[Recording transcript – Making Large Classes Feel Small with Learning Communities]

Hello, welcome to this on-demand session, Making Large Classes Feel Small with Learning Communities. I’m Katherine Miscavige from the English Department at George Mason University.

I teach composition in the English department for the most part, in fact English 302. And English 302 is a composition course that’s directed at students who are a little more advanced in their program, so it’s usually juniors and seniors. It focuses on writing in their discipline, and it focuses on the writing process and revision. There are a bunch of different types of sections of 302, and students usually choose a section that is related to their discipline. So, you can take 302H, which is for humanities students, or 302N, which is for students in the natural sciences. However, there is also 302M, which is a multidisciplinary, sort of catch-all English 302, and that’s what I’ve been teaching for a few years now primarily.

Last year, with the pandemic and everything that was going on I was actually teaching 4 sections of English 302M, and I knew that for my own sanity I wanted to combine those sections into a single Blackboard shell to make things a little bit easier and so that I would only have one course to update.

302s are capped at 22 students, so by combining my 4 sections of 302 M I now had 88 students in the same Blackboard shell.

One of the great things about English 302 is that they are small classes, right – there are 22 students typically. At Mason, which is a very big university, students have a lot of very large classes. So, the English composition classes are a nice change for students to have that small class experience. When I decided to combine my 4 sections into one, my big concern was that we would lose that small class feel. So, I cast around looking for ideas and thinking about how I could continue to have that small class feel and that sense of community even with the 88 students being together.

So, I settled on the idea of learning communities. Now, I want to clarify what I’m talking about when I say learning communities. I’m not in this case talking about the more formal university-wide movement toward living/learning community. GMU does have some of those, particularly for first year students – you can see here the homepage of GMU housing and some of the learning communities that students can join. I’m not thinking about those kinds of learning communities. What I’m talking about has a lot of possible names. Sometimes faculty might call them discussion groups, some of the literature on this topic calls them base groups. And in fact, here’s a definition I like from Karl Smith (2000), he’s talking about “base groups” but this applies to the same idea of what I was trying to do. “Base groups are long-term, heterogeneous, cooperative learning groups with stable membership whose primary responsibility is to provide each student the support, encouragement, and assistance he or she needs to make academic progress.” And that’s really what I was striving to create in my class.

We know that “active involvement with course material [and] a sense of belonging is one of the most important conditions that can be created in a college classroom” (Smith, 2000). In fact, while some of the research here is a bit dated, it’s even been associated with persistence in university, especially for underrepresented minority students, a sense of belonging is crucial to sticking with and completing a university degree. Smith goes on here to say that “Being a part of a group not only promotes academic development but also enhances personal development and increases satisfaction. A relatively simple and straightforward way to start building a supportive community is through **cooperative base groups.**”

And so, this is what I decided to do in my course of 88 students – a fully online course, by the way – in which I used these learning communities. And so, I’m going to talk to a little bit today about how I used these groups within my course, and some of the results I saw by doing so.

When you’re setting up your learning communities, there are several things to take into account. You need to think about how big the groups are going to be; what the makeup is going to look like – whether they’re going to be heterogeneous or homogeneous and so on; what duration you’re going to use the groups for; and how you’re going to get these groups created. We’ll talk in a second about the practicalities of using the groups during the semester, but right now I’m thinking about the set up at the beginning of the semester.

So, for my courses, I decided that the discussion groups or learning communities, as I called them, were going to last for the whole semester—that this would be a group that students were placed in at the beginning of the semester and that they would continue to work together throughout the whole semester, through the final project. I struggled a little bit with the size and the makeup. These are important questions and so thinking through how you’re going to use the learning communities is really important here. For my courses we do a lot of discussion board in blackboard. I use discussion boards to have discussions about the readings, but also to share drafts and get feedback. So, the discussion board is my primary tool for having students interact with the content. And so, because discussion is such an important factor, the size was really important. I decided to go with a slightly larger group than I would for, say, group work because I wanted discussion to not get stale. If you have too small of a group for discussion, especially if it’s going to last all semester, every has their role and you lose some of the variety of viewpoint and diversity of viewpoint. So, I wanted to make my groups a bit larger so that we would still have that genuine discussion and diversity of viewpoint. In the end I settled on the groups being about 8-12 students large. The range in that size has to do with the second point about the makeup of the groups. For my class, since I was teaching this multidisciplinary section of English 302, the makeup was a big question. I saw it as having two choices, either making the groups within a particular discipline – so having disciplinary groups – for mixing up the disciplines. Either homogeneous disciplinary groups or heterogeneous disciplinary groups. In the end I decided since one of the goals of the course is to work on writing in the disciplines and sort of what it means to be a writer in one’s discipline, I decided to make the groups more homogeneous and try to have them based on discipline. So, I had the humanities students together in one group and the natural science students in one group and the engineering students, and so on and so on. It didn’t always work out – sometimes I had to balance things a little bit and just use my judgement, but for the most part I tried to have these disciplinary groups. Which is why the size sometimes varied. So that, maybe I only had a few business students one semester and so that group might be smaller and the natural sciences group might be larger. It didn’t really matter because they’re not working on a project, it’s not a group project, it’s a discussion group, so the size was not so important. There could be variety and have it work out just fine for the group.

The other consideration with size is that I wanted it to be large enough so that if a student disappeared or dropped the course that it wouldn’t affect the overall dynamic of the discussion group -so it was large enough to absorb a student or two leaving.

Finally, for logistics: there’s lots of ways to set them up. I mean, in Blackboard you can have students self-enroll in groups. Because I wanted to manage the size and makeup of the groups I decided that I would do that legwork of setting them up. The way I did was I just had students fill out a little survey – I actually used Google forms, but there are surveys in Blackboard you could use as well – and I just collected some information about what their discipline was, thinkgs they were interested in researching and I used that to create the groups. SO there was a little bit of a logistical management there and some effort on my part to set up the groups, but because they are then together for the rest of the semester I wasn’t a bit headache or anything. I just took a few minutes on my part.

Once you have the learning groups set, you need to think through exactly how you’ll use them for the semester. What will students be doing in the learning communities? What guidance do you need to give? And how will they be evaluated? In my case, again these were more discussion groups, so the way I set it up was that in a discussion group…actually, I gave the teams names, so I color-coded them: we had the red team, the orange team, the blue team, and so on. And in the discussion boards in Blackboard, then, I had a thread going for each group, and students would respond to the thread that was associated with their group. Again, these were discussion-based and, sort of, peer review based groups – and some group work as well – and so students were evaluated both on their own responses to a particular discussion board as well as the feedback that they gave their partners. And I would give guidance to students on how to give good feedback and the kinds of things I wanted them to give feedback based on. So thinking through how to do that and making sure students are really clear about the expectations and the criteria for evaluation, I think, is really important in the success of any activity you’re going to do in class, and that goes for learning communities as well.

I was really impressed with the results of using the learning communities: it went really well. And it had some effects that I didn’t even really anticipate. For example, the quality of discussion boards improved dramatically. I found that student were more invested in their groups, and so they gave better feedback and they gave better initial posts as well because they were invested in their group and they wanted to have a discussion with their group members. And so rather than feeling sort of lost in the big class, students really had quality discussions. And they also didn't have to scroll through quite so many discussion boards to give a good response, right, to give good feedback. They had a much more manageable list of discussion board responses to look through themselves when they were responding. So overall the quality both of the initial responses and of the peer feedback really improved dramatically, I found.

There was also an increased sense of community in the class: students felt like they really belonged, especially in that first, you know, COVID semester when many students were reluctant online learners. They specifically mentioned that they felt like they were still part of a class and that even though it was an asynchronous class and we've never met in person except for some conferences, the students still felt even though they weren't seeing each other face to face they felt this increase sense of community. And they even ended up moving beyond the classroom: so many of the groups shared contact information, some of them set up group chats or GroupMe’s or other, you know, using other technologies for keeping in touch and they worked together on giving each other feedback even outside of what I required in class. I thought that was fantastic and I encouraged them to do that as well.

I have just some quotes here from my student evaluations of what students mentioned. I didn't even ask them to respond to the learning community, this was sort of self, you know, self-directed here, that they called out the learning community as being really impactful in a lot of cases. So, you can see here some of their feedback and how they felt like it was more interactive and they felt more engaged with the course because of, specifically because of the learning communities. So you can see the second comment there, the learning communities within this course engaged me with my classmates in a way that improved their work, they felt like. They liked having the learning communities to ask questions to people and get to know people with similar degree plans and similar disciplines. And they felt like it was helpful because I was, they felt like they were actually in class like I was saying before and they were able to interact with their peers, even in this asynchronous, fully online course.

So, with any new pedagogy there are of course pitfalls to watch out for. As I mentioned, you know, students disappearing or dropping the class might be one, so just thinking through how to deal with those kinds of issues. Some students felt like their group, you know, maybe they didn't get as good feedback as they would have liked from some group members, so varying who's giving feedback to whom, encouraging students not to always respond to the same students but having some variety there is one way to avoid that. But, you know, the more you kind of do a structure like this, the better you are able to avoid any sorts of pitfalls.

If you have any questions or comments about learning communities, I would be happy to touch base with you. There's my email address and thanks for listening to this recording it's a real pleasure to talk about it.