Influencing Faculty Willingness to Participate in Learning Communities

Clare M. Gross, Robert Whitbred, Paul Skalski and Yung-I Liu

Abstract

Learning communities are an effective strategy for improving student outcomes, yet their expansion has been slowed by limited instructor participation. To better understand factors influencing instructor participation, we test hypotheses grounded in the Theory of Reasoned Action using data collected from a survey of university instructors. Consistent with the theory, instructors who positively evaluate the importance of learning community outcomes, who perceive their immediate colleagues support participation in learning communities, and who are concerned with their colleagues' beliefs are more likely to intend to participate in learning communities. We discuss how these results inform efforts to recruit future faculty participation.

Factors Influencing Willingness to Participate in Learning Communities

Learning communities are an innovative approach to higher education where cohorts of students engage in completing real world problems, which allows them to form applicable skills that build their professional qualifications prior to graduation. Universities have developed different learning community formats, appropriate for the needs of particular student populations, such as freshmen and academically at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Janusik and Wolvin (2007) reported that, according to a 2004 national survey of college seniors, 24% had participated in learning communities at some point from 2002-2004. Learning communities have yielded positive results, including better GPAs and retention rates among participants (Roccini, 2011; Kraska, 2008).

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One barrier to the wider diffusion of learning communities is securing the involvement of instructors. This is a challenge to university administrators of all types that has not been informed by the extant literature. Previous research has focused on factors motivating students to join such programs, along with resultant benefits; little is known about how university instructors perceive learning communities or how to best persuade them to participate.

In this study, we apply the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to better understand the effect of instructors' attitudes and the beliefs of others on intentions to participate in learning communities. Specifically, we first review the literature on learning communities and introduce the TRA, followed by hypotheses and research questions suggested by the theory. Next, we describe a survey given to university instructors. Subsequently, we present the results of analyses that test our hypotheses and examine our research questions. We conclude by discussing the implications of these results for both administrators and others interested in learning communities.

History, Characteristics, Benefits, and Challenges of Learning Communities

Alexander Meiklejohn formed one of the earliest learning communities, called the University of Wisconsin Experimental College, at the University of Wisconsin in 1927 (Frost, Storm, Downey, Schultz, & Holland, 2010). Meiklejohn believed that higher education should be more applicable to students' lives and emphasize both theory-practice integration and student-faculty collaboration (Kraska, 1998). Although the program ended in 1931, many of the same principles emphasized by Meiklejohn have been incorporated into subsequent learning communities, and they have since become widespread across American colleges and universities (Smith 2010; Janusik & Wolvin, 2007; Waldron & Yungbluth, 2007).

Learning communities include certain characteristics (Rocconi, 2011). First, they are interdisciplinary in nature. Instead of focusing on each class as a separate entity, students in learning communities apply their knowledge in a variety of settings in order to solve an overarching problem, or achieve a common goal (Roccini, 2011). Second, learning communities emphasize a sense of community. Students take many of the same classes as a cohort (Frost et al., 2010), which both allows more frequently peer to peer interaction and emphasizes effective group collaboration (Heaney & Fischer, 2011). Third, the faculty-student relationship in learning communities encourages direct collaboration on applied projects (Lei et al., 2011). This in turn facilitates the building of strong ties among the students and faculty members and helps students form a professional network to assist them over the duration of their college careers (Waldron & Yungbluth, 2007).

In additional to the immediate benefits of available groups for social and academic support, learning communities have yielded other positive results. First, student participants experience learning outside of the traditional academic setting in a way that is more realistic to what they will experience as a professional, thus enabling students to enter the workforce with greater leadership skills (Dodge & Kendall, 2004). Second, students who emerge from learning communities report having an increased confidence in their verbal, written, computer, and mathematical skills (Wilcox & del Mas, 1997), along with having increased opportunities to interact with faculty and fellow students in a way that helps them complete coursework (Rocconi, 2011). Finally, learning communities have been so successful in improving grades and retention rates for new or academically at risk students that some colleges and universities have begun adopting them for graduate education (Kraska, 2008).

Despite the evidence of substantial benefits to students who participate in learning communities, universities continue to face challenges in establishing and maintaining these programs. Several factors have been found to hinder their development. First, the cross-disciplinary nature of learning communities makes them difficult to design and makes identifying interested faculty challenging as well (Janusik & Wolvin, 2007). Second, those faculty members who are involved in learning communities often need to develop new curriculum while working alongside instructors from other departments, which requires a great deal of time and cooperation. Third, learning communities are organized so that class sizes are small, with universities often having fewer than 100 students annually enrolled in all programs (Brzovic & Matz, 2009; Janusik & Wolvin, 2007; Waldron & Yungbluth, 2007). Some question whether the resources needed for such programs are justified by the relatively small number of students supported.

These challenges illustrate the crucial role of enthusiastic instructor participation to the success of learning communities (Janusik & Wolvin, 2007), yet the literature lacks basic information about instructor perceptions of learning communities (Waldron & Yungbluth, 2007). Our goal for this study, therefore, is to help inform strategic recruitment efforts by better understanding factors that influence instructors' likelihood to participate in learning communities We do this by applying the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA).

Theoretical Foundation: The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) provides a framework for understanding how the behavior of an individual can be predicted based on their behavioral intention (Elwood, Carter & Greene, 2003; Nabi & Hornik, 2002; Slater & Kelly, 2002; Weber, Martin & Corrigan, 2006). TRA conceptualizes how an individual decides to engage

in a behavior in four stages (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2005). *Stage one* takes into account both an individual's own beliefs about the behavior and what he/she perceives to be others' beliefs about the behavior. Own beliefs include both beliefs about the behavior and beliefs about what the outcomes will be if he/she does the behavior. Perceptions of others' beliefs include both beliefs about what others consider appropriate/normative behavior and the focal individual's level of motivation to comply with these normative beliefs.

In *stage two,* the individual's beliefs (about the behavior and behavioral outcomes) lead to his/her attitudes toward the behavior. Concurrently, perceptions of others (about what they consider normative and motivation to comply) lead to his/her perceptions of the subjective norm about the behavior. In *stage three* the attitudes and subjective norms from stage two lead to his or her intentions to engage in the behavior. In *stage four*, TRA suggests that individuals' actual performance of a behavior can be predicted based on their intentions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2005).

TRA has been applied to accurately predict the performance of various behaviors, based on the conceptual elements described in the model (Elwood, Greene & Carter, 2003; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2005; Weber, Martin & Corrigan, 2006; Nabi & Hornik, 2002; Reichert, Kim & Fosu, 2007; Slater & Kelly, 2002), including how heavy television viewing affects persons' attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors (Nabi & Sullivan, 2001), how to increase safe sex practices in bathhouses (Elwood, Carter & Greene, 2003), and how to decrease marijuana use (Slater & Kelly, 2002).

Applying the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to Faculty and Learning Communities

We apply TRA to increase understanding of factors influencing faculty member intentions to participate in learning communities. Figure 1 illustrates our application by specifying how our hypotheses map onto the conceptual elements of TRA in this context. Note that our hypotheses correspond to the four parts of stage one. The *own beliefs* components of stage one predicts that an individual with positively beliefs about a behavior and who positively evaluate the likely outcomes of the behavior will be more likely to intend to engage in the behavior. Thus, we predict:

H1: Instructors who believe learning communities are a positive method of education will be more likely to intend to participate in them.

H2: Instructors who evaluate the outcomes of learning communities as positive will be more likely to intend to participate in them.

The *perceptions of others' beliefs* component of stage one predicts that an individual who feels others believe the behavior to be appropriate/

normative will be more likely to engage in the behavior. In this application, we have identified two 'others' whose opinions will likely influence instructors: their colleagues and their department chair. Instructors interact with both colleagues and the chair on a regular basis, and both provide feedback on performance. Colleagues often are sounding boards who offer advice on priorities for service efforts and provide informal feedback. While a department chair may also provide informal feedback, he/she is also directly responsible for formal evaluations. Thus, we propose:

H3: Instructors who perceive their immediate colleagues and chair think they should contribute to learning communities will be more likely to intend to participate in them.

In addition to this possible affect, TRA argues that an individual's motivation to comply with the beliefs of others will influence their intent to behave. Generally speaking, TRA predicts those who are concerned about the beliefs of others will be more likely to behave accordingly. Thus, we advance the following hypotheses concerning normative beliefs:

H4: Instructors who are concerned about their immediate colleagues' and chair's beliefs about their participation in learning communities will be more likely to intend to participate in them.

Since there may be factors outside of our model that influence instructors' willingness to participate in learning communities, we also asked the following research questions:

RQ 1: What factors inhibit instructor participation in learning communities?

RQ 2: Why do instructors choose to not participate in learning communities?

RQ 3: How can a university increase instructor participation in learning communities?

Methods

Sample and Procedures

We developed a survey that we administered to instructors at a Midwestern university with approximately 15,000 students. The university had implemented a learning community strategy for about five years prior to this data collection with results similar to those at other universities: generally successful student outcomes but struggles with recruiting instructors. Thus, learning communities existed on campus, but relatively few were involved. We began the survey by defining learning communities for respondents.

Since university instructors are often a difficult population from which to elicit participation, we used a variety of approaches to accommodate

respondent preference. Participants were recruited with a variety of strategies. In some cases, respondents were met in person and given a paper copy of the survey to complete and return via campus mail. In other cases, respondents completed an online version. In a few instances, respondents preferred to embed their answers into an email. In all cases, a research assistant removed all identifying information as soon as the completed survey was received.

The survey was administered to instructors over a six week period during a summer session and completed by 100 faculty members, 80 of which completed the electronic version. Participants represented 32 different departments and all the colleges at the university. A total of 51% of participants were male; while 47% were female (2% did not give their gender). The most common academic status reported by respondents were Associate Professors (26%), followed by Part-Time Instructors (22%), Assistant Professors (19%), Professors (19%), Graduate Assistants (6%), Term Instructors (4%), and Unspecified (5%). Approximately 67% had obtained a Doctoral degree, 27% a Master's degree, and 6% a Bachelor's degree; 2% of respondents did not answer the question. In terms of time at the institution, 30% had been at the university less than three years, 14% 4 to 6 years, 10% 7 to 9 years, 13% 10 to 12 years, 5% from 13 to 15 years, with the rest reporting 16 years or more at the university. For age: 8% were 20 to 29, 20% were 30 to 39, 18% were 40 to 49, 33% were 40 to 59, 17% were 60 to 69, and 3% were 70 or older.

Instrumentation

Dependent variable. The dependent variable, instructors' intent to participate in learning communities, was measured by asking participants the following two 7-point Likert scale questions (where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree): "I intend to find out more information on how I can contribute to learning communities," and "I intend to instruct a learning community course in the future." Scores on these variables were averaged to give an indication of intent to participate in learning communities. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .80.

Independent variables. The independent variable for Hypothesis 1, belief that learning communities are a positive method of education, was measured with five 7-point semantic differentiation scale type questions (anchored by likely and unlikely). Specific items asked how likely participants felt participation in learning communities would lead to: (a) higher grades, (b) higher retention rates, (c) student engagement in real world projects, (d) students learning to complete real world projects, and (e) students developing relationships with professors. These items were averaged, and had a Cronbach's alpha of .74.

The independent variable for Hypothesis 2, evaluation of the outcomes of learning communities, was measured with five 7-point semantic differentiation scale type questions (anchored by good and bad). Specific

items asked for an evaluation of the following outcomes: (a) growing in my abilities as an instructor, (b) higher grades for students, (c) higher retention rates, (d) encouraging students to form relationships with instructors, and (e) teaching students how to complete real world projects. These items were averaged, and had a Cronbach's alpha of .70.

The independent variables for Hypothesis 3, concerning faculty belief about whether colleagues and chairs think they should contribute to learning communities, was measured by two 7-point Likert scales. These asked participants their level of agreement (where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree) with the following statements: my colleagues think I should contribute to learning communities and my department chair thinks I should contribute to learning communities. These items were averaged, and had a Cronbach's alpha of .75.

The independent variable for Hypothesis 4, concern with others' beliefs, was measured by two 7-point Likert scales. These asked participants their level of agreement (where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree) with the following statements: I care what my colleagues think in regards to learning communities and I care what my department chair thinks in regards to learning communities. These items were averaged, and had a Cronbach's alpha of .73.

In addition to the independent variable, we included length of time at the university as a control in our analysis.

Research questions. To answer our research questions, we asked participants the following open ended items: (a) what are the challenges to getting involved in learning communities?, (b) if you do not intend to instruct a learning community course, please state why, and (c) what could the university do to make it easier for you to participate in learning communities? The following thematic coding procedure was utilized to identify major concerns and issues which emerged. First, two graduate students independently coded the responses to each question, where initial codes were given and emerging thematic elements were identified. Second, the students met and reached consensus on major elements. Third, the students independently coded the data. Lastly, the students met, identified any area of disagreement, and resolved any discrepancies.

Analysis

To begin our analysis, we calculated descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables. To test hypotheses one through four, a multiple regression analyses was run where the *intent to participate in learning communities* dependent variable was regressed on the and the four independent variables along with the length of time control variable.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the dependent and independent variables. The correlations showed preliminary support for all hypotheses. Specifically, instructors who believe learning communities are a positive method of education (h1; $r = .24$, $p < .01$), who evaluate the outcomes of learning communities as positive (h2; $r = .20$, $p < .05$), who perceive their colleagues support participation in learning communities (h3, $r = .40$, $p < .01$), and, who are motivated to comply with their colleagues' beliefs (h4, $r = .42$, $p < .01$) are more likely to intend to participate in learning communities.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

M	*SD*	Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
4.00	1.24	1. LC Participation	-	.239**	.193*	.399**	.418**
5.04	.99	2. LC Positive		-	.018	.082	.199*
3.29	2.18	3. Value LC Outcomes			-	-.034	-.016
3.83	.93	4. Colleague Beliefs				-	.188*
4.10	1.36	5. Concern with Colleague Beliefs					-

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

Regression Model

Table 2 summarizes results of the regression model testing hypotheses. The overall model explained a significant amount of variance ($R^2 = .35$, $p < .01$). Regarding individual predictors, Hypothesis 1 predicted instructors who believe learning communities are a positive method of education would be more likely to intend to participate; contrary to

expectations, this was not supported. Hypothesis 2 predicted instructors who evaluate the outcomes of learning communities as positive will be more likely to intend to participate; this was supported ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis 3 predicted instructors who perceive their colleagues and chair support participation in learning communities will be more likely to intend to participate; this was supported ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 4 predicted instructors more motivated to comply with the beliefs of their colleagues and chair will be more likely to participate; this was supported ($\beta = .31$, $p < .01$).

Table 2

Regression Model

Independent Variables:	Dependent Variable: Likelihood of Participation in Learning Communities		
	B	*SE B*	*B*
Intercept	-.004	.747	-
LC Positive	.163	.111	.130
Value LC Outcomes	.124*	.049	.216*
Colleague Beliefs	.453**	.116	.342**
Concern with Colleague Beliefs	.277**	.083	.305**
Tenure (Control Variable)	-.032	.034	-.083

Notes: $R^2 = .353$** (* $p < .05$, **$p < .01$)

Research Questions

Figure 3 illustrates the themes which emerged from our content analysis of the responses to the open ended questions. The first question focused on challenges to participation in learning communities. The most frequently mentioned response (by 53 participants) was a "lack of resources," which referred to the time commitment and logistical challenges involved with developing and servicing learning communities. Surprisingly, financial compensation was not mentioned here. Other challenges included concerns about the specifics of the program at this university, learning communities being a poor match to typical career goals, learning communities taking too much effort for the possible benefits, and simply not having enough

information about learning communities.

The second open-ended question asked instructors who were not intending to participate in a learning community why this was the case. "Resources" again emerged as the primary reason for not participating (by 53 participants), with most being concerned with the amount of time needed to effectively develop the programs. Other reasons included a lack of information about the program, doubts about the value of learning communities for students, and not enough rewards being given for participation.

The third open-ended question focused on things the university could do to increase participation. "Increasing Rewards" was the most frequent theme (by 44 participants). Here issues such as financial incentives and increased formal recognition as part of performance evaluations came to the fore. Two other issues include providing more information about the communities and increasing the logistical support available.

Taken together, these responses suggest that participants for the most part were not averse to the concept of learning communities, but felt they required too much time with very limited possibilities for personal benefit, and that more support would be helpful. There was a consistent concern that there was not enough awareness of the benefits of the program, and more effective internal marketing may help encourage participation. Not surprisingly, faculty also perceived the need for better recognition/ compensation for those who participate.

Discussion

Learning communities have emerged as an effective strategy for serving the needs of students, including specific populations such as freshmen and academically at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011), yet their implementation has been hindered by a lack of instructor participation. Previous research has examined the motivation of students to join learning communities (Janusik & Wolvin, 2007; Waldron & Yungbluth, 2007). However, if learning communities are to develop into a permanent form of higher education, their support has to be sustained by faculty involvement. Using a survey of university instructors, this study applied the Theory of Reason Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, 2005) to increase our understanding of how attitudes and perceptions of subjective norms facilitate and inhibit participation in learning communities.

Concerning attitudes, our results show that instructors who perceive learning communities as a positive method of education were no more likely to intend to participate. A likely reason for this finding is a constriction of variance issue in the analysis. Inspection of Table 1 shows the mean for this measure was much higher than that for the other measures (5.04) with a small standard deviation of .99. It appears most of our respondents evaluate learning communities as positive. Thus, we caution against reading too much

into this result.

Results supported hypothesis two, which predicted that instructors who valued the outcomes of learning communities would be more likely to participate. The results in Table 1 are also illustrative of this result. Specifically, the mean for this measure was much lower (3.29) with a much higher standard deviation (2.12), suggesting there is much disagreement amongst instructors as to the value of these outcomes. Items included in the scale measuring this variable included faculty evaluating the importance of "higher grades for students," and "teaching students how to complete real world projects." It is understandable that some instructors may not perceive these outcomes as being inherently critical in and of themselves to their role in the educational process, and may in fact feel that higher education should not overemphasize applied projects at the expense of teaching critical and creative thinking. Others may interpret higher grades as a recipe for grade inflation. Future research should investigate these issues in much greater detail than the first step we provide here.

Our results clearly demonstrate the importance of a social environment that is supportive of learning community initiatives. Instructors who perceived their colleagues and chair felt they should participate in learning communities were more likely to intend to participate. This suggests they had an awareness of such attitudes, and were responsive to them. Not surprisingly, we found similar results for those who were motivated to comply with the beliefs of their colleagues and chair.

Responses to our open ended questions provide further insights into these findings. Specifically, financial concerns do not appear to be an overriding factor in encouraging instructor participation. While more financial incentives would likely be helpful in getting faculty to participate, the primary concern is with the logistically intensive nature of these initiatives. While improving student outcomes will be valued by instructors, many may believe participation in learning communities is not valued or rewarded adequately enough to warrant the effort. This suggests revenue neutral strategies may be possible for recruitment efforts. For instance, providing a formal letter of support that states a faculty member's participation in a learning community meets his/her service obligations for the year may be motivating for those who wish to participate but lack the time.

A related issue that must be managed by each university is where learning communities fit within the mission of the university. Can one reasonably expect tenure track faculty at research institutions to consider participation in learning communities? Should participation in a learning community be considered teaching, service, or both? How do experienced instructors value learning communities (if at all)? For instance, our results showed longer tenured faculty to be less likely to participate in learning communities. To the extent this reflects a generally negative attitude towards the initiatives; untenured faculty may participate at their peril. This only

emphasizes the need for formal support of these initiatives. Additionally, is it reasonable for universities to expect non-tenure track instructors already teaching heavy loads to pursue these types of initiatives independent of appropriate compensation?

The primary strength and limitation of this study was its sample. University instructors are a notoriously difficult group to elicit participation from. While this makes these results somewhat unique, it also accounts in large part for the somewhat small sample size of 100. A second limitation is that our participants are from one institution. While this allowed greater understanding of our results, caution should be exercised when generalizing to other colleges and universities. A third limitation is that actual behavior was not measured. Although this is consistent with other studies using TRA, a central tenet of the theory is that behavioral intention predicts behavior; therefore, future research should examine actual behavior of faculty members to uncover specific reasons for their participation in such programs (or lack thereof).

Future research should also examine if the results found from this research are similar at other colleges and institutions. In particular, examining a larger sample size would be useful. Research on higher education should continue to examine how faculty members perceive the benefits and challenges of instructing a learning community course. This would help shed insight into how faculty members weigh the benefits to students who participate versus their costs for participation. Providing a theoretical understanding of faculty perceptions and behaviors surrounding learning communities can be used by administrators to help develop such programs.

The study applied the Theory of Reasoned Action to understand how instructors form attitudes and behavioral intentions towards learning communities. The results coincided with previous research on the TRA, providing additional support for how attitudinal beliefs and subjective norms affect behavioral intentions. The study also uncovered concerns that instructors face when deciding if they should participate in learning communities. Examining the perceptions of instructors illuminates an area that has not previously been a topic of focus within literature on learning communities. Overall, the results of this study add to the body of literature supporting the theoretical predictions of the TRA, while at the same time have applied value for communication administrators and others who facilitate learning communities at real-world colleges and universities.

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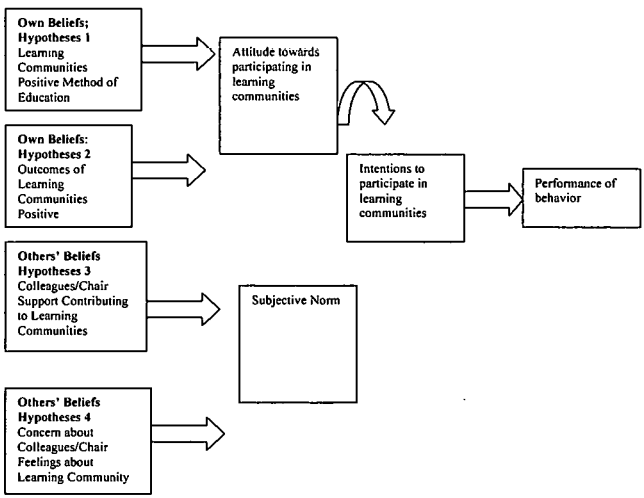
Appendix

Figure 1

Model of the Theory of Reasoned Action and Faculty Intentions towards Learning Communities



This figure was adapted from Perloff, R. M. (2010). *The dynamics of persuasion: Communication and attitudes in the 21st century.* New York NY: Routledge.

Figure 2

Themes from Open Ended Questions