

# Learning Communities and Their Implications for English Education

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## 要 旨

この論文では、アメリカの大学で1990年代から徐々に広まっている Learning Communities (学習の共同の場) の理論的な背景や実際にどのような影響を大学の現場で与えているのかを検証し、それが日本の大学の英語教育にどのように応用できるのかを考察する。

To make college students keep studying and stimulate their interests in what they are studying, the classroom is the most important place to promote learning. The classroom is a meeting place where the students and a professor meet and collaborate in the making of knowledge. The students may or may not know what they are going to learn at the beginning of the semester, but the students develop intellectual capacities through the interactions between themselves and a professor and through peer collaboration in the classroom, which may be extended to learning outside the classroom. This paper presents the underlying theories of learning communities that promote collaborative learning and show an example of the learning communities that have gained extensive success in facilitating students' writing capacities. And then I will explain how the learning community model can be applied to English education in Japan.

Learning communities are an avenue of educational improvement in terms of student learning and the faculty revitalization (Gabelnik, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). Learning communities restructure the curriculum under a central theme around which the learning community programs are focused. Hence students enroll in classes together, and they are asked to build connections between themselves and their ideas. Usually the faculty coordinates the curriculum and defines the direction of the learning communities, so the faculty collaborates with other faculty and redefines the role of a teacher.

Learning communities foster collaborative learning in the classroom. For example, in Writing Link Freshman Interest Groups at the University of Washington, a flagship university in the state of Washington, a writing class and a weekly meeting, both of which consist of about 20 students,

encourage the students to talk and exchange their ideas. The students can appreciate other students' points of view through writing reviews in the writing class. The students form groups of three or four and bring the copies of their drafts. The others in the group read the drafts and criticize them according to the guideline given by a teacher. Likewise, the students feel free to talk about their ideas in the weekly meeting. It may be possible for them to synthesize various ideas and to create knowledge by talking with each other.

These activities are based on the ideas of social constructionists on how knowledge is constructed. During 1970's and 80's, they challenged the traditional idea of what would constitute knowledge and how the human would acquire knowledge. They thought that knowledge was an artifact created by social interaction among people, not between a person and an object (Bruffee, 1985, 1986). It is a common scene that toddlers who do not acquire the command of a language reach out their hands to grasp something. They groan to show their frustration when they cannot get it. The object that they want never cooperate with them; their parents help them get it by lifting them close to the object or by handing it to them. In other words, their unsuccessful attempt generates a reaction from their parents, not from the object. In short, the process of knowing involves the agency of others; the process of acquiring knowledge involves the mediation of social interactions.

Bruffee (1982) explained the roots of the debate about how knowledge was constructed. According to the Cartesian model of knowledge, the human mind is equipped with two devices of seeing: a mirror and an inner eye. The mirror reflects reality and the inner eye scrutinizes the process of transforming reality into knowledge. In the stages of knowing, one examines, interprets, synthesizes, and recreates the elements of reality given to the mirror by the world. Knowledge is a reflection of reality filtered in the human mind. In effect, knowledge is generated through the interaction between the object and the human mind.

In the traditional view, learning is the accumulation and interpretation of knowledge. Reality is fundamentally governed by time and space and exists independent of any human mind, and the subject of learning is the reality that surrounds the human mind and body. According to this model, it is a teacher's duty to tell students what is reality and how to interpret the reality, which is very complex actuality and existence. In other words, a teacher is a transmitter of the knowledge with several tools to mold it. Therefore, memorization and acceptance are the two main tasks that the students are supposed to carry out. The students are subject to the reality, only to receive the information drawn from the reality and to make sense out of the fragments of the reality.

By contrast, according to social constructionists such as Richard Rorty and Thomas Kuhn, we generate knowledge by dealing with our beliefs about the reality and by justifying those beliefs socially (Bruffee 1984). We have our beliefs about the world that are private and peculiar to ourselves. These beliefs derive from contact with the reality through sensory perceptions, so these beliefs are personal and sometimes incompatible with other people's beliefs. According to this perspective, private and particular beliefs are not knowledge. They become knowledge only when they are justified by reference to what others have already accepted. To justify a belief is to establish a certain kind of relationship among people sharing the same beliefs or between persons and a propositional statement of the belief or among the things that people believe (Bruffee 1982). In short, the justification is a matter of conversation among people who are in the process of establishing the relationship that validates the

knowledge.

The community where conversations take place is the kind of community in which people acknowledge some sorts of knowledge mutually, and this process may begin with just one person recognizing another person's belief, and when the knowledge is supported and confirmed by others, the community will grow and expand its size to include another piece of knowledge that is relevant to the original knowledge. In other words, there are many communities, ranging from a small community whose members are just two people to the largest possible community that encompass all the people, or ranging from a stable and relatively peaceful community to an unstable and fragile community. What distinguishes the communities of knowledge from other kinds of communities is that the former communities generate knowledge through a continual process of intellectual negotiation among its members.

Unfortunately, most colleges have failed to create the communities where students share their beliefs with others and create knowledge. It is quite natural that a college has departments that distinguish themselves from other disciplines. It is very convenient for the faculty to divide knowledge into some sorts of disciplinary areas because in this way it has been possible to disseminate the knowledge efficiently. However, as a college establishes the subdivision of knowledge with strong coherence of interests, one area of knowledge is isolated from others and the knowledge as a whole is fragmented.

Collaborative learning challenges the role of a teacher. According to social constructionist concept of knowledge, there is no universal foundation of cognitive thought and no ground upon which the knowledge is built. There is only an agreement arrived at for the time being by the communities, and concepts, ideas, reality and facts are constructs generated by the communities whose role is to confirm the validity of the knowledge (Bruffee 1986). The authority of knowledge, according to this perspective, derives from the community in which its members continually negotiate and agree to the beliefs that are socially justified or disagree to the belief that is not socially justified. A teacher, in this case, is a certified representative of the communities that students are willing to join, and the role of the teacher is to encourage the students to join the communities. In other words, a teacher provides the social context in which the students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation that foster knowledge among people attending the class. The teacher as well as classmates who make up the communities values these conversations.

Collaborative learning would succeed when students reach the consensus to agree or not to agree with the help of a teacher who structures a task or a problem in the classroom. On the surface a teacher may pretend to be an observer of the classroom discussion, but a teacher has to carefully design the discourse. In order to do so, a teacher should provide the students with an idea or at least a hint of where each of them stands in a designated field of study and show the possibilities of the directions to which they can go forward. Weiner (1986) stated that "the teacher in the collaborative classroom must plan and organize the session so that students know that the end is not simply to work in groups but to work in groups in an effort to reach consensus for an important task" by their own authority (p. 61).

Another important thing to make collaborative learning successful is that a safe atmosphere should be guaranteed in regard to what students say in the classroom. As the population of college students in the United States become diverse, professors may confront the disputes that concern with personal traits such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation when they promote collaborative learning, because it

may require the students to reveal personal experiences or hidden feelings that are very sensitive to others' criticism in some cases. Bleich (1995) urged to establish pedagogy of disclosure:

A pedagogy of disclosure means that because each member of a classroom *actually has* an individual history, habitual and scholarly reference to it becomes part of the process of presenting opinions, interpretations, and reports of other things. It means changing *conventions*, and therefore, the expectations, values, and styles of self-reference; but it also implies that discourse is not likely to take place in a classroom under compulsory conditions: class members should not feel forced to share information about themselves that they consider damaging or embarrassing. (p. 48)

Individual and collective self-disclosure changes the vocabularies and disclosure styles of the classroom, but it should be guaranteed that disclosure of personal and collective experiences as a distinctive group is not treated casually and carelessly.

Learning communities are vital ways to restructure the curriculum, the student academic and social life, and faculty and student involvement in a college. Although there are many kinds of learning communities, the common feature is to link at least two courses that are somehow related with each other and to create the community where students as a small group meet and share ideas in the classroom on a regular basis. As learning communities coordinate relevant fields of learning and promote collaborative learning, they caused positive effects on student learning.

Smith and Hunter (1988), for example, reported that students in the Coordinated studies program at Seattle Central Community College got a strong sense of motivation to study and confidence in studying. They also stated that Seattle Central Community College experienced a dramatic increase of student retention because of the Coordinated studies program. Finley (1990) said that the Coordinated studies program at Seattle Central Community College allowed the faculty to design the courses that satisfied the needs of the diverse students so that the students could be more likely to become involved in their own learning. Tinto, Goodsell and Russo (1993) also stated that a multidisciplinary curriculum at Seattle Central Community College promoted a learning model that encouraged students to take diverse perspectives on the subjects. The students regarded their diverse backgrounds and experiences as indispensable ingredients of class contents and appreciated resources other students provided. Furthermore, Matthews (1986) indicated that the coordinate studies program called Quanta at Daytona Beach Community College gave students a sense of group identity to enhance learning. According to Matthews, "learning communities provide students with an enriched experience that adds a unifying dimension to disparate subjects" (p. 47). All the articles I mentioned above showed that learning communities made student learning more meaningful and more fruitful.

Writing Link FIGs (Freshman Interest Groups) at the University of Washington are one of the FIG programs in which freshmen register for three linked courses and one weekly meeting. The courses in the FIG programs are organized around the same theme or integrate the two or three related disciplines. The Writing Link FIGs are different from other FIGs in that the former require students to register for two linked courses and one writing course in which they write papers on the subject dealt with in the two linked courses. For example, under the name of "Introduction to the Ancient World," the students register for "Survey of Ancient Western Art," "The Ancient World," and "Humanities Writing." The

first two classes are large lecture classes of more than one hundred students, each of which has a recitation, and the writing class is composed of only twenty students. In the writing class the students write papers based on the texts and information used in their "Survey of Ancient Western Art" course. In addition to the three courses, the students have a weekly meeting for one hour with an upper-class peer advisor. The peer advisor's job is to answer questions about a variety of topics that may be relevant to the courses. The students are also required to attend one cultural event as a group. The format of a weekly meeting is very flexible; its activities vary from week to week depending on the peer advisors. One group, for example, discussed what cultural event they wanted to go during the quarter, while a peer advisor in another group talked about study skills needed to be successful at college (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993a).

The Writing Link FIGs are one of the less coordinated programs among learning communities because the students just register for the three linked courses and the faculty teaches the courses independently. Because of the less efforts to coordinate the programs, they are suitable for large universities where it is difficult to change the curriculum and to expect the faculty collaboration.

Writing Link FIGs encourage students to form communities in which they can justify their own beliefs. The Writing Link FIGs also make it easier for the students to explore different kinds of communities by linking courses that are somehow related with each other. The justification of beliefs is a social process. It means that to know something is to change one's relation with others who confirm a certain kind of knowledge. It is fair to say that when the students learn something, they leave a community that justifies a certain belief in a certain way and join another community that justifies another belief in another way (Bruffee 1985). As long as the students keep learning something, they constantly change their position from one community to another and persistently redefine their beliefs. Since the students enrolling in the Writing Link FIGs share relevant disciplines with other students, they have more opportunities to justify their beliefs in somewhat different kinds of communities, thus acquiring new kinds of knowledge to which they can contribute by actively participating in the communities.

Tinto and Goodsell (1993a, 1993b) did extensive research on FIG programs including Writing Link FIGs at the University of Washington and they found several positive impacts of the FIGs on student learning. First, the FIGs are meeting places for students. In other words, the FIGs enable the students to meet peers who share similar interests many times a week. Especially in a large lecture class where students tend to feel isolated, the students joining the FIGs know each other, and they are not alone in a lecture hall. In short, the FIGs allow the students to form a social network in which they can satisfy academic needs as well as social needs. Since they know each other and some of them become friends sharing similar interests, they can find peers with whom to study and to help each other as well as to have a fun. Because of their associations the students feel less anonymous and become less likely to skip the large lecture classes. Therefore, the classrooms become friendlier and more comfortable for them.

Second, Writing Link FIGs enable the students to appreciate other students' points of view through the writing review in the class. The students form groups of three or four and bring the copies of their drafts. The others in the group read the drafts and criticize them according to the guideline given by a teacher. The guideline focuses on the coherence of the paper, the clarity of its ideas presented in it, and the appropriateness of the details to support the main idea. The papers are returned to the authors with

written comments. Some of the students do not appreciate the peers' comments, because they regard knowledge as coming from authoritative figures and believe that only a teacher who gives them grades can have worthwhile information. Others, however, recognize the advantage of the peer review that bring them different points of view from their own and think that peers' comments are helpful and valid. One student in the Writing Link FIG said, "I learned to write in a way that they're going to understand, not to just impress" (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993a, p.115). Although some of the students do not appreciate the social constructionist idea of how knowledge is made, the Writing Link FIGs encourage the students to take various perspectives on the subjects.

Third, the FIGs encourage the students to take an initiative in the process of learning. They form a network of peers and have a lot of opportunities to talk and to share knowledge. Hence they do not have to depend entirely on teachers; they have a control over their learning process to a large extent and feel excited with what they are learning. According to the result of the research, the combination of meeting people and sharing information caused the students to spend more time on class materials.

Tokuno and Campbell (1992) reported the impacts of the FIG programs at the University of Washington on retention and scholarship. They found that students stayed more in difficult courses such as mathematics and chemistry if they joined the FIGs. They also reported that overall grade point average and retention were slightly better when the students participated in the FIGs. Tokuno (1993) followed up the previous year's report and found that the FIGs had a long-term effect on scholarship and retention. The students who joined the FIGs got higher overall grade point average than the non-FIG's students even three quarters later. In addition, they were more likely to complete their degree programs. Judging from these evidences, the FIGs did improve student retention.

As you can see, Writing Link FIGs have a couple of advantages over traditional ways of teaching a writing class. I suggest that the learning community model could be applied to English courses in a Japanese college for the following reasons. First, four language skills, which are reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and grammar are usually separately taught at college in Japan. Students have usually less opportunities to incorporate what they have just studied in a reading class into their composition in a writing class. I think that English education has to be interdisciplinary at a college level. What I mean is that classes for language skills and a specific subject such as British history or the sociology of American culture or English literature should be linked in order for students to develop their language proficiency effectively. In particular, I propose that a writing class and an area study course need to be coordinated. One weakness of English language education at a Japanese college is that students do not acquire the knowledge of a specific subject in English so that they cannot write a good quality paper in English. Even though some students have good writing skills, they are not usually trained to have analytical skills in English to delve into a different society or culture. A lot of inputs are necessary to develop critical thinking, but it is not possible to teach a reading material dealing with a certain area of the world and writing skills in one course. It is much better for two faculty members to coordinate an area study course, preferably taught in English, and a writing course so that students can take advantage of what they study in one class for the other class roughly at the same time. This kind of linked course reinforces and consolidates the effective usage of vocabulary, phrases, grammar, and sentence structure.

Another advantage of linked writing and area study courses is that students have more opportunities

to share their writing products and get meaningful feedback from their peers. In other words, the two linked courses promote collaborative learning. Since they study the same subject in the area study course, they have the same background knowledge that they can use for a paper, and it is easier for the students to understand other students' papers. Furthermore, an instructor tends to regard himself or herself as a facilitator or a learner in learning communities (Whatle & Canalis, 2002). This kind of the teacher's role makes it possible to support the atmosphere in which the teacher and students mutually appreciate others' views.

Finally, language learning is an integral part of the social milieu. Realistically, language learning occurs when people in a community meaningfully interact with one another. One factor that Japanese educators of English education are likely to underestimate is that language learning is facilitated through the process of socialization. I think that linked and coordinated courses generate a necessary, not sufficient, condition in which students are able to study English in practical and communicative ways.

The necessary condition of implementing the linked courses is that faculty members have to arrange a syllabus that meets the needs of the other course. A writing class teacher should take into consideration a specific knowledge that the other instructor teaches in his or her area study course. Simultaneously, the area study instructor choose topics that enables students to write a short paper a couple of times during the semester. It is essential that the two faculty members arrange their syllabi before the semester begins and that they regularly meet to check the progress of their classes.

As the world of the academy becomes more specialized and more fragmented, the learning communities in writing programs are vital tools to bridge over different disciplines and to create holistic approaches to facilitating students' writing capacities. I hope that a Japanese college employs this kind of a learning community to promote better English education.

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