

ACM-Teagle Collegium on Student Learning
Final Conference
Holly Swyers, Lake Forest College
"The Pod" collaboration

Summary: At Lake Forest College, we are in the midst of revisiting First Year Studies and are looking at ways to improve students' transitions to college and to engage them in the liberal arts mission of the college. At the initial Teagle-sponsored workshop that led to the Collegium, three faculty members learned about recent scholarship on meta-cognition, aka thinking about how one learns. We could see potential value in having first year students become more aware of their own learning strategies and exposing them to new strategies. We also were struck by research that shows that students have difficulty seeing the interconnectedness of different facets of college life (academics, athletics, residence living, etc). With these issues in mind, we created a "pod" of first studies classes, described below under "context." We hoped to investigate the following questions: To what extent can meta-cognition serve as a shared frame for engaging students across disciplines and college roles? How does close collaboration between faculty members and other college professionals affect the experience of first year students?

Context. Our questions were explored in three first year studies seminars, affecting a total of 46 students. First year studies at Lake Forest College is intended as a gateway class for all students to develop writing skills, form connections with classmates and with the college as a whole, and have regular contact with their first year advisors (the professors who teach each seminar also advise the students in that seminar). In practice, each seminar operated in relative isolation, with each faculty member left to his/her own devices to address various challenges that confronted members of his/her class. We established a learning community (a "pod") that would share a common idea, create a network of known campus professionals for students within the pod, and establish a pattern of collaboration and shared expertise among all members of the community.

The pod included a large number of campus personnel: the three faculty members teaching the included classes, an additional faculty member as a coordinator, a coach, a residence life professional, a public safety officer, a student affairs professional, and a learning support specialist. The general idea was that each member of the pod would be specifically introduced to the students in the pod in their professional capacity as a "point person" for different parts of the students' campus experience. Members of the pod met regularly and agreed on a shared language around meta-cognition to engage with students. Students were able to see the various faculty and campus professionals engaging with one another regularly and were encouraged to see how ways of thinking could translate between different disciplines and different aspects of college life. Whole pod meetings (including students and professionals) were held six times and timed to address different stress points in the semester.

Teaching Practice: The shared language for all our activities was drawn from a document called "Learning to Learn" created by Karl Wirth and Dexter Perkins. Everyone in the pod (students and professionals) read this document, and classes used a variety of meta-cognitive strategies Dr. Wirth presented at Teagle meetings. Many of these strategies boiled down to providing students a framework for reflecting on their work and their habits, allowing them to recognize patterns that were successful - or not - for them. Students learned to talk about the

similarities between their courses and to ask what counts as evidence and argument in different scenarios. The pod concluded with a symposium (called "the podosium") in which each class did a collaborative presentation about their learning over the semester. This capstone experience provided the "a-ha" moment for many students, and the built in audience of the pod gave the event stakes without making it intimidating.

Within the course of the semester, the collaboration between teaching faculty and college professionals created new networks and opportunities for working with students that will have lasting effects. The idea that any participant, whether a coach, a residence life professional, a learning specialist, a public safety officer or a professor, shared a goal of helping students succeed was kept explicitly at the center of all activities. This helped produce new habits of reaching out to other departments and professionals during the course of the semester, a different kind of targeted intervention for some students, and an apparent confidence among students in terms of navigating between different aspects of college life.

Conclusions and Evidence. In terms of student learning or understanding, the measures available tend to be suggestive rather than definitive. What emerged via interviews and surveys is that students felt better informed about how to navigate the college from an earlier point in the semester. They were enthusiastic about the social opportunities presented by the pod.

Academically, they cited two pod-specific events that were significant:

a) a pod meeting held around warning grade time, where they had a chance to hear about other students' experience with warning grades and talk to one another about their difficulties in college in the first six weeks. Students who mentioned this meeting commented on how it helped them realize that others were experiencing similar problems.

b) the "podosium," an end-of-semester gathering where students had an opportunity to present what they had learned over the course of the semester to other pod classes and visiting students from a high school. For many students, this event was a source of pride, and they were pleased to see for themselves how far they had come and what they had learned.

Perhaps more significant, though, was the experience of the campus professionals involved in the pod. While the pod did create more work in the form of meetings and syllabus revision, most participants cited the new relationships formed with other parts of the campus community. In addition, the need to meet created space for conversations that normally don't get to happen during the course of the semester, ranging from dealing with specific students to general pedagogical issues.

Over the long term, some early signs of pod effectiveness has been the willingness of students to approach pod professionals and see them as part of the students' web of resources. This ranged from students choosing classes because they were taught by other pod members to earlier visits to learning support services due to pod involvement.

Implications. On one level, this experiment reveals nothing new: voluntary collaboration helps buoy professionals and creates a broader range of experience and support for students. The real break-through here is the value of a shared vocabulary for talking about what is happening in student learning. The meta-cognition frame proved adaptable by all members of the pod, so students would hear the same ideas in the classroom, in the dorm, in study sessions and on the

playing field. Most members found the principles very similar to ideas they already had in practice, so the real value was in helping students see that the overriding premise of all their college activities (except keggers, which provided lessons the next morning...) was consistent.

Looking ahead. I really like the collaboration model and the cross-disciplinary, cross-professional links. That said, such collaboration won't work if it is forced. The existence of the model within my institution makes it available to groups that want to work together, and we have documented our process and created materials that our learning and teaching center can use to help groups re-create the experiment. In the immediate future, I think we are best served by different groups using the pod model to test its potential and limits.

Bibliography.

To use in class:

Wirth, Karl and Dexter Perkins. 2009. Learning to Learn. Available from:
<http://www.macalester.edu/geology/wirth/CourseMaterials.html>

Ideas on techniques and strategies:

Wirth, Karl and Dexter Perkins. 2005. Knowledge Surveys: An Indispensable Course Design and Assessment Tool. *Innovations in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (conference proceedings). Available from
www.macalester.edu/geology/wirth/WirthPerkinsKS.pdf

Useful for thinking about the relationship of the whole college experience to the liberal arts curriculum:

King, Patricia and JoNes VanHecke. 2006. Using Skill Theory to Recognize How Students Build and Rebuild Understanding. *About Campus*. March/April: 12-16.

King, Patricia et al. 2007. Liberal Arts Student Learning Outcomes: An Integrated Approach. *About Campus*. September/October: 2-9.

Recommended with ambivalence:

Nathan, Rebekah. 2006. *My Freshman Year*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
I did not find Nathan's text particularly revelatory except inasmuch as it drove home how removed from undergraduates a professor can be at a large university. However, her observations regarding the splintering effects of the dizzying array of campus activities are worth thinking about, and the book takes all of an afternoon to read.

POD Quick Review

Pod premises and goals

The pod grew out of three basic premises:

1. The plethora of choices available to current college students makes it harder for them to find time to create a shared community (cf. Rebecca Nathan 2004)
2. The ability to synthesize curricular, co-curricular and non-academic aspects of life is developing later for college students and is a key component in their ability to become self-motivated and self-aware learners (cf. Patricia King 2008)
3. Metacognition (learning how to learn), when explicitly taught to students, increases their ability to handle college material and to self-assess their abilities (cf. Wirth 2009)

Our goals for the pod were to create an environment that

1. Gave students a group of potential student-student connections larger than an FIYS class but smaller than the whole first year class.
2. Emphasized Lake Forest College as a community of learners, regardless of institutional role or disciplinary interest.
3. Enabled a conversation about learning and life that could both augment and transcend classes.
4. Produced a shared curricular experience between multiple classes that would not disrupt the content in any class.
5. Created support connections among and between the teaching faculty and other campus professionals
6. Respected the time of all parties involved and did not become burdensome to anyone.

Pod Personnel, Fall 2009

Holly Swyers (coordinator)

Elizabeth Fischer, Alexander Mawyer, Rachel Ragland (teaching faculty)

Joe Kinsella, Chris Waugh, Jenn Lindsay, Teryn Robinson, Caron Sutton (support professionals)

Quick guide for pod assembly & coordination

- 1) In the early-mid fall, three faculty members agree to work together and decide on a shared frame. Metacognition works very well because it is useful in every discipline and can be incorporated without sacrificing content. We suggest that the three classes span at least two divisions to maximize benefit to both faculty and students. We also note that this could be done with 2 or 4 classes, but think 3 is optimal.
- 2) Once faculty self-identify in a pod, they are assigned a coordinator. We suggest that in the short term, LTC is the place where coordinators are assigned and pod applications are processed (a little like teaching triangles). Once coordinators and pods are paired up, then organization duties fall to the coordinator. Please note we suggest that the coordinator NOT be drawn from the teaching faculty.
- 3) If the pod is to include a residential component, the coordinator should liaise with res life in late fall/early spring.
- 4) In spring and summer, faculty and coordinator find at least 2-3 support professionals to work with the pod. Our suggestion is that someone from athletics, res life, and

students affairs are on board. We also benefitted from having a learning support specialist and a public safety officer in our pod.

5) Also over spring and summer, coordinators and faculty should meet to figure out when the pod will get together, how that coordinates with what is happening in class, and how to encourage students to participate. See below for the kinds of things that might be considered.

6) During the semester, the pod meets 5-6 times. Teaching faculty would participate in the 3-4 of the meetings; support professionals and coordinator would take primary responsibility for these meetings. RAs could be used very effectively to augment pod programming in the residence halls (arranging movie nights, cheering sections for games, concert attendance, etc). This will be particularly effective in pods that are grouped in one or two residence halls.

August

- Chicago Day (everyone did their own trip then met in Millennium Park, where we ate lunch and remixed the groups to tell each other about what we did. Each class was accompanied by a non-teaching pod member, each lunch group was about 8 students).
- Get to know you session for non-teaching pod professionals + students (right before classes start or during first week)

September

- How to get the most out of ACE/Interact done with non-teaching pod professionals + students (we did this right before the second ACE session, which was the third weekend of classes).

October

- Warning grade/check in faculty plus non-teaching pod professionals and students (we brought in students who had recovered from warning grades and ones who had bombed classes where they didn't get warning grades to talk about their experience. We also had great success having students read letters they had written to themselves at the start of the semester and talking about how they were doing and what help they needed).

November (or late October)

- All pod members - guest speaker on the theme of the pod (we liked having the author of our shared reading come in; it was a good academic experience for the students. We did this over lunch).

December

- Podposium - all pod members. If there are multiple pods, it would be worth having this be an all day event for the community. It works as a nice capstone and goal for students, and it gives them valuable experience in sharing their work with an audience. Plus it makes a nice training ground for the spring symposium.

7) Optional, but worth doing: during the semester, faculty and pod professionals put in an appearance in all pod classes. For teaching faculty, this could be done under the auspices of a teaching triangle or just be used as an opportunity to see what's going on in other classes.