Mentoring a Learning Community: 
A Student Research Empowerment Program for Adult Education Graduate Students

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Introduction

A learning community is a group of learners who share similar or common academic goals and attitudes, who meet regularly to collaborate on coursework or projects. Researchers have noted that a learning community can provide a dynamic, multilayered, and nested learning environment for students, especially doctoral students (McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb & Lonka, 2012). Getting doctoral students involved is a key factor for their professional development which could motivate them to develop new ideas and scientific knowledge (Pyhältö & Keskinen, 2012). Their involvement with a scholarly learning community may also contribute to their doctoral experience and educational outcomes, such as degree completion, time-to-candidacy, employment after graduation (Gardner, 2008, 2010; Lovitts, 2005; Pyhältö, Stubb, & Lonka, 2009; Stubb, Pyhältö, & Lonka, 2010; Wulff & Nerad, 2006).

Other outcomes of involvement were divided into three categories: networking, connecting the classroom to the community, and professional development (Gardner & Barners, 2007). Gardner and Barners (2007) noted that the doctoral students involved in the learning community indicated that this involvement had a positive influence on their ability to network and helped them expand their existing networks. These doctoral students saw a clear connection between what they were learning about at their universities and the larger academic community. Finally, these students considered the involvement of the learning community was a direct preparation for their future careers, providing them with skills, connections, and better understandings of the expectations of their future careers.

Mentoring relationships between the students and the faculty is the foundation of establishing a learning community. The experts (i.e., faculty) would help the novices (i.e., students) succeed in competing pressures and expectations (Roberson et al., 1997), they also provide valuable role models for novices and enhance their learning outcomes (Badiali & Titus, 2010; Gillespie & Israetel, 2008). The novices in return would become experts and then provide peer support, guidance, and leadership, while experts revert to novices as they learn innovative skills and gain new experience through this reciprocal relationship (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). It is shown that the mentorship between faculty and graduate students would assist these two groups be successful in the academe (Boyle & Boice, 1998).

With various benefits, this paper introduces a learning community established by graduate students and guided by faculty in an adult education program at a southeastern research institution. Based on a learning community model, this paper addresses the goals, resources, activities, and students’ achievements and future development of this learning community. This paper also describes how this learning community assists the professional development of both the graduate students and the faculty mentors. Finally, it is expected that this paper will share ideas with professionals in other adult education programs who desire to help their students prepare for career and professoriate roles.
Learning Community Model

Smith and colleagues (2004) identified a learning community model, which consisted of five core practices: community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflective assessment.

Community

“Community is developed through a sense of inclusion” (Romsdahl & Hill, 2012, p. 724), and graduate students often consider the learning community as an acculturation process of adjusting to the requirements of graduate school (Romsdahl & Hill, 2012).

Diversity

Diversity refers but is not limited to the different teaching and learning styles, a supportive environment, university-wide consideration and commitments to equity, opportunities, and evaluation of success for traditionally underrepresented groups (Smith et al., 2004). Smith and colleagues (2004) also noted that “students are highly variable individuals and that…successful learning environments respect and build on this individuality” (p. 106).

Integration

Integration brings diverse concepts together in order to provide a more complete understanding of a topic (Romsdahl & Hill, 2012). Students’ personal learning process is usually developed by gaining meaningful knowledge through this process (Smith et al., 2004).

Active Learning

Active learning is a process of “taking in experiences, attaching new knowledge to what one already knows, and making the remaking one’s understanding of the world” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 117), and this process brings other components of the learning community together.

Reflective Assessment

During this process, students are often required to engage in self-reflection regarding their research such as working through new ideas that may challenge previous ideas, and how to apply their knowledge into the real world (Smith et al., 2004).

The Adult Education Student Research Empowerment Program

Based on Smith and colleagues’ (2004) learning community model, a learning community was initiated by graduate students in an adult education program at a southeastern research university in 2016. This learning community was named the Adult Education Student Research Empowerment Program (SREP), and it was guided by faculty members in this adult education program.

The aim of the SREP is to prepare graduate students, especially doctoral students in this adult education program to become competitive scholars. Additionally, the SREP intends to assist graduate students to obtain professional skills including critical thinking, collaborative skills, peer-reviewed manuscript writing, and manuscript reviewing. Finally, the SREP is expected to assist graduate students to publish high quality peer-reviewed manuscripts. The core practices of the Learning Community Model were applied in the SREP (Smith et al., 2004) (see Table 1). Firstly, the SREP aims to assist adult graduate students to share and develop research ideas, and/or to seek potential co-authors in order to conduct research projects. The SREP hold regular meetings
once every month every semester through a combination of both face-to-face and distance formats. Various topics are provided during the regular meeting. For example, the first meeting was an introduction of the SREP, including the goals and missions. Information of call for journals, conferences, and book chapters were also discussed and shared. The theme for the second regular meeting is “How to take notes: Ways of reading articles and building literature review.” The meeting is also recorded for those who are not able to attend the meeting. For resources, this learning community provides information such as calls for journals, conferences, and book chapters.

Table 1
Learning Community Core Practices for the SREP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Community Core Practice</th>
<th>Collaborative strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Regular meeting – topics of every meeting are collected by both organizers, faculty, and students. Guest speakers are invited based on different topics. Individual group meeting – students are required to meet individually to discuss their research projects. Memo for every individual meeting is a must.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Research interest list – students have opportunities to seek potential co-authors based on the list of all members’ research interests and previous research experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Peer supporting – students receive assistance regarding developing their original research ideas, suggestions of writing proposals and/or manuscripts. Previous samples and templates are also provided.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active Learning</td>
<td>Regular meeting topics – students are encouraged to share their expectations of topic of every regular meeting. They are also encouraged to share their experience towards a specific topic, and may lead the seminar discussions. Research products – This learning community helps students make their class projects into conference posters, journal manuscripts, and to further help them realize the value of their work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflective Assessment</td>
<td>Improvement survey – Students’ expectations and suggestions of each assistance (e.g., regular meeting, individual group meeting, peer-reviewing process) are collected in order to improve the development of this learning community. Each participant is a teacher, learner, researcher, mentee, and mentor.</td>
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Specifically, information such as acceptance rate, review period, submission deadline, and the link for submitting is shared and collected. Additionally, the SREP asks its members to identify at
least 3 of their research interests and then a list is compiled for members and faculty members. Using this research interest list, it is then more convenient for students to be able to identify faculty members or colleagues for advice or to serve as a potential co-author(s).

Additionally, the SREP aims to help students obtain various skills, including critical thinking, collaborative skills, manuscript writing, and manuscript peer-reviewing. Moreover, this learning community aims to assist students in publishing high quality peer-reviewed articles and prepares them for future researcher roles. Therefore, by taking advantage of the opportunities to look for potential co-authors, students could form different research groups based on one or more research ideas. They are required to meet with their group members at least one time per week, and a follow-up meeting summary is requested. Students are also asked to report their research progress during regular meetings in order to ensure each research group is on track or identifies needed resources. For the first-time writers, the SREP assigns experienced members to guide those students to write proposals for conferences, including developing the original ideas, providing previous proposal samples and templates, finalizing the proposals, and peer reviewing their proposals.

In order to increase students’ critical thinking and academic experience, this learning community offers peer-reviewing opportunities. Participants are encouraged to apply to become peer-reviewers. However, applicants are evaluated based on several criteria in order to become peer-reviewers. Criteria includes previous peer-reviewing experience, manuscript writing experience, and publication records. The more professional experience they have, the higher chance they will be invited as peer-reviewers. Peer-reviewers will be assigned to double-blind review members’ proposals or manuscripts, and provide peer suggestions within a limit time (usually 1 weeks for conference proposals and 2 weeks for manuscripts). Finally, the SREP provides suggestions to participants regarding which conferences or journals that fit best for their proposals or manuscripts.

Faculty members are involved in this learning community. Professors from this adult education program are invited to serve as academic advisors to provide suggestions about students’ research ideas based on their own research areas. Each individual research group is required to invite one professor whose research area matches their research project as their advisor. Appointments are made between the professor and the research group. Resources such as information about presenting and writing skills are often shared between faculty and students, as well as between students. A resource sharing platform is being established, which would build a rich information environment for this learning community.
Achievements and Future Development

Through the help of this learning community, graduate students have successfully submitted proposals and their research projects have been accepted. They have presented and will present at various local and national conferences including American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), Eastern Educational Research Association (EERA), and Global Conference on Education and Research (GLOCER). Their research topics vary across different areas such as adult education, community learning, English as a second language speaker, educational technology, higher education policy, and international student study. One research group also published a peer-reviewed conference paper focused on international student adaptation. Members of this learning community have actively proposed various topics of the regular meeting, such as to introduce conference presenting skills and to hold a mock conference presentation. Additionally, some students are interested and enthusiastic about leading seminar discussions. Several students also shared positive feedback of the SREP, and expressed their interest and passion in continuing to attend and maintain membership in this learning community.

Plans are underway for future developments. First, more members of this learning community will be encouraged to register as a special topic speaker for future regular meetings. For example, one doctoral student was invited as the speaker for the next SREP regular meeting, and she will introduce her methods and experience of organizing studies and building literature reviews. Organizers will also encourage students to nominate any students as guest speakers about a specific topic. In this way, not only student’s presentation skills will be enhanced; however, mentorship relationships between students can be established as well. Second, the SREP is planning to hold an annual student research symposium for members of this learning community to present their research projects. Adult education faculty and staff will be invited as presentation reviewers and
judges. Presenters may be awarded based on the quality and significance of their research projects, as well as their oral communication skills. Additionally, the SREP will apply for potential funding through universities or research foundations. Members of this learning community will have opportunities to apply for this research funding in order to conduct their studies or to attend conferences. Their proposals will be assessed by both student and faculty reviewers. A reviewer’s form with specific criteria is under development. Research projects obtaining the highest scores will be awarded research funding.

Finally, in order to build a better learning community, students feedback will be collected through pre-and post-surveys, and their opinions toward the SREP will be gathered through face-to-face interviews and/or focus groups. A series of scientific studies will be conducted as the foundation to support the development of the SERP. It is expected that this learning community will continue bringing benefits to both the adult education graduate students and faculty, as well as preparing those students to become professional before they enter the academic job market.

References


