furniture, so that we can move the furniture around in a classroom and create areas of learning. Also, the ideal classroom for me is always the first class. I love a class where students give examples from their lives and their perspectives, especially when they’re not all the same. For example, I love it when a classroom has older students, non-traditional students, and diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, religion, and social class. Action happens, activity, energy.
I stay in the classroom, rather than look for another job, because I think teaching is rewarding. I teach in a student leadership academy and I was working today on my lecture on the 12 steps to success and the last step is make a choice, leave a legacy, because it’s your gift to make a difference in someone else’s life, and that’s why I stay in the classroom. I have the opportunity to provide students with an ideal view of the world and people. What a great job to be in a room where people are trying to better themselves. I think it makes you have hope, compared to some other jobs. I think that keeps me here; it keeps me young. I know what people of all ages are doing and what they’re interested in. The classroom is constantly changing, which is exciting. Teaching is not the same job every day. Every classroom you walk into at the beginning of the semester is going to be a different experience from the semester before.

I’ve been teaching in learning communities since the second year I was here, so for seven years or so. I’d have to stop and really count how many different communities I’ve been involved in, but I have been teaching in different combinations with my sociology discipline, such as sociology and government or history or computer science. I’ve also taught in learning communities that were three course combinations, such as sociology, history, and government. I have also taught with statistics, but I enjoy teaching with political science the most because it fits with my interests really well. We talk about social issues and social problems and public policies. Most of the learning communities I have been involved in have had a different focus and different themes. For example, I taught with a government class last semester that was called Let’s Talk about Sex and Politics. I’m teaching with the same instructor this semester and our class is titled Reverse of Reality. We’re dealing with propaganda and media and reality making.
My start with learning communities was just hearing the other faculty members talking. It was a really informal kind of way to get information about it originally. I was having lunch with my colleagues and I heard them talking about learning communities. They were talking about a class they were forming. Later, I had a conversation with one of my suite mates who taught computer science, and we just started talking about learning communities and we thought it would be kind of cool if we had sociology paired with computer science, a class about social changes related to technology. We started brainstorming about the possibilities of such a class, tried it the next semester, and we just loved it.

You can take the benefits of learning communities in two directions. There’s benefits for me and there’s benefits for the students. For me, it’s fun. It’s fun teaching with someone else because we do the team teaching learning communities where we’re both in the classroom at the same time, and having someone to play off of is a lot of fun. Also, I hadn’t taken History 101 in a long darn time and it is great education. I’ve loved refreshing my memory about political science and stats, as well as all of the other classes I’ve taught with. I had never taken a computer science class—well, I did take computer science, but it was nothing like it is today when I was in college—and I learned a lot, so I learned a lot not only about the subject matter and the interest of the fellow faculty members, but also I learn from their teaching. I also learn from the great ideas they have. When we’re planning a class with someone, we discover that two brains are better than one. We just get excited and bounce ideas off of each other and just create some really great learning experiences. The other thing that becomes a benefit is getting to delve into a topic and theme that interests me. It’s almost like doing special topics; we’re still covering our basic core learning objectives, but wrapping
them around a theme. The other thing I like about teaching in learning communities is the extended amount of time. There’s never enough time, but that’s kind of the nature of the beast, so to speak. However, in a learning community, you get to know the students better because I’m looking at the same faces twice as long because of the extended time. Our learning communities, if they meet twice a week, meet for two and a half hours for a session.

I definitely think teaching in a learning community is a richer experience and I think learning communities are great opportunities for professional development. I’m not saying it’s not a rich teaching experience in a stand-alone class, but it’s different, and to me, it’s richer in a learning community because there just seems to be a connection made with the students and the relationships you build with your colleagues while working together. It’s richer in terms of—now I’m talking about sociology—for example, issues of minority stats and I’m teaching with a historian who can fill in all the history that I may not have time to do in my stand-alone class.

Even though I enjoy teaching in learning communities, I have encountered some difficulties and disadvantages. Because we get the same amount of time, we compete for time to make sure we cover our subject matter. My one difficulty had to do with one of the learning communities I taught in and the issue of flexibility surfaced. I tend to be real flexible, but I was teaching with someone who was extremely structured, and we were making out our schedule for the class and she was writing down what we were doing every thirty minutes and it started to feel like I had a rope around my neck. All semester long I felt caged in and I knew that if we ever taught together again, we would have to add flexibility. So the second time we didn’t have a calendar and it drove her nuts, so the third time we found a balance. I guess I was just fortunate that I was working with someone who was
willing to talk about the issues and concerns and work them out. Another challenge has to do with the fact that our learning communities are theme-based. Bringing in the extra material related to a theme and trying to cover everything that needs to be covered is a challenge, but not so much of a challenge that it can’t be addressed.

I have always used collaboration or group work in every learning community that I’ve taught in. Last semester, they did research as a group on an event on campus, and then like a professional conference, they prepared poster presentations of their research. We try to divide their assignments, so that they have plenty that they’re doing on their own, such as taking exams or writing essays, but we immediately start them out doing something in groups, whether it’s just a little activity in class like a problem they have to solve, or if it’s things they have to do as groups outside of class, where they watch movies or do presentations. Also in learning communities, we go outside the classroom, which seems to work really well. What happens because of these classes is the students begin to build community amongst themselves because they seem to get invested in each other. I find that they take care of each other, give each other rides, call them if they’re not in class. Yes, we do a lot of collaborative work.

I also collaborate much more with my colleagues in learning communities than before I taught in them. In terms of proposing the class, it takes a lot of work to do that, but it’s at that point where we start looking at where we can connect. In the learning communities that I teach in, every aspect of the course is a result of our collaboration. All of our planning is collaborative. We collaborate on our assignments and our exams. Everything is a result of collaboration. Before I taught in learning communities I didn’t experience any significant collaboration experiences. On occasion, I would ask other people what they did, but they
were outside of my discipline because I was the only one in my discipline. Yet asking gave me a chance to get new ideas for something to do in my classes, but I wouldn’t really consider this to be collaboration.

We definitely experience collegiality in our learning communities. It’s the kind of dialogue that is more prevalent and I think we have these conversations without even thinking about it. Unless you’re at a workshop at the college, it doesn’t seem as often that you just run into colleagues that you don’t teach with and talk about student learning. Oh, sure, it happens, but not to the extent that it does in learning communities because in learning communities when we’re grading our student assignments, we always have discussions about teaching and learning. We ask ourselves questions about teaching: What did we do wrong? Did I cover that, I thought I did? Is there a different way we can present this material? Why aren’t they getting it? I think, because we’re both invested in the same students, we have these types of conversations much more often than when we teach in stand-alone situations.

I always encourage other faculty to become involved in learning communities. Everyone should give it a shot if they’re interested. When I think about personalities, I don’t know that teaching in a learning community is for everybody, but I would encourage anyone to give it a try. I would warn them about how important personalities are and that it is important to find a teaching partner that they can get along with. I also tell new faculty that if they’re willing to give up being the center of the classroom experience and be willing to adjust and shift in ways of teaching, then they should give learning communities a try. I’m always reminding faculty how beneficial learning communities are for faculty and students. I was encouraged by hearing other people very excited talking about what they were doing in class the next day, what they had planned. Although I don’t think faculty should be forced to
teach in a learning community, I don’t know that I can say that some faculty should not teach in a learning community. I think that if there are faculty who are not willing to budge or willing to give and compromise with the teaching and learning experience, then maybe they shouldn’t get involved. You have to be willing to change the way you do things. Our initiative is very faculty driven. Yes, I definitely encourage anybody to give it a shot.

There needs to be a rapport or camaraderie between me and my learning community teaching colleague. I’ve taught in several different communities and all were very positive, but I’ve seen examples of pairings that didn’t match, so I think it will depend on the personalities. It’s like a marriage, and if you don’t have a lot in common with these people, they can get on your nerves. They can also do things you think there is a better way of doing them. I think there has to be a bond in terms of professional respect and in a professional kind of trust because it could be a recipe for a disaster if you have any kind of undermining. I don’t answer a question or make a decision without talking to my partner first. Definitely, there has to be a bond, not necessarily in a social friendship kind of way. However, you do develop friends by teaching in learning communities.

Profile for [Chris Larson]

I am [Chris Larson] and I’m the first full-time history professor that they hired at [Casper County] Community College 20 years ago and I’ve been coordinator of the program over a period of years, but not at this time. Let’s see, I did 20 years at [Casper County]; I also taught part-time history classes at [Destin County] for about ten years, and that’s a college in [Rosemont]. I also taught 17 years in high schools, actually here in [Maynard], where I started their advance placement program from scratch, so I’ve been teaching for a total of 37
years and I have done learning communities for 11 years. I believe I hold the record for teaching in the most learning communities taught by anybody in the district.

When I think about becoming an educator and the influences, mine is the standard story. You always have a teacher that motivated you sometime in your life, and so I had a teacher in high school, Ms. Richie, and she found my passion and got me excited about history. Once I went off to college, I thought that’s the area I enjoyed the most, and so history was a lot more fun to read and study and analyze and I had really good college professors. The most positive stroke in teaching is when someone speaks to you and says, “You taught me in history. I’m still paying attention to or reading or studying it,” so that’s the impact you have on people. I’ve taught for 37 years and I get up each morning still excited to walk in that classroom and have some more fun and excitement.

Learning communities is another way, too. They gave me more creative juices because sometimes when you teach the surveys continually, you get a little tired of it, but learning communities experiment, try new things, and that’s why I like learning communities, even though I’ve done them about ten years and sometimes the same course with the same professor, but we do it differently every year, so it depends on the students that you have that helps you decide that.

After you have been teaching in a high school for 17 years, you get to the part where you’re getting tired of six classes every day, non-stop, and you’re seeing the same students and you do those little things called restroom duty and lunchroom duty and you have to break up fights and all those kind of things, so I decided I wanted to go somewhere that I truly would get to teach and not deal with disruptive students so much. True, occasionally we still get disruptive students in college, but it’s just a part of teaching. I always had a desire to
teach college, and even though I had to take a pay cut, it was an opportunity to go for, and it’s turned out to be a really good thing for me. I specifically chose to teach at a community college because if you have a master’s in this state that’s about your only option, so if you’re going to teach at a university, you usually have to have a Ph.D.

One of the biggest challenges in teaching is to find a way to motivate students because what I find is that a lot of students, at least in our community college day classes, the average age is usually about 18-20 years old, and some of them are working 30-40 hours per week, and so a lot of times my course is on the back burner. One of my biggest challenges is how to get students committed to the course who really get into what they are studying because so many of them work all night, come in and try to stay awake that morning during class, which makes it all very challenging for me. I’m a very hyper active person, so I never sit behind the desk. I move all over the room, from the back of the room to the front of the room. I use a remote mouse and everything else in technology, so they know I’m alive. They say we can never sleep in your class. Also, one of my goals is to know their names and that’s from public schools. I’m not necessarily interested in their lives, but I want to know their names. True, I’ll probably forget their names in a couple of semesters, but, at this point, they have an identity. I know they’re no longer anonymous and that’s a way to be creative. Another way to reach some of these students is if I can talk to them about their jobs, like “Oh, you just waited on my table today as a waitress,” and they think it’s somewhat neat that they just saw their professor and they can see that we’re “real” people, so you make connections like that.

I know a lot of the town and things around here. I just saw a kid yesterday from [Searing], and I said, “You play football in [Searing],” which is the whole life of that town. I
also mentioned the coach’s name, someone I never knew, but the point is I immediately made a connection to that kid. He now knows that I know who he is and a little bit about where he’s from, so some way to let them know they’re not just anonymous, so that way they feel like I know them, at least who they are. Because of knowing who they are, I hope I’ll have a better commitment from them.

Another challenge is the fact that we lecture, lecture, lecture, but, in this case, lecturing is still a part of it, but I have them do collaborative work. I have some multimedia research papers, which are collaborative type projects where the students get to teach and I use their questions on major exams. We also do collaborative work in class and I try to get them to experience history, so we go to some old homes in [Maynard] called [Charles Street], where I try to show them that history is really manageable. All the time I’m doing these activities, I’m trying to break that lack of commitment from the students. Also, I’ll say this. I’m not 100 percent. I strike out because I can’t reach all of them. However, I’d say getting the students to be committed and figuring how they are going to use their time the best is one of the biggest challenges we face at the community college level. I have found that sometimes when they come back for the second semester, they see what the mistakes were that they made. Instead of taking five classes on two days, they spread their classes out differently. They’ve learned to readjust their time and that’s part of learning to be successful in that sense. Let’s see, I had two Hispanic girls in my class last fall and they were struggling, but by second semester they were successful and that’s where you can see the excitement; you’ve reached them. They’re certainly not all honors students every day.

My philosophy of teaching, in my mind, is being student-oriented. I always say to my students that learning is never ending and that’s what I hope for them to realize. The same
rings true for me. My education, even though I’m not going to college for a degree, my education never ends and that is my attitude about teaching when I teach history. I realize I’m not going to make them scholars, but I help them realize that I’m their last chance in life to have history. If I don’t get to them now, it may never happen. If I make an impact now, then when they’re adults and they’re surfing the Internet, looking at historical sites that may catch their interests or if they plan a road trip and look at a historical museum with their family or they read a good book on a historical figure or they wind up reading a biography or seeing a movie and catching the history of it, I’ve succeeded. I try a variety of approaches to make this happen. In this case, my philosophy is trying to make history as interesting and exciting as possible. The most important thing to remember is the student. If I don’t have the student, I don’t have a job. Also with my philosophy of education, I like to be physically present. For example, I do one online class, but I like the idea of actually being present. I like to be in the room and interact. Even with the online type of thing, we have tapes they watch online, and then, if they want, they can come and have an orientation or discussion group for each exam. People show up and I get some faces and names, but I still like that contact with students on a daily basis the best.

I think one of my most splendid joys of teaching is seeing students after they have been in my class. I’ve taught for 37 years, so when I see students like the other day when I was in [Maynard] for a wine tasting with some friends, I ran into this guy with his wife and he said to me, “[Mr. Larson], I had you for every history class I could take at [Casper], which was ten years ago, and you’re like good, you just motivated me.” So that’s probably one of the most positive experiences I get is when I get those kinds of compliments years later from somebody. Some students tell me that they recommended me to other students. Or also, I’ve
gone back to class reunions from when I taught in high school. I get invited back to 20-year class reunions, so when I show up there, they come up to me and say, “You said something 20 years ago and I listened to you.” One guy who was a principal told me, “[Mr. Larson], I tell the teachers every year what it takes to be a good teacher and I quote you.” Another former student, who was probably one of my first AP history students, came up to me and said, “[Mr. Larson], I got my Ph.D. in history.” Little things like that are probably the most rewarding aspects of teaching.

I have received awards from the college and that’s always very positive, and I was the nominee one year for the state award for the outstanding professor of the state. I didn’t get the state award, but to be nominated was an honor because I was chosen by my colleagues. Then they used to have one where students would choose outstanding professors and I have received those awards before because students would vote for me. I also speak to various clubs and organizations in [Maynard] and it’s always rewarding when they shake your hand and tell you that your message was beautiful and that they appreciated the talk. All of these kinds of things are where I get the positives. My family is also very positive and supportive of my work. When my son, who is 14, says, “Let’s go again” to some historical site, I’m always thrilled because of his attitude. Even my wife, who claims that she’s learned a lot of history from me, is paying me the ultimate compliment because she didn’t like history until she married me.

I think some of my most teachable moments have come from teaching in learning communities, which I have been doing now for ten years by leaving the typical survey classes. I had the idea about collaborative multimedia projects while teaching in a learning community. The way we do this is have groups of three to four students who produce a
multimedia project attached to a research paper. I usually give a period of time frame, 30 years or so, and I give a short overview and the students will then hopefully come up with topics out of that. Once they decide on a topic, they usually will truly get motivated with it. I feel like I’m in a university in a sense because they’re asking my advice on this topic and I go into real detail about that topic. What’s also happened in these learning communities is the improvement of my skills with research and documentation. Now, I’m able to help students with documentation and their Works Cited pages, and, of course, this documentation expertise has now transferred to my other classes. My teaching partner also has a passion for history, so he’s able to help with the history, as well. So now we go down to the LRC in the library with them and we’re browsing together and giving them good suggestions and ideas, while they’re picking my mind. I like it when they pick my mind, instead of me picking their minds. I feel I’m more of a facilitator, but they’re looking at me differently because they realize the learning communities are more than just the students learning. They recognize that it’s the professors and the students learning together, and that to me is one of my favorite teachable times.

I have transferred this multimedia project to my other classes. I choose topics like the Donner party exhibition or Andersonville Prison in the Civil War. I’m always trying to find topics that will peak their interest, such as the Trail of Tears or Cherokee things instead of the usual ho-hum topics, and they’ve found the topics to be exciting. So I would say that would be where I’ve found myself the most excited in teaching.

Asking me how I would mentor a soon-to-be teacher or offer advice to someone about to enter the classroom are good questions. First of all, just realize one thing, when you go into this profession, don’t plan to go into it with gigantic financial rewards. The way I
look at teaching is that you have to have the passion for what you’re about to teach. You have to be willing to take part in the learning and studying with your students. You’d better have a lot of patience because sometimes you can really get frustrated. What else would I say? Teaching is about the fact that the learning is never ending; you’re always learning new things, new ideas. Don’t do the same thing over and over again; try new things, new approaches, and learn new and other technologies. You need to be able to understand or relate to your students; you don’t have to be their friend, but just understand their world and what they’re all about. The key is passion and your desire to work with your students and make them as excited as possible. Just don’t expect to be a corporate CEO.

I don’t know that there is an ideal or preferred student type for me to teach. It doesn’t really bother me either way. I mean, the easy teaching is the students who come in and can write beautifully, take notes, and help make class exciting. Then there’s the type of students I like to work with, too, who have very little skills or no desire to be in college, and if I can reach them and get them motivated some way or other, I would consider them to be the type of students I enjoy. Although I enjoy a class full of 18- and 19-year-olds, I also like a class that has some more age diversity, and because older people can share life experiences for the younger students, so that they get a different perspective on topics and things; that’s probably my favorite kind of class. However, when you teach mornings, you’re mainly going to get 18- to 20-year-olds. In the afternoons, I’m dealing with older students, so it’s a little different mix. I like age diversity the best, if I had a preference. I also like a class that has racial and ethnic diversity because again, I’m able to offer a different perspective on issues. When I have just one race, I’m not seeing or offering another opinion, so that’s what I like. On this particular campus, out of the three probably, we have the least in terms of ethnic diversity.
Out of the three campuses, [Princeton] probably has the most ethnic diversity, which is something I’d like to see more of here.

When I look back on my teaching career, I’ve probably made the most change in my teaching in the fact that I’m shifting more and more into collaborative work. I spent the first part of my teaching career being the Sage on the Stage, but now I’ve moved into much more collaborative work with my students. Also, I have expanded my ability to use technology because when it first really started hitting, I kept thinking, oh, okay, we have this PowerPoint, but that’s like a high class overhead projector, but I’ve learned now that technology actually supplements the teaching. It’s not the sole aspect of teaching, so I made PowerPoint slides, like I might choose a history topic and I have pictures and slides, but usually my outlines are included. The one we have set up in our classroom, in a lecture situation, is a podium and we have a projector in the ceiling, and so in this case, I have a DVD and still a VHS, along with the computer, PowerPoint slides, etc. I can do many different things with this set up. For example, yesterday I went to a Website that I had previously bookmarked. Although we were in the Southwest, we went to Jamestown, Virginia. I used the Website and asked my students how many of them remembered when they were little kids and they saw the cartoon movie of Pocahontas. I then asked them if they could remember how John Smith looked. They responded, “Oh, yeah, blonde hair, fair skin, blues eyes.” Then I asked them how Pocahontas looked, and they responded, “Well, dark brown hair, dark skin, what Indians look like.” After asking them how old they thought both John Smith and Pocahontas were, I suggested that we see what the Website would offer for information. Well, we soon discovered that John Smith had long red hair, he was rugged looking, and he was about 35. Then we found the only picture we’ve ever seen of
Pocahontas, and we discovered that she was dressed as an English woman, big collar and all, and that she was about 21. I gave them more background about why she was dressed the way that she was in the painting. So now they’ll never forget John Smith and Pocahontas.

I like to have a talk like that. I like the fact that we can be here and leave the classroom and go anywhere in the world. This type of teaching has really captured my enthusiasm, so I find myself using the Internet a great deal more. When I use the Internet, I can tell that I have the whole class’s attention; everyone listens and they become much more involved. I happen to have a 14-year-old son, so I know his world a little bit. I at least know what an iPod is, so that helps me in some ways relate to my students. I think it’s important to know a little bit about their world. I’m definitely not the same person I was when I started teaching. I may be turning 60, but I’m not this old guy who is totally out of touch.

My ideal teaching experience would be a classroom where it’s virtual reality and we can be placed in a situation where we could experience part of history. For example, we could be on the Oregon Trail and feel hunger and feel thirst, those kinds of things. Or I could place students in a battle. So much of today’s TV is not true, unless they have something with a history slant with it, but the thing is to really put ourselves in the place and feel history. I have done virtual reality like at Disney World, so if I could create a history classroom like that, it would be great. All of this is just one of my imaginary thoughts that I doubt will probably ever happen.

Excitement and passion keep me in the classroom. People keep asking when I’m going to retire, but like I said earlier, each morning I continue to get up and enjoy doing what I’m doing. Like I said, when I see my successes with students and those kinds of things, I figure if I do retire and I’m still in the area, I might still teach a couple of classes. I can’t
resist it because I simply like what I do. It’s hard to imagine stopping and history is what I love doing.

Like I said earlier, I started with learning communities a little over ten years ago. At the time, they didn’t have the same name as now, but the dean at that time wanted to encourage people in social sciences to get involved, so I came out. The dean had to twist my arm a little because all I could see was extra work and all that kind of stuff, but I went ahead anyway, and as it turns out, it has turned out to be a really rewarding experience, even though at the time we were just trying to get a learning community program started at [Casper County] Community College. Right now the administration has made a major commitment to support learning communities.

When we started, we had no idea what we were doing, so we wound up giving a separate grade for history and a separate grade for English. I was going to do my history stuff and [Nicholas] would do his English stuff. We did this for a few years, until we decided that this method wasn’t what we perceived a learning community to be, so what we wound up doing since then is we blended and we have one common grade for history and English. It goes on the transcript as English and history and it doesn’t say anything about a learning community, but that’s how it is on the transcript. When we decided to change from two separate grades, we could actually see that we were maybe a letter grade away from each other at the most. So when we blended the grading, we began blending more of the activities. Now we’re very comfortable working with each other, but it took two to three years for us to figure out and actually go through a few learning community conferences to get ideas from other people. We also learned that you always want to center a learning community class around a question, so that there would be a theme that we would be working through. For
example, what does it mean to be an American? With that question, we had our students examine different ethnicities on how and what it meant to be an American and we used sociology and history.

I have taught in several different learning communities. I have taught in a learning community with a government professor, then sociology—three classes of sociology—and then the rest with an English professor. The English course is the one where we have our students do research papers with multimedia projects. Working with the English professor has also got me used to using service learning more because that had always been a component with his English classes. I never really used service learning in my stand-alone classes, so this has helped me with working with it. I’ve also gotten more into experiential learning experiences because with a learning community, we have two days a week and meet for two and a half hours each day with two professors. It’s not where I just teach history and [Paula] teaches sociology. Often, we’re up in front having a dialogue and going back and forth with each other. It’s all about blending.

As I indicated earlier, I had to be convinced by my dean to become involved in learning communities in the beginning. However, ever since that first experience, I have wanted to do a learning community every semester. In fact, I would like to do two learning communities each semester, but at this point, finances say that isn’t going to happen. Something I view as my standard thing now is doing one learning community every fall or spring. I also have this dream of a learning community, which we’re working on with no administrative approval yet, but I’ve always wanted to do this one about civil rights with sociology and history and we take a bus for a week and we visit civil rights spots like Selma, Alabama; Montgomery; Atlanta and take the class. This type of experience would truly be
learning together as a learning community. So far, we’re only in the planning stage; however, before I leave this job, that’s something that’s my ultimate dream. So the old guy isn’t planning on fizzling out!

One of the benefits of teaching in a learning community is to see how effective collaborative learning can be. You can also try new and innovative ideas and approaches that you might not feel like you’re comfortable doing in your stand-alone classes. Also, I learn from my colleagues, who, by the way, are my critics, but I learn from what they’re doing and their ideas. You do have to be careful because as a learning community teacher, some people I’ve noticed at the college, do not let you teach the way you’re used to because one person is extremely structured and the other person is very flexible, and they can never pull it together. “My way or else” is a comment I have heard sometimes, so again, I feel like it’s a learning experience from my colleagues as well.

Some of the other things that I use in a learning community, as I have already said, I transfer to my stand-alone classes. I’ve tried some of our learning community approaches that have been beneficial, such as the collaborative learning, which has been exciting to bring to my stand-alone classes. Whether it’s a learning community or a stand-alone class, we’ve discovered there’s always a question about whether or not one person will do all of the work for a collaborative assignment, while one or more can be a slacker. While that can be true at times, in our learning communities, we’ve had the policy that a group has the right to fire anybody in the group. I can remember one time when a girl got fired from her group and she had to go interview with the other learning groups to see if she could get in their group. Finally, when one group accepted her, she had to sign a contract, and I thought this whole process was pretty awesome. I had nothing to do with this firing and rehiring; they did. It was
exciting to see students take responsibility for their actions. When situations like this happen, I remind them that they’re performing like corporate America, where slackers can cost the members of a whole group their jobs.

Yes, I definitely believe that teaching in a learning community is a much richer teaching experience. Well, maybe not richer than the others, but it’s just, it’s just a very enriching teaching experience. I guess I like the idea of being with a colleague and having some dialogue. When you’re in your stand-alone classes, you can’t really get any feedback from other professors because they don’t really know what you’re doing in your classroom. It is enriching. In fact, it’s what’s kept me going and kept me from having burnout. Ten years ago, I felt like I was doing the same thing, same thing, same thing. It has been the learning communities that have kept me in this job more than ever in the last ten years.

Of course, there are some disadvantages and difficulties that surface when teaching in learning communities. For example, you sometimes feel like maybe your learning community partner may be thinking, “I’m doing all of the work.” I’ve also felt at times in the beginning that I was doing all of the work, but now we sit down and discuss who is going to do what. For example, yesterday, the sociology instructor worked with the groups in choosing topics, and she said, “[Chris], I will put the list together.” I thought this was great, so we swap duties and that’s what I like about sharing because it’s not one person doing everything. Also, sometimes in learning communities a disadvantage is when students will sometimes play professors off of each other. In other words, a student might say, “I made a B on this, don’t you think I deserve an A on this?” and the student will only ask one of the professors to see if the grade can be changed, when it is a question that needs to be asked both professors, especially since we joint grade everything. Another disadvantage may be
when students sometimes have a problem with the amount of work and they'll complain. However, we have solved that issue by showing them the work we do individually in our stand-alone classes. We remind them that this is two classes combined into one and that they’re doing the work of two classes, not one class, and that sometimes gets to be a harder concept.

I’ve already talked about collaboration when I was talking about the multimedia collaborative research projects that have been very successful. Students today are so high media that they really put on a super presentation of media. However, the hardest part of the project is the research, which is a little more difficult for them, but in our English/history learning community they take turns with who is doing the research and who is doing the multimedia work. We’re doing the same in our sociology/history community because we want them to learn about documentation to show where they have found their information. We do other collaborative assignments in the classes, and like I’ve already mentioned, I do collaborative work in my stand-alone classes now because of how effective it has been in the learning communities.

Before I started teaching in learning communities, I did some collaborative work in my classrooms, but I didn’t do multimedia long-term kind of projects. I did things with primary source documents, where I would put them in a group and we’d analyze and discuss primary sources, those kinds of things, but never to the point of a big presentation. We also do short collaborative work, like where they have to come up with three questions and these three questions will be used in our next exam. I know Mr. [Gantry] uses the questions on the final, but the questions have to be how, what, why. In other words, we don’t want to know what year something happened, or name this person. We have the prerogative as professors,
and if they’re weak questions, we can rewrite them, yet it makes the students feel like they are actually creating a test. Because we assess their questions, it’s another way we use collaboration.

Because we don’t have honors classes here, we do get some students who aren’t too prepared and they just throw their projects together. We have very diverse learning communities when you talk about academic skills coming to class, but then I think with the collaborative things, it pulls these students up a little higher because they meet and work outside of class doing research for their work. We’ve noticed that if one of their persons is not there, they’ll get on their cell phone and call them and get them out of bed and encourage them to come to class. I wish I could call them up and get them to come to class, so I’ve seen that work collaboratively, too, where they actually help each other and even get each other going, in that sense.

As far as using collaboration with other faculty members, before I became involved in learning communities, I don’t have much to share. When I would go to workshops and be put in groups to work on some kind of problem or issue, is about the only type of collaboration I had experienced. Or if I’m on a committee in the district and I have to work on some kind of project with other faculty, like I’m currently on the learning community taskforce and we’re working on ways of marketing learning communities, that kind of collaboration. These are the only kinds of collaboration I have experienced with other faculty members before I started teaching in learning communities.

If I understand your definition of collegiality, we would be involved with collegiality when we’re assessing in our learning communities. When I teach in a stand-alone class, I totally make my own decisions on assessment, but in a learning community with a colleague,
we’re discussing grades together all the time. We’ll have a dialogue about whether we should consider moving a student to a B that might have been a high C, or we’ll look at an assignment together like the PowerPoints in sociology and history. We’ll sit in a classroom by ourselves and we’ll both have a spreadsheet and we’ll decide how many points we should give for creativity, and then we look at their research, and we’ll go back and forth together until we reach a middle ground. I like that we’re discussing with another professor and what he or she is looking for, compared to what I’m looking for. I like knowing what the English department is requiring because before I was just happy to get something close to a research paper. Now, I understand better about the dilemmas some of these students have about plagiarism. A lot of these kids come into school and I know people say absolutely no plagiarism, but it turns out some of these students don’t really understand what plagiarism is because they copy things out of books at the high school experience, so between [Nicholas] and me, we’re not going to hand them a zero and destroy them.

I also think we’re practicing collegiality when we put the syllabus together. Of course, you have to do the standard thing the college says; you have to put in a syllabus the drop date and those kinds of issues, but you also have to have a discussion about how you feel about tardies and absenteeism. You also have to have a discussion about what you want to present because, quite frankly, my learning community is quite different than what I do in a stand-alone class. We’ll also oftentimes get together the hour before our class begins so we can decide what each is going to cover for that particular day. Of course, we e-mail each other and ask, how about this idea or what about that idea. We are constantly having some type of interchange throughout the entire semester.
Yes, I would encourage other faculty members to become involved with learning communities. Actually, I have encouraged two others to teach with me, a sociology instructor and a government instructor. On our campus, the faculty actually has a lounge area where we dine and eat and talk. Of course, we often talk about what went on in our learning community and other faculty members see you sitting and planning with your teaching partner, so people begin to ask what learning communities are all about. I’m always willing to give them ideas and to talk about the problems and dilemmas we have. It’s kind of like being a mentor. We’re going to have five learning communities this spring semester, so it’s very exciting to see more professors who are getting into learning communities, and, of course, as more get into learning communities and they have a rewarding experience, they share that with other professors. Right now the college has a major commitment to see as many professors as possible doing learning communities. I think their goal is they want to eventually have core classes all sign up for the learning community program.

Not every professor is destined to work in learning communities and you shouldn’t make a professor. For example, I went to a workshop a few years ago and this English professor was sharing about the time when a history professor invited her to form a learning community with him. When she asked him why he wanted to work with her, his response was, “Well, this would be great. I could teach the history and you could grade the research papers.” Of course, she chose not to work with him. I was glad to hear her response because teaching in a learning community is more about working together. I would say if I were going to teach with another professor, I feel I would need to be teaching with someone who can be flexible. When teaching in a learning community, you’re going to be trying new ideas and new approaches. If you have the attitude of my way or else, then I would not be able to
enjoy teaching in that learning community. I’ll be honest. I was that kind of person in the beginning and I found out it didn’t work that way. You don’t have to be best friends, but you have to be the type of professor who is willing to try new things and be open.

I’ll share a story with you. About a year and a half ago, I had a heart attack and quadruple bi-pass surgery. Every one of my learning community colleagues made a visit to see me in the hospital. Usually, you become more than a group just teaching in a classroom. We became friends and very close with each other. Sometimes you just get connected with each other’s families and stuff. It’s just a bond that seems to happen over the years. Again, I would say your teaching partner has to be willing to change and be flexible. I have even said no to one colleague because I thought we would probably have a conflict because she is so very precise and organized and not very flexible.

Profile for [Nicholas Gantry]

I’ve been teaching English ever since I graduated with my bachelor’s degree in 1976. I started teaching junior high and taught eighth and ninth grade for four years in Georgia, and then I went back to graduate school to get my master’s degree. I taught two years as a graduate assistant at a four-year college, and after I finished my master’s course work, I worked there as a full-time instructor for two years while I wrote my master’s thesis. When I finished my thesis, I moved here and got a job as an associate back in the spring of 1986. After two years as an associate, I became a full-time instructor here at [Casper County] and have been here ever since. So I have taught junior high, at a four-year college, and now with the community college system.

I began college thinking I was going to be a civil engineer, but I soon discovered that I really wasn’t suited for the hard work of taking classes like calculus and chemistry and
physics, so I had what we can say is an educational focus change and I became an English major when I started my education over at a community college. At first, I wanted to major in everything I took. Not thinking about what I was going to do with any of the classes, but I would take a sociology course and think I wanted to be a sociologist. I took a history course and wanted to be a historian, but the classes I enjoyed the most were my English courses, and I started telling everyone I was going to be an English major. When people asked me what I was going to do with an English major, I told them I was going to teach. I come from a long line of teachers; my mother was a teacher; one of her great aunts was a teacher; another great-great aunt was a teacher; my sister is a teacher; I have uncles who are teachers; so there were a lot of educators in my family, so they’ve never had any stigma attached to teaching.

When I started to get into the education program and had some really good teachers who enjoyed what they were doing as English teachers, I became interested. All of my major professors were wonderful at the four-year college and I saw how interested they were in teaching. They were all published scholars in their field and they also enjoyed being in the classroom. Then when I worked on my graduate degree, I also had really good teachers who were also published scholars. I found as a graduate student that I just didn’t like trying to write scholarly articles. I wanted to be at a place that emphasized teaching over scholarly publication, so I found a job here and it was just a god-send because it was perfect. The emphasis here is learning and quality teaching more so than professional publication. We are encouraged to be active with professional publishing, but there is no requirement to get published. We don’t have to write textbooks and the fact that I had published before coming here had no impact on my being hired. I am contracted to produce classroom success because this institution values good teaching.
Teaching in the public school system, especially at the junior high level for four years, was enough to convince me that I wanted to teach at a community college. In the public school system, if they were short a teacher, they could tell someone to teach the class, whether the individual was qualified or not. I taught ninth grade math at the junior high. In fact, I’ve taught outside my field several times. However, I just didn’t like the public school teaching and all of the peripheral activities. I didn’t like having to chaperone dances and I didn’t like having bathroom duty. I wanted someplace that would let me read and write and work with students without having to worry about discipline. The college takes care of a lot of stuff like that. If a student doesn’t want to be here, he or she just doesn’t come. I didn’t like day-to-day standardized testing. I decided to give up having the same students all year long. I just didn’t want eighth and ninth graders to be the rest of my life.

I wanted to teach at the community college level because of the emphasis on teaching. I know some people at the community college don’t like freshmen and sophomores, but I find them a lot of fun because they’re discovering what they’re going to do. I enjoy the basic courses, freshmen Comp I and II, and the sophomore level courses are exciting as well. I just find students, especially at the community college, very excited about having the opportunity to learn and go to school. I like the fact that we have a lot of the nontraditional students also. I like hearing the nontraditional students making such comments as, “I’m really worried about my writing skills because I haven’t been in school for 20 years.” I like watching them discover themselves. They have a bad self-concept of themselves as students and they make comments about their high school English teacher telling them they couldn’t write and weren’t really material for college. However, they’ve matured now and they
actually have something to say, so I enjoy that aspect of them discovering the talent within themselves.

My philosophy of education is tied in with teaching people to be good citizens, good workers. I try to connect my assignments to the real world. I want my students to explore their own interests and to focus on issues that are about their communities. It’s also one of my goals to open students to experiences of many cultures. I want them to understand why the courses I teach are important or necessary to their overall education.

Probably the greatest challenge that we face as community college instructors is working with the student whose attention is divided, the student who is trying to work a 40-hour a week job, plus take a full load of classes. Somehow I have to keep this student motivated for a college class. Some of my students even work 60-hour weeks while going to school. If it comes down to a choice between work and school, they’re going to choose the job. So it’s this type of student, the one who needs help in learning to prioritize in order to focus on school, who has become my greatest challenge.

I think my greatest joys as a teacher are the students who return and make a point to look you up and tell you about their trip to England, or the student who tells me, “Of all the classes I took in college, I remember yours the most.” I think teaching in the learning communities, when students see the intersections between courses, have been some of my most teachable moments. With the two classes connected, they enjoyed doing the papers. To me, those have been moments of success, which is why I continue to teach in learning communities because I think they are about successful teaching.

If I were to be a mentor for a new teacher, I would definitely have some advice to share with the individual. Don’t get overloaded with all the peripherals of committees and
taskforces. I would try to talk to them about who our students are and how they might differ from students they have had at other colleges. We have everything from doctoral candidates to students who have never been in a college classroom. Students coming out of doctoral programs today sometimes have no clear understanding about community college teaching. I would help them prioritize what’s important and help them see what needs to be done. I also would help them understand the mechanics of the institution.

I would find it impossible to describe the ideal student type other than I like for students to have a bare minimum of interest. If they’re interested, they can become inspired. They just have to have an interest in what we’re doing. Everything else takes care of itself. Usually, because most of our students pay their own way through college, they have a higher level of interest and they are ready to want to read.

I can think of several ways that I have changed since I began teaching. When I first started teaching, I told people a lot more and now I try to help them question and find the answers. When I first started teaching, I was what we used to call the Sage on the Stage. Part of it was I was so young, but now that I am a little older, I’m more certain of myself and I have established myself as a teacher. I’ve learned to let them question and explore. I try, instead of lecturing, to listen, question, and use the board for discussion questions. I think that’s my biggest improvement. I don’t feel like I have to tell them everything anymore.

I think I already have the ideal teaching experience and that’s teaching in a learning community. In these classes, students are excited about getting an education. I’ve had students actually tell me, “I was sick in bed and I came because I didn’t want to miss your class.” Every year I have a good teaching experience. I’ve been teaching for 30 years and I’ve never gotten tired of teaching because I’ve always enjoyed the classroom. Of course, I
help myself by not teaching in the summers. I stay in the classroom because I love teaching. I love sharing ideas and introducing new ideas. Some things they’ve heard before in high school, but it just never made sense. Most of them have never read Chaucer; they’ve heard of Shakespeare, maybe they saw *Romeo and Juliet*, but I enjoy the opportunity to help them have a new exploration.

I’ve lost track of how many learning communities I’ve done. I’ve done a community with sociology a couple of times, at least 12 communities with history and English, so I’ve probably done 15 or 16 learning communities. I have taught in at least one a year for the past 12 years. Originally, I liked the idea of a learning community, but if it had been left up to me, I might not have gotten involved. We started the program when an administrator suggested that we do it. Although there were some that didn’t work, most of the initial pairings worked pretty well. If differences existed between faculty members it usually centered on how each faculty member in the learning community tolerated students.

There are many benefits to me as a teacher in a learning community. First, I don’t have to convince them that what I teach is practical. They actually enjoy writing about the other discipline. There’s also the benefit of motivation because the students in learning communities seem to be more motivated. I also think it’s fun to be a student again because I am always learning from my teaching colleagues. When we started doing presentations, we didn’t have to become an expert in a certain area. In other words, we were able to be facilitators of learning, rather than professors. Another benefit for us and the students is we have so much time we can see an entire film or go on a field trip, and a stand-alone class cannot do this. I also see huge benefits in the opportunities to do teamwork.
I definitely agree that teaching in a learning community is a richer experience than teaching stand-alone classes. It is the best teaching I have ever done. I think one of the biggest advantages of teaching in a learning community is the fact that I lose my course. A learning community becomes our course. Although I like this concept of the learning community becoming our course, some people struggle with the idea and consider this concept to be a disadvantage of learning communities.

[Chris] and I have had very few problems collaborating. The first couple of semesters that we worked together we didn’t know how to do it. Blending happened best for us when we finally quit thinking about putting two courses together and decided to start with a blank slate. We start with a theme and a question that we want the course to answer. We don’t come in with a history syllabus and an English syllabus and try to put them together in some way. We just start with a blank slate and say, “This is our theme; this is our question,” and collaboration has been very, very simple from that point on.

It seems the only times we get upset with what we’re trying to do is when we realize that we’re trying to do too much. We’ve definitely learned to work around one another’s strengths. We work very well together, whether we are standing up at the front of the class together, or one of us is sitting down and the other talking. At times, I may chime in or even argue with him, and he argues with me. [Paula] and I do the same thing when we teach together and the students actually enjoy hearing our perspectives. We’ve also had to learn to collaborate on some of the minutia of the classroom, what do you do when someone comes in late? Some people lock the door. What about late papers? Over all, I’d have to say that my experience has been very good. After all, working with a learning community partner is like getting married. I can’t think of any times that I was involved with collaboration with another
faculty member before I became involved in learning communities. I do remember asking a business professor to come in one time and tell about the value of writing for the future. However, it is usually pretty difficult to schedule other professors in for special presentations.

As far as collegiality is concerned, [Chris] and I have moved to grading together instead of grading assignments separately. When we were first starting out as learning community partners, we wondered about how each other graded, but we graded the assignments individually, only to discover that we were giving almost identical grades. At that point, we decided that we felt comfortable giving a common grade, so basically, we keep two copies of the same grade book. We do grade a couple of assignments separately. For example, I grade all of the service learning assignments and [Chris] grades the experiential learning assignments. We’re very comfortable working together and we didn’t have any problem working out classroom policies. Our syllabus is a blend as far as policies go.

I don’t know that I could encourage every faculty member to participate in a learning community. Some people will never find someone they can live with; there are people who are not suited to go to lunch together. This doesn’t mean that they are bad teachers, but they have an exact way they have to do their course and a learning community requires flexibility. There are also some people who are uncomfortable with another faculty member in the classroom with them. They feel like they’re constantly being judged or evaluated. Maybe these two faculty members could make a linked community.

Camaraderie is important. The bond and rapport help decision-making. When there is a connectedness between the two professors, the students get a completely different picture and realize that this class isn’t like any of their other classes. Consequently, the students
begin to develop relationships as well. In fact, we’ve had students get on the phone during class and call a classmate who wasn’t present and encourage the missing students to get there because they wanted the student there. You don’t see that in a regular, stand-alone class. I think the best part of the learning communities is this strong connection that students discover.

Profile for [Susan Jansen]

My discipline is humanities. I have a Ph.D. in humanities from UT-D and I have a bachelor’s degree in English and a master’s degree in history, so humanities was just a little bit of everything. After I got my bachelor’s degree in English, I taught English for a while in junior high and then I got my master’s degree in history and I taught history and English in junior high and high school. The sort of interesting thing that is related to our current learning community situation is that when I taught in a junior high, it was an experimental situation where we combined all of the students in various subject areas, so that we taught them like the interrelatedness of history maybe and English. We called it team teaching, so it was this approach, but not in a single classroom, but rather the group. Some might work with small groups, while another member of the team would have a large lecture. They even built a school to accommodate that approach.

I taught in public schools for a total of 13 years and then I didn’t teach for quite a while. I started work as a docent at the local art museum, so I started taking art history courses and ended up with everything for a degree but Spanish and a dissertation. I decided to take the Spanish and write the dissertation and then I began teaching here at [Casper County]. First I taught part time for about five years, but I have been teaching here full time for ten years. I have taught humanities and western civilization. Before I taught here full
time, I taught a lecture course at UT-D, but the classes had over a hundred students in them and that didn’t appeal to me. I wanted smaller classes where I could get to know my students, so I let the large, university lecture class go away.

I really can’t say for sure when I wanted to become an educator, but I would say that other than my grandmother who started me reading and writing before I started school, my eighth grade teacher in a little town in west Texas was a dynamic woman. It was an eighth grade class, but she taught everything. Her specialty was math and she made math an adventure and a game and everything about math was exciting. At the time, I thought if teaching is that exciting and she’s been doing it all of these years, it must be the most wonderful thing in the world. And it is. I love teaching.

I became a college instructor because in the period of time, the 10 to 12 years I didn’t teach and I did all of the volunteer work, I kept hearing these horror stories about high school and the discipline or lack thereof. I thought that I either wanted to teach the very small, such as the pre-K, or I wanted to teach the college age. Once I taught a college class, I knew that that was what I liked best of all and the community college, like I mentioned a little bit before, is so much more rewarding because I know my students and I can have a personal relationship with them.

I don’t know that I have a philosophy of teaching. I guess a teacher should be a person who is excited about his or her subject area and attempts to convey that enthusiasm to the students to open new doors for them, so that they may not go into your field, but they will at least have a good feel about it. We have to make our subject area interesting to them and we want to always challenge them.
I don’t know that I can describe any challenges that I have had to face as a college instructor. If there’s anything that’s challenging, it’s the bureaucracy or when there are politics involved. Although it’s not necessarily a challenge for me, but it’s frustrating when everyone is not focused on the learning environment for the students.

What are my joys as a teacher? Well, I just got a call a few minutes ago from a student I had last semester and she was calling to thank me for my class last semester and how much she appreciated it and she felt that she learned a great deal. The fact that students return and I have the opportunity to write letters for admissions to universities and help them get jobs is a great joy. Just staying in touch is important to me. Like I said earlier about the community colleges, because I get to know my students well, they become a part of my life. These are the joys I appreciate as a teacher.

Probably the most teachable moments for me are when they get it. When that light comes on and I make a point and they get it and they come back and tell me in their own words, not my words, what they see in a work of art. None of these moments are necessarily earth shattering; it’s just that whenever they happen, it’s always delightful.

The first thing I would tell a potential soon-to-be teacher is that they truly have to love what they are about to teach. They have to be excited about the subject. If they are not satisfied with what they know about their subject, they need to continue learning in that area. I also think they have to love people, be flexible, and have a sense of humor at all times. You always have to think ahead because at a community college, we have a wide range of capabilities and so I think you have to take care of the ones who are maybe not as studious as others and you have to have something that will challenge the very best, so that they can move to greater heights. It’s like trying to strike a balance, so that I don’t have some who are
bored and I’m talking way over their heads, while there are others right with me and understanding the concept. Maybe this is the challenge I should have mentioned earlier when you asked me about challenges in the classroom?

I think an ideal student is a well-rounded student. Of course, I always want those who will just get in there and read their assignments and have everything ready for class. As far as this semester, I have a number of athletes and they are good in their athletics and they devote a lot of time to their athletic ability, and they come to class prepared, so I think the ideal student is a balanced person. It would be a pretty dull class if everyone were only interested in artistic theory.

I think the way that I have improved through the years is by learning new teaching techniques. I’ve learned these techniques by attending conferences and being exposed to what other people are doing successfully. I get new ideas that way. At the same time, if you’re teaching something that you love, like I do, all of the books that I read. I love to read about archaeology and architecture and things that are not specific to my degree, but are related to what I do, so I continue to learn. Another thing that I do that has enriched my teaching is while I’m teaching, I continue to be a docent at the museum, so I’m constantly seeing the works of different artists and, on other occasions, I grab my husband by the hand and drag him to the nearest museum that has a good show, so we can view the collection. All of this is reinforcement and enhancement of my teaching.

I’ve already experienced my ideal teaching experience. The woman whom I teach with in my learning community is my ideal situation. If I could write my own schedule, I’d teach all learning communities with her because we really enjoy working together and consider that situation to be ideal.
I guess it’s the excitement of the feedback that I get from my students that keeps me in the classroom. Being around young people like this because they are so upbeat is always a benefit and suggests a bright future. A lot of times people my age are more concerned about their ailments, which are not an issue for these young people. Being in the classroom makes me feel younger.

I have only done one learning community, the one that I do in conjunction with art appreciation. I think that this is the third year that we’ve taught it, which means that this will be the fifth semester because we offer this learning community every semester. So I’m teaching my introduction to humanities with [Barb’s] art appreciation. We talked about using art history and humanities, but art history is two semesters, so that’s why we went with art appreciation and humanities. The humanities allow us to bring in all of the art history part of it that we would like.

Originally, I got involved in learning communities because [Barb] asked me. I had another friend who wanted me to teach humanities with world literature, which would work nicely, too, but we ended [up] being on two different campuses and that makes it awfully hard to have a learning community. [Barb], who had already done a learning community with a woman who taught western civilization, was interested in working with me. I agreed because I’ve always enjoyed her company and she’s a really dedicated teacher; her whole focus is teaching.

One of the benefits of teaching in a learning community is the time span that we have. Also, because the two areas are so similar, we can go deeper into the material and make it a lot richer. We also bounce off of each other so much because we both have so much of the same background and we both like to read the same kinds of things. My teaching partner is
very easy to work with and she is very flexible. Our teaching situation is a real give and take, both in our planning times together and in the classroom also. She doesn’t get up and talk about art history and I don’t get up and talk about humanities. We have it all blended together, so that we can talk about the elements and principles in a painting and I’ll bring in the humanities’ issues about the same work of art. We’re very integrated and I see all of this work together as a benefit. Like I said earlier with the time span, we can go on field trips, or we can go to the art museum and visit the sculpture garden for one class and another area for another class. Yes, I can take my other classes to a museum, but we can’t stay as long, so the two classes blocked together really help us plan activities away from campus.

Teaching in a learning community is definitely a richer teaching experience. I already said this, but if I could make my own schedule, I’d have all learning communities. It’s a much richer experience with three hours twice a week with the students. We get to know the students and they get to know us and the comfort level is yet another good benefit that happens in these classrooms. Right off the bat, we encourage our students to get together with two or three people to form a study group. We’ve also given them assignments where we encourage them to work together on specific discussion things, so we’ve really tried to foster the cohesiveness of the students in the class by encouraging them to work together.

I think maybe a slight disadvantage, but if you pace it just right it isn’t; it’s more like an advantage that’s turned into a disadvantage. If you don’t have the class paced correctly, they get frustrated with the amount of work, so you have to intermingle the student reports and discussion groups and films and music, so that there’s variety. So it’s the pacing of the material that could be a disadvantage, but we work really hard to create variety.
Although the students do quite a bit of collaboration on a variety of the assignments, [Barb] and I collaborate on everything. We make all of our lesson plans together and we spend an hour or two after every class planning and preparing what we’re going to do for the next class. We have also gone to some of the same workshops together. We both see the same thing. But collaboration isn’t new to me and my teaching. I have always used it to a degree. The humanities are always pretty easy to incorporate collaboration. We tried to move to a multicultural curriculum, more than just western civilization. I have also used collaboration with my department. We’re always sharing our successes and failures in the classroom. Also, we sponsor a humanities fair every semester to exhibit our students’ creative projects.

[Barb] and I always have discussions about classroom practices. We’re always talking about whether or not something worked in our class. We always think we have things worked out and that next semester is going to be a piece of cake, but what do we do the first day we get together the next semester? We start changing stuff around and decide to do assignments differently because we think it might be a better way to teach the concept. If there’s something that I’m presenting for the first time, I always ask [Barb] to give me feedback and I do the same for her. We’re always trying to help each other be the best we can be.

I think the best way that I could encourage another faculty member to become involved in learning communities is to tell them how much I’ve enjoyed learning communities and what a richer experience they are. I’d also encourage them to talk with students who have been in a learning community because they seem to get so much more out of it. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say they did not enjoy the learning community that they’ve been in. I also keep talking about the other faculty members who teach in learning
communities and how they are enthusiastic about their particular courses. I think the best way to encourage other faculty to participate is through the student referrals and the other people who have been doing learning communities more than I have.

I would encourage most faculty to get involved in learning communities as long as they wouldn’t steal my teaching partner. Although I love teaching in learning communities and would be willing to encourage others to get involved, I do think there are some people who shouldn’t teach in them. How do I say this diplomatically? People who are inflexible won’t function well in a learning community. It has to be a flexible person and someone who is excited about teaching, but I think flexibility is probably the main thing; you’ve got to be flexible. I don’t know that camaraderie is necessary. I think I could teach with a lot of different people. I won’t say anyone, because like I mentioned, inflexibility doesn’t work, and I don’t think I could teach with someone who is so rigid that they can’t make changes. Before I started teaching with [Barb], we knew each other, but we weren’t half as good of friends as we are today. We had common interests and I knew about her and she knew about me, but we were in two different positions, which separated us to some degree, but we have definitely grown into a special bond.

**Conclusion**

Winning a national award for their learning community initiative is one piece of evidence that demonstrates the commitment to learning community experiences at [Casper County] Community College. Having an award winning program also demonstrates commitment to the program from an administrative level. However, by reading the profiles of the six participants in this research study, it becomes evident that another reason that their
initiative is successful is because it is championed by committed faculty who are passionate about teaching and focused on student learning.

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Seidman (1998) believed that these first-person narrative profiles provide a certain “power” (p. 103) that adds a dimension to the study over and above an analysis of the themes that emerge from the interviews. The purpose of the next chapter is to present the results of the analysis and coding for themes from the interview transcriptions.
CHAPTER 5. AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES

In this chapter, I present the themes that emerged from the interviews. As stated in Chapter 3, I used the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to process the data. The following themes emerged from the interviews: passion for teaching; attitudes about students and student success; importance of learning communities (Although all of the research ultimately focuses on learning communities, several participants made references to them during the first round of interviews when the notion of learning communities was not a part of the interview protocol.); the marriage metaphor and partner compatibility; altered pedagogy; flexibility; and finally, faculty benefits with the sub-themes of learning, collaboration, and professional development. Each of these themes is discussed in the following sections.

There were only two themes that consistently emerged in all three rounds of interviews. Although a weak theme in the first, or life story interview, types of faculty benefits abounded in both the second and third rounds of questioning. The other theme—flexibility—that surfaced in all three rounds was only strong in the second round of interviews, when the participants discussed their learning community teaching experiences. However, the idea of flexibility was referenced twice in both the first and third interviews.

**Passion for Teaching**

One of the strongest themes that surfaced was the fact that all six participants possess a strong desire, or in their words, a “passion” for the classroom and teaching. Whether referencing a former educator who influenced them, or discussing why they chose to teach at the community college level, each indicated a love for teaching and a desire to be in the
classroom and making a difference in students’ lives. For example, [Nicholas Gantry] made the following observation when discussing his desire to teach at the community college level:

I wanted to be at a place that emphasized teaching over scholarly publication, so I found a job [at Casper County] and it was just a god-send because it was perfect.
The emphasis at the community college level was on learning and quality teaching over professional publication. . . . When I was hired, I knew this was an institution that recognized the value of teaching.

In a similar manner, when making a distinction between teaching at the community college level, as opposed to a four-year private school or university, [Andy] Blackwell made the following statement:

Well, our focus [at the community college] is teaching. . . . I want to teach and that’s what I like, so that’s the whole reason that I like teaching at the community college. I can focus on teaching. I can play around and experiment with things and try new things, new ways of teaching class, because it’s encouraged. From my observation, trying new things at a four-year level isn’t necessarily encouraged because it seems that there it’s all about research and publishing. However, at the community college, our focus is on the teaching and on the students, and so that’s one of the key points for me.

Besides referencing their passion for teaching while discussing why they chose to become an educator, and specifically a community college educator, this theme about their passion for the classroom also surfaced when they shared advice that they would offer soon-to-be educators, if they were their mentors. [Jennifer Davenport] said, “I truly have a passion for the classroom. [New teachers] need to show [their] passion.” With a similar response,
[Chris Larson] said, “You just have to have the passion for what you’re about to teach.” And finally, [Susan Jansen] claimed, “For individuals who are about to become teachers, I would tell them that first of all to be sure that what they were about to teach was something that they truly loved and they were excited about.”

**Attitudes about Students**

Asking questions about mentoring soon-to-be educators and what they considered to be ideal students, it was only natural that each participant would focus on students and their attitudes about them. Although most of them claimed the following about an ideal student, “I don’t know that there is an ideal student,” [Nicholas Gantry] commented about a particular student who said, “‘I came because I didn’t want to miss your class.’ That’s the ideal student to me.” However, in several different references, the participants made comments about students and the importance of students and student learning. For example, [Jennifer Davenport] claimed, “Education is about the students.” Echoing her sentiments, [Chris Larson] said, “The most important thing is the student. If you don’t have the student, I wouldn’t be here.” And when discussing her attitudes about mentoring a soon-to-be instructor, [Ellen Thompson] presented the following advice: “Remember what it’s like to be a student.” Over and over, just as there was a strong commitment to teaching, throughout the first round of interviews, there was also a strong emphasis on the importance of students and working with them to help them “get it,” so to speak, or to make a difference in their lives.

Along with multiple references to students and student learning, a common sub-theme that all six participants noted was how they identified or related to student success. The most common question that seemed to elicit their thoughts about student success was the question that asked them to reflect about their greatest joys as a teacher. All six of the participants
reflected about former students who, in some way, had contacted them and thanked them for the difference they had made in their lives. For example, [Jennifer Davenport] recalled the student who sent her a thank you card saying, “You may not know it, but the day you said, ‘yes you can,’ made all the difference in my life.” [Chris Larsen] made the following claim: “The most positive stroke in teaching is when someone speaks to you and says, ‘What you taught me in history, I’m still paying attention to or reading and studying history.’ It’s all about the impact you have on people.”

[Ellen Thompson] made references to student success when she discussed her philosophy of teaching. She claimed that what was most important to her was “mak[ing] a difference in their lives, how they see themselves, how they see others, and how they interact with one another and their world.” Later in the interview she supported this same idea when discussing her greatest joys as a teacher and said, “[I know I was successful when] they come back and tell me that my class made a difference.” She went on to prove her point that she knew she had made a difference in their lives by mentioning a time when she had received an “announcement from a former student [who was getting a four-year degree] and he thought of me.”

**Importance of Learning Communities**

Although it was explained in the pre-interview stages that the purpose of the first round of interviews was to discuss their “life stories,” or how and why they became educators, with no references to learning communities and their involvement with them, four of the participants made references to learning communities during this first interview. These references to learning communities surfaced when the participants were asked to describe their most teachable moments, an ideal teaching experience, or how they have changed or
improved over the years. Although she did not actually use the term *learning community*, [Jennifer Davenport] actually described a teaching experience with Dr. [Thompson] when she discussed her most teachable moment. She also referenced learning communities when she discussed her ideal teaching experiences. One of the reasons she considered learning communities an ideal teaching experience is because she said the faculty are “totally engaged [and] . . . learning with students.”

When discussing some of his most teachable moments, [Chris Larson] said, “Well, if you go back to where I find [teachable moments] very exciting is learning communities.” He went on to discuss their use of collaborative video projects in their history/English communities. He also mentioned how he, as a faculty member, has benefited because his “skills improved on the research itself because of documentation.” He also made a reference to faculty learning: “Learning communities are more than just the students learning; it’s also the professors learning with the students together, and to me that is one of my favorite teachable times.” [Susan Jansen] claimed that she has already had her most teachable experience when she said, “I’ve already taught it. When I teach with [Barb] in a learning community, it is an ideal situation. If I could write my own schedule, I’d teach all learning communities with her.”

Finally, when discussing how he has changed as a teacher, [Andy Blackwell] referenced his experiences in learning communities. He said, “I’ve learned to be more flexible and I’ve learned from colleagues.” When responding to his ideal teaching experiences, he returned to the subject of learning communities and said that his ideal teaching experience would “most likely be in a learning community because it’s having the
interaction and having the other discipline, those two subjects together.” He repeated himself by making a reference to changing his teaching style by “teaching with somebody.”

**The Marriage Metaphor and Partner Compatibility**

Initially, I was surprised to discover four of the participants comparing teaching in a learning community to being in a marriage. However, when I read their *Learning Communities Faculty Guide* (n.d.), I discovered the source for this metaphor. As stated in Chapter 4 and the Profile section of [Casper’s] learning community initiative, the college also emphasizes faculty personalities when they discuss the pairing of learning community partners. The guide claimed, “as with any successful marriage, the team members should be comfortable with each other” (p. 3). When discussing the difficulties and disadvantages she has encountered while teaching in a learning community, [Jennifer Davenport] referenced the marriage metaphor to explain that just as in all marriages, “its not always a perfect relationship” when pairing with another faculty member. She further explained that if the learning community is going to be successful for both the faculty and the students, the two faculty members have to learn to work together to make it happen. Echoing similar sentiments, [Andy Blackwell] mentioned the marriage metaphor when he discussed the issue of camaraderie. He said, “Teaching in a learning community is like a marriage and you want a good marriage and you need to know that you can work with that person. Also, just like a marriage, there are some things you don’t find out until you do it.” Similarly, both [Ellen Thompson] and [Nicholas Gantry] made references to the “bond” that needs to be present when working with a colleague in a learning community. [Ellen] went as far as to say, “I don’t answer a [student] question [about a class issue] or make a decision without talking to my [teaching] partner first.”
Closely related to this marriage metaphor theme is the opposite, or what happens when partner compatibility either doesn’t exist or it is a challenge. Usually, these comments about partner compatibility surfaced when the participants were asked to discuss the disadvantages and difficulties of learning communities. According to [Jennifer Davenport], “learning communities could have a huge disadvantage if you don’t enjoy your teaching partner. For example, if your teaching partner has a different pace or if I think my partner is going to dominate the time, it can be frustrating.” [Chris Larson] said, “Of course, there are some disadvantages and difficulties when teaching in learning communities. For example, you sometimes feel like maybe your learning community partner may be thinking, ‘I’m doing all of the work.’ I’ve also felt at times in the beginning that I was doing all of the work.”

When asked if anyone could teach in a learning community, [Nicholas Gantry] made the following comment about teaching partners: “Some people will never find someone they can live with; there are people not suited to go to lunch together.” While remembering a time of incompatibility, [Ellen Thompson] discussed the time she felt “like [she] had a rope around [her] neck. All semester [she] felt caged in and [she] knew that if [they] ever taught together again, [they] would have to add flexibility.” [Susan Jansen’s] only concern about teaching partners was her hope that no one would “steal [her] teaching partner.”

**Altered Pedagogy**

All six participants perceived that their pedagogy had been altered as a result of teaching in learning communities. They all also maintained that the experiences and assignments that had become valuable learning community experiences did not remain in their learning community classrooms. Instead, all made references to ideas about cross-over assignments, which meant they began using their learning community assignments and
projects in their stand-alone classes. At the same time, they mentioned that it was the learning community environment and the support of a teaching colleague that provided them the courage to experiment with new activities and assignments in their learning community classrooms. Specifically, [Nicholas Gantry] made the following claim:

To me, the learning community is the place to just try things you always wanted to try but maybe didn’t want to try in a stand-alone class, so I experiment there because I’ve got someone else to bounce ideas off of as my co-teacher, and we try things there and then I take them back to the stand-alone classroom.

**Flexibility**

The majority of the reflection about flexibility surfaced during the responses to the questions about whether or not some faculty should teach in learning communities, the disadvantages they have encountered in learning communities, and when they discussed the issue of camaraderie. The common theme that ran throughout each interview is that “a learning community requires flexibility.” For example, although she was responding to the question about camaraderie, [Jennifer Davenport] actually discussed flexibility and comfort levels while teaching with someone else:

I don’t think you can do a good job in the classroom, unless you’re doing it the way that works for you; you have to be comfortable. If you feel forced into a certain way, such as we need to do this in fifteen minutes, and this in the next fifteen minutes, and this the next fifteen minutes, I couldn’t live with that. I have a looser flow and so the person with the rigid schedule would be nuts, and they would make me crazy, too, so it wouldn’t work.

[Andy Blackwell] made the following comments about flexibility:
You certainly have to be flexible. I know when I teach my own course, I may have a schedule, where things are laid out day-by-day, but when there are two courses, you’ve got to be more flexible because one day that person may need to take a little more time and you learn to work with each other.

When [Ellen Thompson] responded to the question about difficulties and disadvantages that she had encountered while teaching in learning communities, she discussed a time when she taught with a colleague who was “extremely structured” and wanted to “[write] down what [they] were doing every thirty minutes,” which made [Ellen] feel like she had “a rope around [her] neck.” She insisted that if the two would ever teach again, they would have to “have some flexibility.” And finally, when she was discussing whether or not she felt anyone could teach in a learning community, [Ellen] claimed anyone could be a potential candidate unless they “are faculty who are not willing to budge . . . [or] change the way they do things.” Similarly, [Chris Larson] said that he “would not be able to enjoy teaching [in a] learning community” with a partner who was not flexible. And echoing the other responses, [Susan Jansen] claimed “flexibility is probably the main thing; you’ve got to be flexible if a learning community is going to be successful for both faculty members and the students.” All six participants felt that they would be unable to select a teaching partner if that individual were not flexible. The references to flexibility centered on timing issues, such as how to share time in the classroom or not worrying if one topic took more time than another. There were also references about the need to be flexible for trying new ideas and approaches. For example, [Chris Larsen] made the following comment:

I would say if I were going to teach with other professors, I feel I would need to be teaching with a professor who can be flexible because [we] would be trying
new ideas and new approaches. Sometimes if you’re so “my way or else,” then I would not be able to enjoy teaching that learning community.

**Faculty Benefits**

Because there was a question that specifically asked the participants to reflect about how they have benefited from their learning community teaching experiences, it would not be valid to claim faculty benefits as a theme. However, the types of benefits referenced become the actual themes that were repeated by more than one participant. Also, because faculty benefits surfaced within the responses of other questions, it is definitely an area that deserves discussion. Similarly, there was a strong positive response when the participants were asked if they believed teaching in a learning community was a richer experience than teaching in a stand-alone classroom. Comments such as “definitely” or “by far” were immediately provided and then supported with examples of faculty benefits. Student benefits were also used to illustrate why these teaching experiences were richer experiences.

When discussing some of the faculty benefits she has received from teaching in learning communities, Jennifer Davenport referenced the “synergy” that she feels when she teaches with a colleague. She also commented about “stepping outside the box in [her] thinking of how to develop curriculum and assignments [because] two heads are better than one.” All six participants made some type of reference about gaining “new skills” or improving their “teaching techniques,” as well as becoming more “innovative” in the classroom.

**Learning**

Learning, whether it was learning another discipline or learning new teaching techniques, became a strong theme that surfaced while the participants discussed faculty
benefits. First, the idea of learning another discipline surfaced multiple times and the concept of integrating the disciplines was prominent. However, when specifically responding to the question about faculty benefits, [Andy Blackwell] made the following comment: “[Learning communities] help my knowledge base. . . . I know a lot more biology now than I did ten years ago. [Besides], seeing other teaching styles is good because it’s helped me to change my teaching style over the years.” [Ellen Thompson] also made a reference about learning from her partners’ teaching techniques. Two of the benefits she mentioned were the “connection made with the students and the relationships you build with your colleagues while working together.” [Chris Larson] echoed the sentiments mentioned above when he made a reference to being with a colleague and creating a dialogue about teaching that just can’t happen when teaching in a stand-alone class because “the other professors don’t know what you’re doing in your classroom.” He added an additional comment about the benefits for learning communities when he stated, “[Learning communities are] what really [have] kept me to stay in this job more than ever in the last ten years.” [Ellen Thompson] discussed what she considered to be one of the “best” benefits, which, in her estimation, is “being a learner in a learning community.”

Learning as a theme also surfaced when more than one participant made a comment about the extended amount of time that happens when learning communities are taught together in a block schedule. Comments were made about learning more about their students and getting to know them better, as well as a reference to the deeper learning that happens in learning communities. When [Ellen Thompson] mentioned the extended time, she said, “[I] get to know the students better because I’m looking at the same faces for twice as long.” Similarly, when [Jennifer Davenport] was discussing the time issue, she made a comment
about the ability to be able to take field trips, and as a result of the field trips, the opportunities “to bond more with the students” outside of the classroom environments. [Susan Jansen] echoed the comment about taking field trips because her learning community always meets for three hours every Tuesday and Thursday. She also made a reference to being able to “go deeper into [the material] and make it a lot richer” because of the blocks of time.

**Collaboration**

Just as there was a question that specifically solicited information about faculty benefits, there was also a question that asked the participants to reflect on the role of collaboration in their learning community teaching experiences. However, just as with faculty benefits discussed above, a variety of types of collaborations and their impacts were referenced when discussing collaboration. Also, during the response to this question was not the only time that the participants made references to the role of collaboration in their work. While responding to the question about collaboration, more than one of the participants began to discuss how they created assignments or projects for student collaboration. Whenever this happened, I reworded the question, so that I could get them to focus on how they collaborated with their teaching partners and how they felt about the value of such experiences.

There was also a question that asked them to discuss how they used collaboration with faculty before they were involved in learning communities. Besides an occasional invitation to have another faculty member as a guest lecturer on a particular topic, all, but one, of the participants responded that they did not collaborate with other faculty members prior to teaching in learning communities, not even the faculty members within their own
departments. However, the references to “being with a colleague [and] having some
dialogue,” such as what [Chris Larson] referenced when discussing the richness of teaching
in learning communities, were the types of responses most alluded to, and their attitudes
suggested that they much preferred these collaborative teaching experiences, rather than
teaching in isolation

While discussing faculty benefits, [Ellen Thompson] made the following comment
about collaboration: “I find that when planning a class with someone that two brains are
better than one; we just get excited and bounce ideas off of each other and just create some
really great learning experiences.” When discussing camaraderie, [Jennifer Davenport] ended
her comments by saying, “There are those faculty members that I would love to teach every
learning community with because we just flow; we’re e-mailing each other ideas in the
middle of the night.” Although she is making a reference about the ability to work together
because they have established camaraderie, she is also suggesting that they are collaborating
or working well together.

All of the participants discussed how they collaborated to create assignments, plan
field trips, write tests, as well as to marry their two syllabi together to create one. [Susan
Jansen] said, “[Barb] and I collaborate on just about everything we do in class; we make all
of our lesson plans together, and we spend an hour or two after each class planning and
preparing what we’re going to do for the next class.” Echoing the previous comment, [Ellen
Thompson] said, “In the classes I teach as a learning community, every aspect of the course
is a result of our collaboration. We don’t do anything without collaboration, so that
everything is connected.” When discussing collaboration and brainstorming for classroom
assignments and projects, [Jennifer Davenport] used the term “synergy” to describe what she feels happens when she works with a colleague.

[Nicholas Gentry] referenced how he and [Chris Larson] have learned to work with each other’s strengths during the many semesters of collaboration. He said, “[Chris] and I have had very few problems collaborating.” He did admit that the first few semesters they didn’t really know how to make the “blending” happen. However, once they began the following technique of collaborating together, everything seemed to flow together:

Blending happened best for us when we finally started over. Instead of thinking about how to put the two courses together [as his course and my course], we started with a blank slate [to create our course]. We decided on our theme and the question we wanted the course to answer. So instead of coming in with a history syllabus and an English syllabus and try to make them work together, we designed our syllabus, and collaboration has been very, very simple ever since.

**Professional Development**

Besides admitting that they believed their pedagogy had been altered as a result of teaching in learning communities, all six participants made several comments about professional development or growing as a teacher and admitting to becoming more involved in additional activities for the college. Although most of their additional involvement included working with learning community committees, such as the advisory board, or working on the college’s QEP (quality enhancement plan, [Casper’s] form of accreditation study, which currently focuses on the role of learning communities at the college) committee. Some of the comments, such as [Nicholas Gantry’s] “I’ve become more creative [as a result
of my involvement in learning communities],” and [Susan Jansen’s] “I’ve expanded my teaching techniques” seem to suggest faculty growth or development.

When discussing opportunities for professional development, [Nicholas Gantry] mentioned his “opportunities to present at conferences and to work on articles that [he] would not have had without the learning communities.” In her comments about professional development, [Jennifer Davenport] discussed her “desire to change [her] perspective in the way [she] looked at [her] pedagogy” and how it has been “altered in a positive way.” Andy Blackwell simply said, “Learning communities are a great means for faculty development.” He went on and elaborated about how his “knowledge base” and “teaching styles” have definitely been increased and enhanced because of his many semesters in learning community classrooms. And finally, [Susan Jansen] maintained that the process of creating “blended outcomes” by transitioning two separate classes into one was a powerful “growing experience” for her.

The two strongest themes that emerged consistently throughout the interviews were (1) the fact that the participants felt a synergy and empowerment by increasing their knowledge base through learning a new discipline and (2) the many ways that they improved their teaching because they learned new teaching styles or techniques, as well as the experience of becoming more creative, innovative, and experimental in the classroom. Additional faculty benefits ranged anywhere from connecting better with students to becoming more creative and being saved from faculty “burnout.”

**Conclusion**

In summary, in this chapter I have discussed the themes that emerged during the analysis and coding process. For the most part, the themes that emerged during the “life
story” interview were not related to teaching in a learning community. However, these themes—a passion for teaching, an emphasis on students and learning, and a desire for students to be successful while attending college—that surfaced during that interview, more than likely, have impacted the participants’ attitudes about learning communities as being positive, life-changing experiences. It is, in fact, these very characteristics—a passion for teaching and a love for students—that are at the heart of learning community teaching. The participants’ references to synergy, creativity, and innovation are all examples of passion for teaching. In a similar manner, their multiple referrals to student learning and the need to never lose sight of students and students’ needs is another indication of their love for students. Also, the references to learning communities as providing the most teachable moments or memorable teaching experiences indicate that learning communities are powerful teaching and learning experiences. The fact that these types of responses surfaced during the first interview when none of the questions referenced learning communities, further indicates that teaching in learning communities is important for the participants.

All of the themes that emerged during the second and third interviews were, for the most part, positive in nature. Although specifically asked to discuss faculty benefits and collaboration, several common themes became evident when they responded to these two questions. The list of benefits, with collaboration and professional growth/development being two of them, seems endless. Consequently, because there are multiple benefits for faculty to experience when they teach in learning communities, it indicates that learning communities are good and positive teaching experiences.

Interestingly, none of the challenges and concerns referenced in the literature review in Chapter 2, such as the time commitment, especially the time commitment necessary for
effective collaboration, or lack of institutional support, was mentioned in response to this question. Quite the contrary, the participants in this study have had strong institutional support and found synergy, rather than burnout or frustration because of the commitment necessary to be effective. In fact, [Chris Larson] claimed that learning communities had saved him from burnout and from quitting teaching. However, while discussing what they considered to be some of the difficulties and disadvantages of learning communities, a challenge or concern about partner compatibility surfaced more than once. This same theme was repeated in other instances during the interviews, as well as when they discussed flexibility. In fact, it was the references to lack of flexibility that entrenched the theme of partner compatibility. The participants believed that faculty members who could not be flexible with teaching styles and course ownership, as well as flexible with being creative and innovative, would not be successful teaching in a learning community. Besides being offered as a cautionary theme, flexibility was also referenced as a benefit. Multiple participants commented on how they had become more flexible because they learned to teach with a partner.

Now that these themes have been presented, it becomes necessary to make meaning of them and to draw conclusions or implications from them. It also will be important to determine if the themes fulfill the criteria for trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—that was discussed in Chapter 3. The following chapter—Chapter 6—will fulfill these obligations, as well as make recommendations from the research and make connections to the research questions, parts of the literature review, and the dissertation’s theoretical perspectives.
CHAPTER 6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As was stated earlier, Merriam (2002) listed four characteristics of qualitative research: “Researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experience. . . . The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. . . . The process is inductive. . . . The product of qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive” (pp. 4-5). These four characteristics have been demonstrated during this research project. First, the purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to attempt to see how the participants have made meaning from their learning community experiences. Secondly, both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5—by the use of the first-person narratives and the quotations from the interviews—demonstrate how rich description is evident in this research. Thirdly, the process of how qualitative research becomes inductive is presented later in this chapter, when I discuss the issue of transferability, or how I feel my small sample of research participants have a message that can be transferred to a larger audience of potential learning community teachers. And finally, how I presented the emerging themes in Chapter 5 partially fulfills my responsibility as being the primary instrument of data collection and analysis.

However, the purpose of this chapter’s discussion of the implications is to fulfill further my responsibility as being an instrument of analysis. I have divided this chapter into four major sections. First, I discuss how my findings relate to earlier sections of this document, such as the research questions, the theoretical perspectives, the literature review, and the issue of transferability. Secondly, I discuss the recommendations that I would suggest for using these research findings in the academy, as well as the recommendations for further research above and beyond what I have attempted to accomplish in this dissertation. I
conclude the chapter and the entire document by returning to the purpose and significance of my research. And finally, I offer some final reflections.

**Implications**

At the end of Chapter 5, I presented my conclusions about the emerging themes. In this chapter I relate my findings to the following areas:

- the research questions that guided the study
- the theoretical perspectives that served as a foundation for the study
- the past research presented in the literature review
- the issues of trustworthiness

**The Research Questions**

The first research question focused on faculty perceptions about their pedagogy and whether or not they felt it had been altered because of their teaching experiences in learning communities. The question also asked how their stand-alone classes were affected. All of the participants believed that their pedagogy had been influenced and changed because of their learning community experiences. The learning communities had taught them to be more flexible and creative in their teaching techniques. Learning communities also gave them the courage to experiment, or “think outside the box,” as suggested by [Jennifer Davenport], with new ideas because they felt empowered by the presence of a teaching partner. Also, all of the participants mentioned carrying learning community ideas, assignments, and methods of student collaboration to their stand-alone classes. They even admitted not waiting for the next semester to use an assignment or share an article that was introduced in a learning community.
The second research question focused on their perceptions about their use of collaboration and collegiality. Once again, all the participants believed that their collaboration and collegiality had been impacted because of their experiences while teaching in learning communities. All of the participants admitted that their collaboration with other faculty members had been severely limited before their learning community experiences. In fact, they indicated that it was the use of collaboration with a teaching partner that had provided them with a synergy and revitalization, or, as referenced above, the courage to become more creative and innovative in the classroom. On the issue of student collaboration, some mentioned utilizing collaboration to a degree before they taught in learning communities; however, all of them referenced increasing the amount of student collaboration because they realized that active learning was more exciting than their previous position of being the Sage on the Stage. In addition, the concept of collegiality—“mutual learning and discussion of classroom practice and student performance” (Kruse, 1999, p. 2)—was nonexistent to them before participating in learning communities.

The third research question focused on their perceptions about the “other college responsibilities.” Again, all of the participants noted being more involved with the college in committee work or such college programs as the Research Showcase than they had been prior to being involved in learning communities. At the time of the interviews, all of the participants had added to their service or commitment to the college a position on the Learning Community Advisory Board, the Quality Enhancement Committee, or both. Although not a responsibility, their desire to encourage other faculty members to participate in the learning community initiative suggests positive support for learning communities and a desire to move beyond normal expectations or “duties to be assigned.” Similarly, and also not
a responsibility, the fact that more than one of the participants has written about learning communities or presented about their participation in learning communities at a local or national conference further indicates the importance and value of learning communities to these faculty members and their belief that learning communities should be a welcomed part of their college’s culture.

And finally, the fourth research question’s emphasis was on whether or not the participants perceived learning communities as effective vehicles for faculty development. Although not always using the term *faculty development*, all of the participants acknowledged growing and developing because of their teaching experiences in learning communities. All of the participants also noted that these learning community teaching experiences were richer than when they taught in stand-alone classes. Because of their passion for teaching, they are happy to be in the classroom, whether it is a stand-alone class or a learning community environment; however, if they could, they would choose to teach in a learning community. More than one wished for more opportunities, perhaps even an entire schedule of just learning communities.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

In Chapter 1, I discussed four theoretical perspectives—theory of community, theory of teacher community, theory of collaboration, and theory of cooperative practice—which function as the theoretical framework for this study. Each of the four theories was substantiated in this study. First, the theory of community, which emphasizes the sense of “we,” was most prominently exhibited when the participants talked about the marriage metaphor or their references to creating one syllabus for the learning community, so that they could blend the outcomes from two individual courses into the outcomes of one community.
Certainly their multiple references to collaboration also suggests a sense of “we,” as well as their focus on creating a theme and a question for building the primary premise or emphasis for the community suggests a “we,” rather than the “I” for individualism or isolation.

The theory of teacher community focuses on learning as being “the essence of teaching” (Grossman, et al., 2001, p. 952). However, this theory does not focus on just student or just faculty learning. Both are at the core of this theory. The participants’ love for students and learning was evidenced in multiple comments. Several of the participants also mentioned their learning. This idea of faculty learning was especially evident when the participants discussed one of their favorite benefits from participating in learning communities—an increase in their knowledge base because they are being exposed to another discipline. Also, [Andy Blackwell] commented on “being a learner in a learning community” when he discussed his perceptions about whether or not he felt his pedagogy had been altered from his learning community experiences.

The theory of collaboration was obvious when they discussed the role of collaboration in their teaching partnerships. However, over and over again, the participants returned to the idea of collaboration or working together in additional questions, and they made multiple referrals to how their collaboration had impacted them. As a result of this collaboration, the participants experienced an increased “development of their teaching ability, new intellectual stimulation, and a closer connection to the university or college as a community” (Austin & Baldwin, 1991, p. 41). In addition, the “synergy” referenced by Rasmussen and Skinner (1997) and Rogers (1999), was also mentioned as a benefit for teaching in learning communities.
And finally, Bertand’s (2003) theory of cooperative practice suggested that “we learn better when we work together” (p. 259). The operative idea here is working together, which was emphasized over and over by the participants when they discussed collaboration for creating a new syllabus, establishing new assignments, and writing new tests that would incorporate the curriculum for both disciplines. Perhaps one of the most important components of working together that surfaced in this study is the idea of flexibility, which was one of the major themes that emerged from the collected data. The participants continuously stressed their need for teaching with a flexible partner. Without such an individual, they seriously doubted how effective they could be in the learning community. Indeed, [Susan Jansen] commented, “Flexibility is the key.” It is certainly a significant idea when addressing the theory of cooperative practice.

Past Research

Earlier, when I discussed how the literature supports a rationale for developing learning communities, I cited Shapiro and Levine (1999a), who suggested several reasons for colleges to establish learning community initiatives. Among the many on the list, two—“encouraging integration of the curriculum [and] bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways” (p. 3) have been reinforced by this research study. The participants from [Casper County] Community College made multiple statements about collaborating on curriculum and blending outcomes. They also repeatedly made comments about the bonds and other “meaningful ways” that they worked together while teaching and learning in community. In addition, because [Casper County] only has coordinated, or team-taught learning communities, this study supports Shapiro and Levine’s belief that “team-taught programs are one of the most intensive models in terms of. . . faculty development” (p. 35).
Over and over, the participants in this study emphasized how much they had grown and developed because of their learning community experiences.

As stated earlier, this study does not support the learning community challenges and concerns that have been previously referenced in the literature (Jaffee, 2004, Schoem, 2002, Shapiro & Levine, 1999b; Smith et al., 2004). Although all of the participants admitted to challenges and disadvantages, each participant had a different response when questioned in this area. However, the one caution that did repeat itself was the ineffectiveness that would result if they had to teach with inflexible partners. The [Casper County] participants seem to contradict the notion of potential burnout because of the time commitment involved in collaboration for effective learning communities. Again, their references to synergy, as well as the fact that for many of them their most teachable moments and “ideal” teaching experiences have occurred while teaching in learning communities suggest quite the opposite of burnout.

This study echoes and supports past research about faculty and learning communities. However, similar to Tollefson’s (1991) and Rye’s (1997) research, this study personalizes the research by using qualitative methodology. In particular, this study uses the lens of phenomenology to offer the “rich description,” which demonstrates the how and why that is at the heart of a phenomenological study. It is the voice of the participants as they have made meaning from their life stories as educators and made meaning from their collective experiences of pre- and post-learning community teaching that adds a dimension to the existing literature about faculty and learning communities. For example, Gabelnick et al. (1990) maintained that “it is virtually impossible to participate in a learning community without being transformed in some way” (p. 54). Indeed, the participants in this study discuss
how they have been transformed. They also make concrete references to the types of assignments that they have transferred from their learning community classrooms to their stand-alone classes. In addition, they make clear references to the courage they feel while team teaching and how this courage allows them to be more adventuresome and experiential in their learning communities than when they teach in isolation.

**Trustworthiness**

In Chapter 3, I discussed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) concept of trustworthiness and how “the four terms ‘credibility,’ ‘transferability,’ ‘dependability,’ and ‘confirmability’ are . . . the naturalist’s equivalents for the conventional terms ‘internal validity,’ ‘external validity,’ ‘reliability,’ and ‘objectivity’” (p. 300). In that chapter, I also discussed the methods I intended to use to establish trustworthiness. It is the intent of this section to discuss the implications of my efforts to establish trustworthiness.

**Credibility.** Although I used multiple techniques for establishing credibility, the use of triangulation and member checking were the two most prominent methods. Triangulation has been achieved in a variety of ways. First, the use of the multiple interviews for each participant allowed for the possibility of issues and concepts to be revisited or, if necessary, these multiple interviews, especially the third interview, allowed for an opportunity for clarification. The fact that repeated themes from multiple sources emerged is another way to ensure triangulation. In addition, triangulation was established through the use of a peer reviewer. By using the Peer Review Checklist (see Appendix C), the peer reviewer was able to determine if the essential pieces were included and the necessary processes completed to ensure that credibility has been established. Besides checking off the items on the checklist, the peer reviewer made the following comment about the research:
Chapter 4—the voices of the participants—is the key, the rich description, that brings this research alive. I didn’t need the presentation of the themes found in Chapter 5 to discover what learning communities meant to the participants. Hearing their voices sold me on how they have been affected by learning communities in their teaching experiences.

Finally, my reflexivity journal, which was kept throughout the research project, allowed me to reflect about my feelings about myself, my research, my data collection, and data analysis. The reflexivity journal revealed my apprehensions during my pilot project and first rounds of interviews. For example, on September 7, 2006, I recorded the following comments about myself as a novice researcher:

This morning I’m slightly apprehensive because I’m venturing into new territory—qualitative research that counts; it’s for real. All the previous attempts have been practice runs, so to speak. I hope the equipment works and all goes well in the next two days of data collection.

In addition to those comments about my apprehensions on the first day of data collection, I made the following comments about qualitative research and my biases:

I know that part of qualitative research is to use a purposeful sample. I also know that these folks from [Casper County] Community College are excited about learning communities. I’m wondering if some—especially my Committee members—will think my research is overly biased because of my biases towards learning communities, as well as the biases of my six participants. Actually, besides admitting the existence of these biases, my research methods should solve this issue. First of all, since I’m researching their perceptions about how their
pedagogy has been altered, their biases about learning communities should not have anything to do with their perceptions about how their pedagogy has been altered. Since I am establishing trustworthiness through such methods as member checking, peer review, and triangulation, the research should be able to stand on its own. After all, the purpose of using a phenomenological lens is to capture the voices of those who have experienced the phenomenon.

Later in the journal, I also discussed my disappointment that I received very little feedback from the member checking process. However, after discovering Stake’s (1995) comments suggesting that most participants don’t respond to member checking unless they disagree with what has been reported, I felt much more comfortable. In a similar situation, I was frustrated while interviewing my second participant during the third round of interviews because he basically gave me the same answer for all five questions. However, when I consulted my peer debriefer, she simply responded, “The repetition is good for triangulation.”

It is, in fact, the use of member checking that further ensures credibility within the research project. Allowing my participants to read their profiles and make comments is a way to inform my readers that I am open for correction and that I am attempting to report exactly what they said, rather than what I think they said. In addition, although both the analysis and implications sections are my interpretations of the data, I have allowed my participants to member check those areas of the document as well. The only response I received on this member checking was my gate keeper’s, “It looks pretty good.”

**Transferability.** As was stated earlier, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is not my responsibility as a qualitative researcher to ensure transferability. However, it is my
“responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers” (p. 316). I indicated in Chapter 3 that it was my responsibility to supply sufficient thick descriptions from the voices of the participants, so that readers from other institutions of higher education would be able to transfer the information into their individual academic arenas. This notion of transferability is also the inductive part of qualitative research that Merriam (2002) discussed. Therefore, as a qualitative researcher, it is my hope that the evidence provided from my data is easily and readily applicable to a larger audience of potential learning community faculty.

**Dependability.** Actually, it is the next major section of this chapter—Recommendations—that supports the concept of dependability. If the data are dependable enough to support recommendations, then the trustworthiness of the research is further entrenched. The two techniques that I utilized in this research, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), to ensure dependability were triangulation and an audit trail. As discussed above, I triangulated the research by using multiple participants, multiple interviews, member checking, peer review, and my reflexivity journal. The multiple references to certain emerging themes, as discussed in Chapter 5, also ensure dependability. When multiple participants repeat each other on certain themes and ideas, such as the comments about the need for flexibility or how teaching in learning communities has afforded multiple opportunities for creativity, the data becomes more dependable than if only one participant makes a reference to a concept or an idea.

I used both my reflexivity journal, which has already been discussed above, and my research journal to create my audit trail for this research project. In my research journal, I recorded my “reflections, questions, and decisions or the problems, issues, ideas [I]
encounter[ed] in collecting data” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). For example, early in my research journal I discussed my frustrations during the pilot study when I discovered that there was no way my first and second interview would each last 60 minutes, as suggested by Seidman (1998). However, after I discussed the issue with Dr. Evans, my Major Professor, she assured me that I was fine and that making such discoveries during a pilot study was appropriate. Also, as a result of the pilot and the length of time of the first two interviews, on July 26, 2006, I made the following comment and decision about how I was going to conduct my actual interviews at [Casper County]: “My thinking now is because the first two rounds of interviews have completely different focuses, and because they are lasting between 30 to 40 minutes each, I might be able to complete the first two interviews back to back.”

I also used my research journal to reflect after I completed each interview. For example, after the second interview on September 7, 2006, I wrote the following comments about my frustrations with their responses to the question about collegiality and how I made changes in the questions for the remaining interviews:

One concern I have is the hesitation with the question about collegiality. Although I read the definition from my dissertation, which came as a suggestion from the pilot study, both [Jennifer Davenport] and [Andy Blackwell] hesitated with their responses and both basically began discussing collaboration. I view collegiality as being more a discussion about student performance, as well as a discussion of pedagogy, not how faculty work together and create similar assignments. When I tried to clarify collegiality for [Andy Blackwell], he was able to discuss more about how they would discuss student grades after tests. I think the part of the definition that throws them off is the “. . . may share lesson plans around
interdisciplinary theme unites,” which sounds like collaboration. So for the remaining interviews, I’m going to delete that part of the definition.

I also reflected in my research journal while I was analyzing and color-coding the transcribed interviews for emerging themes. It was at this time that I wrestled with the fact that I used the terms faculty benefits and collaboration in specific interview questions. Consequently, I didn’t feel that I could classify the two as emerging themes because I specifically prompted the responses. Later, on December 28, 2006, I made the following comment about this issue: “I have decided that the two areas are not necessarily themes, but rather specific categories that have a theme or themes within them.” It is, then, the use of this research journal, along with my reflexivity journal, that allowed me during the course of the research project to ask questions and attempt to solve problems, as well as reflect on my feelings. As a result of this journaling process, I have been able to help ensure the dependability of the research.

**Confirmability.** It is the concept of confirmability, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) that allows the researcher to establish neutrality. Lincoln and Guba suggested three methods for obtaining confirmability: an audit trail, triangulation, and a reflexivity journal. Although all three have been discussed above, I would add at this point that both the triangulation and the reflexivity journal are important ways for ensuring neutrality. When multiple participants repeat the same ideas (themes) in multiple interviews, and when the participants have member checked for accuracy, it is not the words or biases of the researcher that have been reported. In other words, I have reinforced Creswell’s (1998) eighth reason for using qualitative research: “Employ a qualitative approach to emphasize the researcher’s role as an active learner who can tell the story from the participants’ views rather than as an
‘expert’ who passes judgment on participants” (p. 18). Besides the triangulation, because I was able to reflect and write about my concerns and feelings in my reflexivity journal, I was able to keep my biases in check and remain neutral throughout the research. Although Lincoln and Guba do not mention peer debriefing, I think my discussions with colleagues about my research and concerns during the process were, in a sense, an oral reflexivity journal.

**Recommendations**

In this section, I will make recommendations as to how I think this research can best be used to benefit the academy and those interested in establishing a learning community initiative. I will also discuss my recommendations for further research. First of all, the data, specifically the emerging themes collected in this study, need to be shared with any college or university that is either contemplating starting a learning community initiative or seeking alternative methods of faculty development. Most institutions begin learning community initiatives because they have read the research on how effective they are for student learning, retention, and persistence. However, this research project suggests that yet another rationale for beginning a learning community initiative is because faculty and the institution have opportunities to gain significant benefits, such as synergy, a more creative faculty, and a faculty who are more willing to participate in additional academic responsibilities. The best way this information could be shared is either in presentations at local and national learning community or faculty professional development conferences or perhaps rewritten into an article or two for specific juried journals.

Establishing a learning community initiative provides multiple situations for an institution to provide faculty development opportunities besides the growth and development
that faculty experience while teaching in learning communities. According to Laufgraben et al. (2004),

creating, improving, and sustaining learning communities requires ongoing attention to developing and supporting those who teach in learning communities. [In fact], faculty development is central to the teaching and learning mission of learning communities and focuses not only on the teacher but also the curriculum. (p. 76)

Besides the introduction to learning communities seminars used to encourage and educate new faculty about learning communities, many institutions provide continuing education opportunities for faculty already involved in the learning community initiative. These seminars could focus on a variety of topics, such as discussions about pedagogy and/or assessment; sessions on writing integrated outcomes, which was mentioned in the profile section on [Casper County]; workshops on how to incorporate interactive learning activities in the learning community classroom; or seminars on the value of reflection while teaching in a learning community environment. These learning community faculty development opportunities could be offered as individual stand-alone experiences throughout an academic year or be provided in an annual retreat environment.

However, it is important to remember that faculty participation in learning communities is not a panacea for providing opportunities for faculty development. Also, learning communities are not necessarily the appropriate teaching arena for everyone, especially, as the participants in this study suggested, those faculty members who are inflexible in their teaching styles and classroom management practices, or those faculty members who simply prefer to teach alone. However, the challenge for an institution that is considering beginning or in the process of building a learning community initiative is to
involve as many faculty as often as possible. Some institutions, like [Casper County], initially set limits, such as one learning community per faculty member each academic year. However, when they realized the demand for certain learning communities, such as [Susan Jansen’s] humanities and art appreciation learning community, [Casper County] released its restrictions and now allows this learning community to be offered every semester.

Usually, it is not a difficult task to convince interested faculty to become involved in learning communities. Oftentimes, the hard sell is to the administration that seems to be increasingly driven by numbers. However, if the administration is interested in faculty retention, especially the faculty who are passionate about teaching and focused on student learning, this study, as well as one recommended later, could help convince an administrator of the value of learning communities. For example, the following comments by [Chris Larson] demonstrate how learning communities have kept him from leaving the classroom: “[Learning communities] have kept me going actually; [they’ve] kept me from having burnout. . . . [They have] kept me staying in this job more than ever the last ten years.”

Once an institution decides to create a learning community initiative, it is important to have ongoing administrative support, such as that provided by [Casper County’s] administration. Shapiro and Levine (1999) maintained that “senior administrators in both academic and student affairs must be visible and vocal champions” (p. 118). Without administrative support, most learning community programs will be difficult to sustain. Another important administrative issue is funding. Smith et al. (2004) stated, “If learning communities are to be sustained, they need to be part of the regular college budget” (p. 317). Besides administrative support, it is important to create some type of leadership team that helps drive the initiative. According to Smith et al., “learning communities require leadership
at many different levels. Establishing a collaborative leadership team is probably the single most important step in initiating and sustaining [the learning community initiative]” (p. 303). Usually, a learning community coordinator is assigned. In community colleges like [Casper County], this coordinator is usually a faculty member who receives partial release time for coordinating activities. However, in larger institutions, the coordinator is oftentimes an administrator. The responsibility of the coordinator and the steering committee is to monitor the learning community assessment process, recruit faculty and students into the initiative, create opportunities for faculty development, and market the program.

As noted in the description of the [Casper County] learning community initiative, their program was thoughtfully planned out and well organized. Once an institution has decided to establish a learning community initiative, a considerable amount of planning should happen. For example, the steering committee should spend time writing a mission statement for the initiative. They also need to define learning community and decide what type or types of models will work best for their institution. The advisory board or steering committee should also have discussions about outcomes and assessment, as well as marketing and budget considerations. It would be wise for this committee to read one of the seminal books on learning communities, such as Shapiro and Levine’s (1999) *Creating Learning Communities: A Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organizing for Change, and Implementing Programs* or Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith’s (1990) *Learning Communities: Creating Connections among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*.

The planning doesn’t end with the steering committee. After faculty members have decided to participate in the initiative, they also have to spend a considerable amount of time planning both before they implement a learning community and during the semester while...
they are teaching. Comments made by the faculty interviewed in this study indicate that they spent considerable time discussing their collaborative work and planning activities. Usually, faculty begin by planning a theme or starting with a question they want to use as the focus of the learning community. Assignments need to be integrated and if the community is a coordinated (team-taught) community, the syllabi from the classes need to be married into one syllabus. As the faculty in this study indicated, all of this preplanning and coordination during the semester works much better if faculty choose their teaching partners and have agreement on such issues as classroom management policies. It is important that faculty volunteer to participate in the learning community initiative. They should never be drafted or assigned to teach in a learning community class.

Besides the above recommendations, the process of this research project has led me to believe there are additional research projects that could be completed to support and enhance this project. First of all, one recommendation would be to expand the parameters of this study. This expansion would not necessarily have to be with additional faculty from [Casper County]; however, it would be interesting to include several community college campuses that have active learning community initiatives. It would also be interesting to include faculty who have just taught in linked learning communities and compare their experiences with those of the faculty included in this study who have only taught in coordinated communities. Truly, an in-depth study would include faculty from all four models discussed in Chapter 2: paired or clustered communities, cohorts in large courses, team-taught programs, and residence-based communities. An additional expansion of this study would be to include four-year institutions and compare their faculty stories with those from the community college arenas.
What about the faculty members who have not had a good learning community experience; where do they fit into the research? It would certainly be appropriate to identify these educators and conduct a similar in-depth phenomenological interviewing process. This research could certainly be a stand-alone study, similar to this one about the positive experiences, or it could be a study that compares and contrasts the positive and negative experiences.

Another area for possible research would be to investigate the use of learning communities with vocational programs at community colleges. For example, has the graduation rate of vocational students been increased because they were able to complete core requirements, such as composition or speech, once the core requirements were linked or coordinated into a learning community with one or more of the classes from the vocational curriculum? If the graduation rate has increased, how and why has this occurred?

Further studies focusing on faculty might include a study that investigates which faculty volunteer to participate in learning communities and compare their reasons for becoming involved with the reasons given by faculty who continue to choose to teach alone. Another study might compare the evaluations of learning community faculty with the evaluations of faculty who choose not to teach in learning communities.

In addition, researchers could attempt to determine the role that training plays in the success of learning communities. The study could review the types of materials used and seminars offered before faculty teach in a learning community, as well as investigate the types of ongoing learning community faculty development offered during the academic year. Besides reviewing the materials, researchers could interview faculty on a one-on-one basis or conduct focus groups to determine the effectiveness of the training.
And finally, non-faculty-focused research projects could be ones that involve administrators. One study could interview administrators who support active learning community initiatives. These administrators could be from the department chair and dean level, as well as chief academic officers and provosts. The intent of the project would be to discover how and why they are supportive of these programs. Such a study might be a valuable tool for faculty who need assistance in persuading their administration to initiate a learning community program. On the other hand, a separate study could examine the views of administrators who do not support learning community initiatives or compare and contrast the views of administrators who are positive about learning communities with those who are negative about this form of teaching.

**Conclusion**

The best way to conclude this chapter, as well as the entire document, is to return to the purpose of the research and the significance of the study.

**Purpose of the Research**

Originally, the intent of the study was to discover whether or not teaching in learning communities helps to fulfill faculty members’ professional development needs. Also, I hoped to discover if faculty experienced rejuvenation or revitalization because of their learning community experiences and how they perceived their pedagogy had been altered because of this rejuvenation. And finally, the study was designed to discover how learning community experiences affected stand-alone classrooms and other institutional commitments, and allowed faculty to become institutional change agents.

Although such terms as rejuvenation, revitalization, and change agents were not used in either the research questions or the interview protocols, the presentation of the emerging
themes and the discussion of the implications, indicate that rejuvenation, revitalization, and change agentry were definite outcomes for the [Casper County] faculty participants. Their references to synergy, creative and innovative teaching techniques, and a desire to remain in the classroom because of their learning community experiences imply rejuvenation and revitalization. Also, because [Casper County’s] entire Quality Enhancement Program focuses on the effects of learning communities on students, faculty, and the institution, it suggests change and a paradigm shift in their institution’s culture because their faculty have been “empower[ed] to serve as change agents to move [their campuses] from institutions to learning organizations” (Levine Laufgraben et al., 2004, p. 77).

The emerging themes presented in Chapter 5, as well as the discussion of the implications, especially the implications from the research questions, did, indeed, indicate that the participants have perceived that their pedagogy has been altered and that their learning community experiences have affected their stand-alone teaching experiences and influenced their participation in additional institutional commitments and obligations, such as committee and advisory board appointments. Although none of the participants admitted to being a change agent at [Casper County], they have, in fact, become change agents whenever they attempt to convince a colleague to participate in the learning community initiative.

**Significance of the Study**

The recommendations discussed previously partially include what was originally listed as some of the significance of the study. Because this study illustrates how faculty experience growth and development and altered pedagogy because of teaching in learning communities, it is significant. Also, because the study shows how faculty carry their classroom and teaching enthusiasm into their stand-alone classrooms and their committee
and board rooms, the study possesses significance. It is, in fact, the *how* mentioned in the previous sentence that allows this study to offer the most significance to the academy. As was stated earlier in Chapter 1, when the participants described their experiences while teaching in learning communities, their voices and the emerging themes increased the available research and knowledge about how teaching and learning in community affect faculty and impact their development.

**Final Reflections**

In early January of 2007, when I typed what I thought would be the final period of this dissertation, I sighed a huge sigh as the weight and magnitude of the project seemed to slip away. Little did I know at that moment, it wasn’t, in fact, the last period. There were revisions yet to come, even after my oral defense. However, now, when I think I’m truly nearing the end of this project, I wonder if any research project is ever finished.

Throughout this study, I think my greatest frustration was my feeling of inadequacy. I don’t think that my research-oriented doctoral classes—the beginning research methods, the qualitative and quantitative courses, or the dissertation proposal class—adequately prepared me for the depth and breadth of this project. However, with the important feedback and insight throughout the process that I received from my dedicated and interested Major Professor, as well as a Committee who was invested in my researching and writing process, I believe I managed to overcome my frustrations.

If I had the opportunity to clear the slate and start completely over at the very beginning, I honestly don’t think there would be much in the process that I would change. Probably one area that I would consider changing would be my interview protocol. Although I have no idea what kind of data would have been collected, I think the questions should have
been more open ended than they were. The existing questions might have been too
manipulative for investigating a phenomenon.

Although I am committed to the community college arena, this study has whetted my
appetite to become involved in further research. More than likely, these research projects will
focus on learning community initiatives and their role in the academy, an area to which I
remain committed, both as a scholar and a teacher.
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The Life Story Interview

During the first round of interviews, I basically want to have my participants discuss their roles as teachers.

1. Before we begin the questions, could you please provide some basic background information? For example what is your teaching discipline and how many years have you been teaching? Do you have teaching experience besides your community college experience?

2. When did you decide to become an educator and what were some of the influences that encouraged you to enter the profession?

3. Why did you choose to become a college instructor?

4. What led you to decide to teach at the community college level?

5. What is your philosophy of teaching?

6. What have been your greatest challenges to overcome as a community college instructor?

7. What have been some of your joys as a teacher?

8. What have been some of your best “teachable moments”?

9. If you were mentoring a soon-to-be teacher, what kind of advice would you offer?

10. What about students, is there an ideal student or a preferred student type?

11. Looking back on your teaching career, what have you changed, or how have you improved?

12. What might be your ideal teaching experience? In other words, if you could create any classroom situation by waving a magic wand, what might it be?

13. What keeps you in the classroom?
The Experiences with Learning Communities Interview

In the second round of interviews, I want the participants to focus on their experiences while teaching in learning communities.

1. Before we begin the questions, could you please describe your history with learning communities? How long have you been involved with learning communities and what types of learning communities have you taught in?

2. Why did you decide to teach in a learning community?

3. What have you found to be the benefits of teaching in a learning community?

4. Would you say that learning communities are richer teaching experiences? Why or why not?

5. What difficulties or disadvantages have you experienced while teaching in a learning community?

6. How have you used collaboration in your learning community teaching experience?

7. In what ways did you use collaboration before teaching in a learning community?

8. In my dissertation, I define collegiality as the “mutual learning and discussion of classroom practice and student performance. Collegial teachers may share lesson plans around interdisciplinary theme units, or work toward common expectations of student work.” With this definition in mind, what role does collegiality play in your learning community experiences?

9. Would you encourage other faculty to become involved in a learning community? Why or why not?

10. How would you encourage other faculty members to become involved in teaching in a learning community?

11. Would you say some faculty should not teach in a learning community? Why or why not?

12. What about the camaraderie between you and your learning community colleagues? In other words, do you think you could teach with any colleague or does their need to be some sort of special bond or rapport that pre-exists?
The Reflection Interview

During this round of interviews, I want to make meaning from the first two rounds and determine if the participants perceive that their involvement in learning communities has altered their pedagogy.

1. How do you perceive that your pedagogy has been altered as a result of your participation in a learning community teaching environment?

2. How do you approach your stand-alone classes differently as a result of teaching in a learning community?

3. How has your participation in learning communities affected your participation in other college responsibilities?

4. How have you grown professionally because of your teaching experiences in learning communities? In other words, do you think you’re a better teacher because you have taught in learning communities?

5. How do you perceive learning communities as vehicles for faculty development?
APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Teaching and Learning in Community: Enhancing Faculty Development through Engaged Pedagogy

Investigators: Randy Jedele, Ph.D. student at Iowa State University and principal investigator
Dr. Nancy Evans, Major Professor for dissertation research

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to interview community college faculty members who have taught in learning communities. The interviews will focus on how the learning community teaching experiences were beneficial arenas for improving faculty development and changing pedagogy. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a community college faculty member who has had three to four semesters of teaching experience in a learning community.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will approximately be three 60-90 minute recorded interviews in which I will ask you questions about your teaching experiences and pedagogy because you have taught in a learning community environment for three or more semesters. In addition to the taped interview, you will be asked to participate in “member checking” by reading your transcribed interview for accuracy and completeness.

As mentioned above, your interview will be recorded. You will have the liberty to stop the recording at any time during the interview. The recorded interview will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Besides me, Alissa King, my paid interview transcriber will have access to the tapes and transcriptions. It is also possible that Dr. Nancy Evans, my Major Professor, and Dr. Nana Osei-Kofi, another professor involved in my research, will have access to the tapes and transcriptions. Once my dissertation committee has signed off on my dissertation, all of the tapes will be destroyed.

During the interview, you will have the liberty to refuse to answer any question. You also have the liberty to terminate the interview early, if you are not satisfied with the process or what is expected of you. You will also have the freedom to refuse to member check the transcription of your interview.
RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks at this time from participating in this study.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. (A benefit is defined as a “desired outcome or advantage.”) It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit the academy by sharing your insights and information about the value of learning communities and how they can impact faculty development.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs, besides your time, from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide not to participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. As mentioned above, all recordings and transcribed tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Subjects will be assigned a unique code and letter to be used on forms instead of their names. If it becomes necessary to use names of individuals and institutions in the manuscript describing the research, pseudonyms will be used in place of real names.

The manuscript will be housed in a password protected computer file. Alissa King, my transcriber will have access to the tapes and transcripts. Also, as mentioned above, it is possible that Dr. Nancy Evans, my Major Professor who is directing this study, or Dr. Nana Osei-Kofi, who is qualitative methodology professor involved with the study, will have access to a transcribed recording. However, anonymity will be maintained because those files
will be coded for confidentiality. Once the dissertation is approved, the tapes and transcribed files will be destroyed. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study contact Randy Jedele at 515-964-6417 or rejedele@dmacc.edu, who is the researcher. You may also contact Dr. Nancy Evans at 515-294-7113 or nevans@iastate.edu, who is the Major Professor supervising the research. If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact Ginny Austin Eason, IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, austingr@iastate.edu, or Diane Ament, Director, Office of Research Assurances (515) 294-3115, dament@iastate.edu.

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SUBJECT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Subject’s Name (printed) ____________________________________________

(Subject’s Signature) ____________________________________________ (Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

(Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent) (Date)
APPENDIX C. PEER REVIEW CHECKLIST

The following peer review list was adapted from Rowan and Huston’s (1997) article for qualitative researchers and their peer reviewers.

Introduction and Literature Review

1. Is the research topic relevant and important?
2. Is the specific research question clearly stated?
3. Is the literature on the topic appropriately reviewed?
4. Is ethical approval for the study documented?

Methods

1. Is the qualitative approach clearly identified and justified?
2. Is the approach appropriate for the research question?
3. Is the study context well described?
4. Is the role of the researcher well described?
5. Is the sampling method clearly described?
6. Is a rationale presented for the sampling method?
7. Is the process for collecting data clearly described?
8. Is the method of information collection dependable?
9. Is the method of analysis clearly described?
10. Is the method of analysis appropriate for the research question?
11. Are the methods of determining the credibility and transferability of findings described and appropriate?
Profiles and Findings

1. Do individual participant profiles adequately capture the voices of the participants and represent their distinct personalities?

2. Are there an appropriate number of quotations to get a sense of the participants’ perspective?

3. Is confidentiality maintained?

4. Is the data analysis clearly described?

5. Do the interpretations and themes flow logically from the analysis?

6. Are the findings dependable, credible, and transferable?

7. Do the findings answer the research question?

Discussion

1. Are the main findings of the study summarized?

2. Are the strengths and limitations of the study identified?

3. Are areas for further inquiry suggested?
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