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REHABILITATING THE "IDEA OF COMMUNITY"

ABSTRACT: *Learning communities have become increasingly popular ways for working with students, especially first-year students, yet there has been little discussion of these structures in the composition literature. Given that the root metaphor of conflict informs many first-year writing pedagogies and in light of Joseph Harris's critique of "community" as a key word, talk of learning communities may invoke fears of a return to conservative tenets of expressivism. Community-like elements, however, are regularly noted by other scholars as informing practices in many writing classes. The apparent success of learning communities and the continued use of community in our classrooms should therefore cause the field to re-consider how we define "community." Such re-considerations should not only respond to Harris's insightful criticism but also build on research and theory that suggest why learning communities can be effective vehicles for curricular and institutional change.*

Learning communities have become popular topics of discussion at national conferences and in the literature of sub-fields such as student life and development, the first year experience, and undergraduate education. Many two-and four-year colleges and universities are experimenting with learning communities as potentially effective ways for creating curricular coherence and for helping students succeed academically (see Gabelnick et al.; Lenning and Ebbers; Shapiro and Levine). Several learning communities are intentionally designed for first-year students, particularly those identified as "at risk, " to ease the transition between high school and college. However, learning communities are rarely mentioned in composition's scholarly journals. Why? Perhaps learning communities are old news in that some of the tenets underlying them have been staples of first-year writing pedagogy for years — student-centered classrooms, collaborative and active learning, and frequent student-teacher contact. Or, it might also be the case that because *conflict* appears to be the root metaphor organizing writing pedagogy, particularly basic writing, (Harris, "Negotiat-

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ing"), scholarly discussions encouraging the development of community in the classroom are perceived as a return to assumptions associated with expressivism—the classroom as a sort of pastoral environment, free of conflict, where like-minded students can nurture their individual voices. There is a notable irony, however, in that the lack of explicit theoretical discussions about community in our field's scholarly literature is offset by many casual references in that literature to community building and community-like elements that apparently contribute to successful learning in the writing class.

Recall that in 1989 Joseph Harris made a compelling case for re-thinking the way community should be used in our work with students ("The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing"). In his well-received critique of community as that term had been used in the composition literature, Harris argued that the term should be reserved "to describe the workings of . . . specific and local groups," such as individual classrooms and academic departments. He claimed further that we take a "material view of community: one that, like a city, allows for both consensus and conflict..." (20). Harris extended that critique in 1997 ("Community") by offering *public* as "a positive opposing term. The opposition between terms is organized by competing images of how people live. Talk about "discourse communities" reflects an idealized version of community as "romantic, organic, and pastoral" and one "where everyone pretty much shares the same set of values and concerns." Harris links uses of community with idealized and utopian conceptions of social life. Rather than community, Harris argues, our classrooms might resemble public spaces "where differences are made visible, and thus where the threat of conflict or even violence is always present" so that our students might cultivate "*civility*, a willingness to live with difference" (109).

Harris's argument to limit the use of the term community was appropriate and necessary, yet his initial and later critiques of discourse communities and the idea of community itself has taken the concept in a direction that, while helpful for training public intellectuals, seems to me to do little to address some of the compelling needs of our students, especially basic writers, needs to which learning communities are intentionally designed to respond. Although Harris focused on the community concept and did not discuss learning communities per se, based on his debunking of the term, it would appear that the learning community movement could be read as an educational reform effort based more on nostalgia and utopian fantasies than as institutional re-organization to help students stay in school, thrive, and graduate. Harris's arguments have reduced the concept of community to near uselessness, yet the seeming success of learning communities suggests otherwise. Moreover, it is odd that in a field such as rhetoric and composition, dominated as it is by social constructionist theories of knowl-

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edge in which social relations among individuals are crucial to knowledge-making and dissemination, and in a field where many believe that writing as a form of social action should aim toward social justice, little sustained serious discussion is given to potentially effective forms of social relations that might be encompassed by richer conceptions of community. What follows here then is an attempt to rehabilitate ideas of community, not so much to define it, but to identify qualities, values, and social structures associated with the concept that might not only help our students persist to graduation but also to flourish while they are in college. In opening such an inquiry, I want to first describe some of the thinking behind learning communities and how they have been defined, and then consider why they can be effective. In light of Harris's criticism, finally, I'll suggest a direction we might go to rehabilitate a concept that persists, not because it represents a nostalgic wish for better times (although it certainly can be used that way), but because it represents something fundamentally good about human beings in their relations with one another.

The *Community* in Learning Communities

The idea of community as it appears so far in the learning community movement is focused on re-organizing the scenes of teaching to promote student learning more conscientiously. Probably the most well known and frequently cited definition, but by no means the only one, is offered by Faith Gabelnick, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Barbara Leigh Smith.

> Learning communities purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students . . . [L]earning communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes. (5)

Learning communities emphasize curricular coherence; active learning; and making connections, that is, connections between ideas presented in different disciplines and making social connections — student-to-student and student-to-teacher. Although Gabelnick et al. originally described five types of learning communities in the 1980s, they have since identified three fundamental underlying models that can be varied and combined to fit a given context. Anne Goodsell Love and Kenneth Tokuno describe these three models as (1) student cohorts in larger classes, (2) paired or clustered classes, and (3) team-

taught programs.

In the first model, the simplest of the three, cohorts of students are enrolled in the same sections of larger courses, with the number of these courses varying from two to four. In the second, student cohorts take the same classes together and are often the only students in those courses. Although faculty teach separately, they try to make intellectual connections between or across courses. These paired or clustered courses can be linked by a common theme that is explored differently but in a complementary fashion in each course. Love and Tokuno cite the example of Western Washington University where "The Narrative Voice" links oral history, literature, and health courses.

The last model is also known as a Coordinated Studies Program and is the most intricate of the three. Student cohorts travel in several courses and can meet together in both large and small groups. Faculty form teams and plan the curriculum to integrate the content, assignments, and activities for three or more related courses. They can also teach in each other's classrooms where there is frequent teacher-to-student contact. Seattle Community College offers a Coordinated Studies Program called "Speaking for Ourselves: You Cannot Shut Us Out." This integrated set of courses includes world cultures, non-Western art, composition, modern world literature, and a library research course (Love and Tokuno 10-11).

This brief overview of learning communities fails to do justice to the variety of programs throughout the country. However, my primary purpose here is not to describe that movement but rather to use it as a place to begin inquiry into the community concept. Toward that end, let me turn to an example of a learning community on my campus to show more specifically how such an entity is organized and how it can function successfully. The Learning Alliance, a variation of model two described above, was created in 1992 to address problems typical of most large colleges and universities. The director who designed and still oversees the Learning Alliance was originally asked by the dean of the College of Liberal Arts to create a program that would turn around dismal retention rates and help students graduate in a timely manner. A few key university administrators and staff, more so than any faculty, were the first to recognize and respond to the challenges facing our entering first-year students: They arrive at the university understanding little about college life and university expectations; many are the first in their families to go to college and so cannot rely on their parents for guidance in adjusting to life on campus; a majority work either full or part time while taking four or more college courses. The dismal statistics documented the sad results: about a third of our students were on academic probation by the end of their first year; 52% were gone after their second.

In their first semester in the Learning Alliance, students travel as

a cohort in three courses: two in general education and a two-unit class introducing them to the university. Typically, a composition course (basic writing or university-level) is linked with another general education class. These links might include pairing composition with psychology, history, sociology, political science, or geography, for instance. In their second semester, students enroll in two linked courses, but they change cohorts. They are encouraged to build explicit connections between ideas and disciplines, while their instructors stress active learning and include in their classes frequent writing assignments, group work, workshops, lots of discussion, and extended individual and group projects. Faculty work together to create links between their courses and participate in summer and winter institutes to design their respective curricula. Each faculty pair meets regularly throughout the semester to assess and, if necessary, fine tune the curriculum jointly constructed, and all Alliance faculty meet once a month for an early morning breakfast meeting to discuss any issues or concerns.

Some learning communities are designed for a single term only; however, the Learning Alliance extends beyond the first semester and emphasizes out-of-classroom experiences in addition to the academic. We want students to get involved quickly in campus life, to meet others, and to come to know the university as a place that offers various opportunities—intellectual, cultural, and social. Alliance students receive priority registration each semester, an aspect that appears to be the main selling point for most first-year students. However, they must come in for academic advising each term during their first two years. We hope to ensure that Alliance students are taking effectively sequenced classes that fit their projected majors and professional careers.

In previous years, all Alliance students contributed ten to fifteen hours of community service during both their sophomore and junior years. Because of the resources needed to oversee this component, however, the community service requirement has been reduced to the second year only. Juniors and seniors can still drop by for advising, but it is not mandatory. They also have the option of enrolling in a 400-level Psychology course that will prepare them to become one of thirty-nine peer mentors to other Learning Alliance students. The peer mentor program enables these now older and (we hope) wiser students to work with first-year students in navigating that difficult transition from high school. Some of our basic writing students have become outstanding peer mentors, a gratifying outcome for a few individuals who we initially feared would not remain in school.

Since it began, the Learning Alliance has collected data to document its success by using GPA's, retention data, and graduation rates. Data from the Learning Alliance are impressive: 67% of its students graduate in five years or less compared to the wider university average of 30%; approximately 90% of Alliance students, including BW

students, are retained, while the rest of the university's retention rate after year two remains at about 50%; cumulative GPA's from 1992 to 2001 for all Alliance students (including basic writers) range from a respectable low of 2.6 to nearly a "B" average of 2.9. Currently, the average GPA for Alliance students is 2.74, compared to the overall university's average of 2.2.[1]   But this data, encouraging as it is, does not really tell us about the qualitative experiences of students in learning communities such as the Learning Alliance, experiences that beg for further investigation. My point here, though, is not to use the Learning Alliance as an ideal model of a learning community, but to show how such an entity can function successfully on campus. In the next section, I show that the linking of community with learning possesses a long history, a link that continues to inform the composition class. I then go on to suggest why certain kinds of social relations can facilitate learning.

Sociality and Learning

Learning communities, or the idea of learning in groups that function like communities, is nothing new. In their monograph, *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities*, Oscar Lenning and Larry Ebbers remind us that learning in a community can be traced to the work of Quintilian and even to such texts as the Bible and the Talmud (1). Scholars also note the significant twentieth century influence of John Dewey, Alexander Meiklejohn, and Joseph Tussman (see Shapiro and Levine; Levine, "Beyond"; Gabelnick et al.; Love). Dewey's philosophy of progressive education and student-centered learning has been well documented, so I will not dwell on his influence here. Meiklejohn, Dewey's contemporary, created the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. In his attempt to bypass the still dominant elective system, Meiklejohn worked to establish curricular coherence and a learning community on campus (Gabelnick et al. 10-16). Gabelnick et al. note that Meiklejohn "is considered a father to the learning community movement because of his insights about the need to reorganize the structure of the curriculum" (11). Joseph Tussman, a former student of Meiklejohn's, attempted a learning community experiment at the University of California at Berkeley from 1965-69. As it turned out, Tussman's ideas were more influential in the state of Washington than in California when in 1970 at Evergreen State College several faculty re-designed the undergraduate curriculum. The approach they eventually developed "became a model for dozens of learning community adaptations in the 1970s and 1980s" at other institutions (12-14).

The idea of learning in small communities as well as the goals and means of promoting learning should also be familiar to those in

composition where a collaborative, student-centered approach to learning has dominated pedagogy for years. Kenneth Bruffee's often cited argument for collaborative learning was likewise a description of small learning communities embedded within individual classrooms (although he didn't use the modifier "learning"). The composition literature, moreover, is full of examples of how small peer groups in the classroom can contribute to learning. Laura Gray-Rosendale's excellent book, *Rethinking Basic Writing,* provides a recent instance. In her work, Gray-Rosendale meticulously documents and explains the interactions among four students in a writing group as part of a Summer Institute course. She describes this Institute as an attempt "to foster community among its students," and to "'ensure a smooth transition from high school to college'" (57). In concluding her study, she describes the positive influence of the Institute on the students and how each felt participating in a peer revision group helped him or her understand and meet the demands of academic literacy (153-64).

Other scholars have described innovative courses and programs intended to help basic writers either be "mainstreamed" into regular composition courses or help them make the transition more successfully (Soliday and Gleason; Grego and Thompson; Rodby). One common element across these innovative efforts is the development of close ties among students and between students and faculty. Regular meetings of small peer groups with a faculty member is a constant, as students and their instructors work closely on assignments and class projects. Soliday and Gleason remark that the *Enrichment* pilot writing program they developed at City College of New York was intended "to build community on an urban, commuter campus" where typically most students juggle school with job and family obligations. In this pilot program, basic writing students spend two semesters together and remain with the same teachers and class tutors for the entire year. The relationships formed, Soliday and Gleason claim, are "conducive to learning" (65).

Because it appears to be old news, one might conclude that the linking of learning and community should merit little interest. Perhaps it is a truism that we learn best when we are learning with others who want to learn and where participants recognize that each will benefit. Yet what is notable about the present movement is that learning communities are part of educational reform efforts that respond to the neglect of undergraduate education (Shapiro and Levine 2), and that counter the increasing corporatization of higher education. "Community" in these reform efforts, it seems to me, becomes a code word for reminding educators that our common aim has always been to teach, and to teach well, and that the essence of learning is embedded in human relationships. How might this be so?

Learning communities attempt to facilitate student success by

actively encouraging factors identified in various influential longitu-
dinal studies as crucial. Shapiro and Levine summarize these factors
as the degree of "student-faculty interaction, student involvement in
co-curricular activities, and, most important, peer influences and in-
teraction" (xii). In the final chapter of *What Matters in College?* an up-
dated and expanded study of his monumental 1977 work, *Four Critical
Years*, Alexander Astin concludes that

> [v]iewed as a whole, the many empirical findings from this
> study seem to warrant the following general conclusion: *the
> student's peer group is the* single most potent source of influ-
> ence on growth and development during the *undergraduate
> years* (emphasis in original). (398)

Astin expounds that the effects of peer groups can be viewed from
psychological and sociological perspectives. An individual seeks ac-
ceptance and approval from her peer group because she recognizes
that the peer group is like herself; members share similar beliefs, val-
ues, interests, and so forth. From the sociological perspective, the peer
group as a collective represents individuals who "identify, affiliate with,
and seek acceptance and approval from *each other.*" The group ac-
cepts the individual as one of their own and approves of the member's
behavior as meeting the expectations of the group (400-01).

Obviously, peer group influence on the individual can either help
or harm depending on the circumstances. But certainly well designed
learning communities can provide numerous opportunities for students
to meet and come to know their fellow students (not just students like
themselves) and encourage them to meet in informal study groups,
whether on campus or in residence halls. As many in composition
have done, we need to continue to think beyond the traditional college
classroom — the isolated instructor with a group of students meeting a
few hours per week for a quarter or semester only — as the organiza-
tional unit for learning. Technology is an obvious aid in this endeavor,
but certainly investigating how learning occurs in various kinds of peer
groups needs to continue so that their potential as sites for learning
can be more fully realized. However, perhaps because peer groups
have been criticized for encouraging a too easy consensus (see Trimbur
for a discussion) that reinforces narrow thinking and prevents taking
on other perspectives, and because conflict as root metaphor privileges
difference and negotiating one's position among often several com-
peting perspectives, talk of community feels regressive, as if such com-
munities will coddle students and repress conflict.

Harris argues for an idea of community that would include both
consensus and conflict and therefore a pedagogy that would add to or
complicate students' "uses of language," a pedagogy that encourages

"a kind of polyphony—an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own" ("Idea" 17). Yet, because Harris is also pushing against sentimental, romantic notions of communities of like-minded peers, he privileges difference and conflict. In his later discussion, he elaborates on his vision of the classroom as a public space and proposes to substitute a "community of strangers" for a "community of agreement." People don't come to know one another; instead they come to know their respective positions on issues and the interpretive frames underlying them. That's knowledge worth having certainly, but such a community of strangers may be of limited value to first-year students, especially basic writers, who often find the campus environment un-welcoming and, in some cases, downright hostile. Instead, we might consider other forms of community on campus that include consensus and conflict but that are also designed to promote mutuality among faculty, staff, and students. Such communities of learners can include pedagogies such as those Harris favors, but will also distinguish between conflicts productive of learning and those that aren't.

A Community is not a Club

In *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, Harris offers the term *public* in opposition to community. He claims in public spaces, competing interests must wrangle and barter, and this is the kind of classroom he desires where different views are shared and discussed, but not necessarily resolved in favor of a single agreed upon reading orchestrated by the teacher. Rather, students must decide on a reading they want to explore and eventually defend without the security of knowing it is the "right" view, or the only view. Harris wants a classroom scene that resembles city life and organizes his classroom to produce conflict that he hopes will lead to deeper learning and that will help his students practice the identity of public intellectual, an identity that assumes people can come together as strangers in order to debate issues of common interest. What Harris does not want is a classroom community that resembles a "private and chummy club . . . [one he] is least interested in joining" (97).

I share Harris's dislike of the classroom as "chummy club." Viable communities, if they are to facilitate learning on campus, would not be mistaken for clubs. Robert Bellah et al. in *Habits of the Heart* reserve the term community for those organizations that attempt to be inclusive and that celebrate "the interdependence of private and public life," one's calling to a profession, for instance, which satisfies private need and serves public interests. In contrast, what they claim are frequently mislabeled as communities are "lifestyle enclaves." Like a

club, the enclave is "segmental," it typically responds to private needs for leisure and consumption, and (to use Bellah et al.'s elegant phrase) "celebrates the narcissism of similarity" (72). While clubs can have community-like aspects, they tend to be exclusive and elitist, places where differences are suppressed, where strict criteria of who gets in and who is left out are rigidly enforced, and where competition for status dominates over concerns for learning. Examples on our campuses of such clubs are not hard to come by: Fraternities, sororities, and athletic teams, unfortunately, too often become groups that "celebrate the narcissism of similarity."

Where Harris sees opposition between community and public, I see complementarity. Public service, if directed toward the benefit of others and is not motivated solely to serve one's self interests, can extend the experience of community from smaller to larger spheres if social relations continue to be marked by values such as mutuality, empathy, a sharing of common interests, solidarity, and ultimately trust (see Bender 7). Hence, I would argue that the physical forms of community are less important than the quality of social relations that emerges among participants. Yet the opposition Harris pushes leaves little room to consider other forms of community on campus that are not utopian and that are not confined to the individual classroom only, but that still retain these important traditional values. If our students are to acquire these values by seeing them exemplified repeatedly in the work of faculty and peers, they need to participate in campus life for an extended period. One huge problem on large commuter campuses, though, is that students only hang out long enough to attend classes. They thus never feel part of the university, they don't participate in its culture, and they remain "strangers" both to faculty and to one another.

The local form of community Harris advocates is a classroom scene that, while it includes consensus, privileges conflict. Moreover, it is narrowly selective in the preferred identity—public intellectual— he hopes his students will emulate. David Bartholomae makes a similar move in "Inventing the University." The favored identity for students in Bartholomae's vision of the academy is a rather conventional one of student as critic. Both Harris and Bartholomae use the classroom to socialize students to try on a clearly identified role. Consider, though, that college students, and here let me focus on basic writers, may not necessarily embrace the identity of public intellectual, or critic. From my experience, I think most students would reject these roles and seek out something more familiar, something that better suits their young-adult identities.

As others have mentioned, it's unwise to generalize about the identities, needs, and abilities of basic writers (and by extension other students as well). It's particularly unwise when we consider what are

probably very different identities, needs, and aspirations of students attending a two-year versus a state college or a Harvard, Stanford, or Yale. Yet it is safe to say that although we can't predict in advance nor should we circumscribe the identities students might assume, they do need to form a coherent identity on campus that allows them to function within the academic culture, an identity that can accommodate various identities appropriate in other aspects of their lives. This working out of an identity on campus is often forced by new learning experiences, yet some of these conflicts of identity can also impede future learning. Learning communities can therefore be used to address specific conflicts that arise unpredictably for students, conflicts that might obstruct, rather than facilitate, learning.

This working out of an appropriate identity is in some ways consistent with the root metaphor of conflict that Harris says includes "finding a place to speak within a discourse that does not seem to ignore or leave behind the person you are outside of it" ("Negotiating" 31). It is also more complicated, nuanced, and idiosyncratic, than we have imagined. A good recent example that illustrates this complexity is Judith Rodby's research of nonnative English speakers who would have been placed in basic writing under an older program at her campus but who were now in freshman comp ("Contingent Literacy"). Rodby explains that students' willingness to revise was the key factor in determining success in the writing course. She focuses on the locus of motivation for revising and draws upon Urie Bronfenbrenner's framework for explaining how skill development occurs in a given context. Bronfenbrenner's "ecological environment" includes four interconnected levels—micro, meso, exo, and macro—with each level forming a separate system. These systems include relations between people and consistencies of "ideas, belief systems, activities, and roles..." (50). I am not doing justice to her detailed analysis, but the gist is that for the students Rodby studied, it appears that motivation to do well in college arises from congruence among various levels of a given student's ecological environment. Where there are conflicts within these levels, students are less motivated to revise.

All the students in Rodby's study passed freshman [sic] composition, but some struggled more than others. To illustrate, one of the more successful students, Luciana, had a rich mesosystem. She had attended a summer program and ended up scheduling fall classes with several students she met in that program. These students were also together in group tutoring sessions, and two of her courses were linked so there was congruence of subject matter and consistency in the "rhetorical terminology" of her speech and composition courses. Luciana also had a sister-in-law who worked on campus who regularly advised her. Rodby says that Luciana's

mesosystem functioned like glue holding . . . [her] world to-
gether, so that when she moved from school to home, or from
one class to another, she inhabited a single, nearly seamless
universe of meaning. She did not encounter conflicts of val-
ues or even much cultural diversity among her relationships.
(50)

Although Luciana's success indicates the power of such mutuality in
her social network, the lack of diversity in her campus experiences is a
drawback to the social network she established on her own and was
apparently overlooked in her linked courses. Learning communities
can intentionally build diversity into peer and faculty interactions set
up within a given model. Faculty and peer mentors can facilitate stu-
dents' exploration of underlying cultural and personal frames inform-
ing different beliefs and values and subsequently help students reframe
these differences based on what they discover in this exploratory pro-
cess.

In contrast to Luciana, Rodby describes Horatio, a Hispanic stu-
dent, who appeared to have a strong mesosystem, but who withdrew
from participating in his writing class while researching Proposition
187, California's anti-immigrant ballot measure. His research into ille-
gal immigration created a painful conflict for Horatio between his be-
lief that he belonged on campus and a growing realization that His-
panics were not necessarily welcomed in the state. It was only when
his composition instructor intervened and helped Horatio see that his
essay might educate his peers that he began revising more produc-
tively. He eventually passed the course, but just barely. Rodby con-
cludes that "these students . . . had strong macrosystems that instructed
them that education, literacy, and good grades would guarantee good
jobs and a good future. At one level, this macrosystem ideology pushed
these students to revise their writing repeatedly" (60). Rodby also as-
serts that because these student ecologies are material and social net-
works, such programs as Summer Bridge and learning communities,
among others, help students develop salient connections for themselves.
And, I would argue, such communities can help students work through
the conflicts that threaten the ideological systems they have internal-
ized.

Rodby's analysis and use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological envi-
ronment model complements James Paul Gee's theory of literacy whose
key term is *Discourse*. Gee's approach can guide us in thinking about
how learning communities can help students both learn and acquire
"secondary Discourses" of college. Discourse is a "socially accepted
association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions,
and 'artifacts', of thinking . . . and acting that can be used to identify

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oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'" (131). Discourse is an individual's "identity kit," a way "of being in the world . . ." that "integrate[s] words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (127). There are, however, many secondary Discourses—each more or less powerful. One's primary Discourse is acquired in childhood, typically in the home through an oral mode and serves as "something of a base within which we acquire or resist later Discourses" (137). School Discourse is a secondary, and usually a *dominant* secondary Discourse because controlling such a dominant Discourse "can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society," power that will enable the individual to adapt to and acquire more easily other congruent secondary Discourses (132). Gee notes there are countless Discourses. Pertinent here are examples he cites of "a student" in general or a certain kind of student such as "a student of physics or a student of literature" (128).

When students make the transition from high school to college, they must eventually control other secondary Discourses. In some cases, the degree of difference between high school and college Discourses is minimal; in others, however, the differences are much greater. If we assume Discourses of academia are polyglot and conflicted, all students to varying degrees will need to negotiate an "identity kit" for themselves if they are to forge a literacy that will facilitate academic success. Instead of "negotiating" a position for themselves, though, Gee uses the terms *acquisition* and *learning* to describe how individuals "come by the Discourses they are members of" (138). Effective teaching involves both acquisition and learning, but learning solely leads to "meta-knowledge." "Meta-knowledge," Gee says, is a way of "seeing how the Discourses you have already got (not just the languages) relate to those you are attempting to acquire, and how the ones you are trying to acquire relate to self and society" (141). Such a process involves comparing and contrasting various Discourses which is why it is essential that students be exposed to diversity as a "cognitive necessity . . . to develop meta-awareness and overt reflective insight . . . ."

Diversity accords well with basic writing pedagogies governed by the root metaphor of conflict. I want to argue, however, that there is another secondary Discourse crucial to student success, one Gee mentions, and one that I think is indicated by Rodby's research: This is a secondary Discourse outside of any particular disciplinary Discourse, and what for a lack of a better phrase, I'll call the "Discourse of being a student." That is, a Discourse that represents a given student's identity and affects how that person thinks and acts in class and on campus generally. Some ways students think and act may not necessarily fit their college instructors' expectations and may not be conducive to

academic success. Certainly students, especially basic writers, are often intimidated by their professors and fear talking to them, and they won't ask for help or for clarification on an assignment. Few will take advantage of instructors' office hours. In addition, ways of reading and note-taking, carry-overs from high school, may prove unproductive in the college classroom.   Some basic writers are bewildered to discover that a professor's lecture does not typically repeat information in the textbook and instead often challenges or contradicts what they've read. These students sometimes discover too late (or never) that just learning what they take to be "facts" is not sufficient to demonstrate learning to their college teachers, that argument is the dominant mode for creating and presenting knowledge, and that faculty usually like to see students think and argue independently and critically. We especially see these latter expectations in Harris's classroom, too. In some instances, students experience debilitating conflict when their family or religious values are aggressively challenged by professors and/or peers. In these cases, an alert teacher can help students negotiate their conflicts by making them part of the course content (one strategy used in pedagogies informed by the conflict metaphor). This Discourse of being a student, however, must both be learned and acquired, and such a process takes more time than a single semester and will most likely require the attentiveness of more than one instructor.

Learning communities can help students consciously learn this sort of secondary Discourse, a Discourse which can then develop metaknowledge and can serve to help them understand differences among several Discourses (including their primary ones) that define how other students and faculty in various disciplines define themselves. Conflicts between and among these "identity kits" might be more effectively dealt with in small learning communities that can operate both within and outside individual classrooms. These communities can be led either by faculty, staff, or peer mentors — or better yet, led by teams comprised of representatives from each of the three. In the Learning Alliance, for example, student cohorts meet with peer mentors for two hours each week throughout their first semester to learn about various aspects of the campus but also to air problems that arise in their classes or in the dorms. Students who may be experiencing psychological conflicts can often be noticed first by these peer mentors and referred quickly to the appropriate counseling services. Success is never guaranteed, of course, but there's a better chance students will be more willing to work through potentially destructive conflicts rather than be rendered mute by them, which, in the latter case, unfortunately, too frequently means that students "resolve" those conflicts by dropping out — or by letting the institution make the decision by forcing them out because of failing grades.

If Discourses include values and beliefs, this secondary Discourse about being a student must be supported by values that can privilege identities conducive to academic success. These values should be made explicit to all who participate in a learning community, including students, faculty, staff, and administrators. A viable community is grounded on clear values that each member understands, accepts, and is guided by, values whose violation would entail the destruction of the community (see Sergiovanni, *Building Community in Schools*). These foundational values of a learning community must be congruent with the educational mission of the college, or, if I use Gee's terms, congruent with the campus's dominant Discourse concerning the value of undergraduate education and the identities it makes available to its students as involved and caring citizens.

As an example, the Learning Alliance is founded on the following operating principles that inform all of its activities and creates an ethos all students in the Alliance are expected to embrace. These principles are adapted from "Building Community" by John Gardner and "Insights into Community on Campus" by George Kuh et al.

> Good communities incorporate and value diversity — encourage cooperation, compromise and consensus.
> Good communities have a shared culture — develop identity through group norms, standards, and values.
> Good communities foster internal communication — thrive on extensive formal and informal interaction and frequent face-to-face contacts.
> Good communities promote caring, trust, and teamwork — encourage a spirit of mutuality and cooperation where everyone is included.
> Good communities arrange for group maintenance processes and governance structures that foster the development of young people, encourage participation and sharing of leadership tasks, and prepare students for future responsibilities and citizenship.
> Good communities create links with the world — rendering service to campus, local communities, and the society at large.

Learning communities need to be diverse to encourage productive differences and conflict, but they also need to help students learn how to negotiate consensus when collective action is required to accomplish a project or to solve a problem. Learning communities need to be inclusive and membership voluntary, and students (and faculty) should, if they so desire, be able to leave the community after participating for a quarter or semester.

As I see it, schools are poised halfway between home and public

space. We don't want students to leave their identities outside when they step onto our campuses. But many are not yet ready to deal on their own with the vicissitudes and conflicts of the public sphere. We know that students must change if education is to have any value and that learning inevitably involves conflicts of various kinds. Learning communities can help students distinguish between the kinds necessary for their learning and those that might prevent them from stepping out from the safety of familiarity and like-mindedness. In a recent issue of the *WPA* journal, Charles Schuster (writing from the point of view of an associate dean) claims that Composition studies must "become part of the wider campus conversation on restructuring higher education" and that "[u]nless it gets involved, its influence is almost sure to diminish" (94). Because learning communities offer us a way of thinking about such restructuring, we need to have wider conversations about *ideas* of kinds of *communities* on our respective campuses, not to recoup the past, but to imagine social networks on campus that support learning and respond more effectively to students at their point of need.

Note

1 For more details about the Learning Alliance and data regarding the success of basic writers in that program, see my essay, "Mainstreaming and Other Experiments in a Learning Community," in *Mainstreaming Basic Writers: Politics and Pedagogies of Access* (full citation below).

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