

Forging L.I.N.C.S. among Educators: The Role of International Service-Learning in Fostering a Community of Practice

By Maureen Porter

A Call for Community

What does it mean to be an educator in today's world? Can I depend on others to work together to achieve social justice? Do I dare share my whole self in my classes? Do I really belong in this community? These are the kinds of questions graduate students in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education ask as they stretch to earn their professional degrees in education. The answers they find in graduate school set the stage for the kinds of teachers, mentors, and leaders they will become.

As educators ourselves, we share part of the responsibility for helping them discover welcoming, energetic communities of practice. They need to find learning environments that challenge them to contribute as whole persons, to imagine themselves as valued professionals whose work truly matters, and to align their vocation with their values.

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This article is based on my own strategies to foster community among educators. As a new, young, female junior faculty member in the School of Education at this major research university, I have struggled to build a strong sense of community in my school. I have also encountered ambivalence about

openly expressing personal-professional-political concerns in the workplace. Further, I wanted to connect the theoretical discussions that we were enjoying in my classrooms with hands-on applications in challenging educational settings around the world. In an effort to address some of these issues, and to engage my students and colleagues in proactively creating a more nurturing professional environment, I initiated an international service-learning program that is integrated into our graduate course of study.

To these ends, my work with the international service-learning program exemplifies the kinds of engaged scholarship that is gaining recognition across the country. Boyer, in the pivotal *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professions* (1996), calls for a broader understanding of the range of significant scholarly work that includes the scholarship of integration, teaching, and application. As a higher education initiative specifically designed to foster leadership development, my service learning program responds to the landmark W. W. Kellogg Foundation report's charge to develop programs, "[T]o change and transform institutions so that they can more effectively enhance student learning and development, generate new knowledge, and serve the community, and . . . to empower students to become agents of positive social change in the larger society" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p.9). Further, composing this reflective critique and sharing it for iterative, collegial review with student and faculty colleagues meets several of the standards set out in Glassick, Taylor Huber & Maeroff (1996), another project of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, that reconsiders forms of engaged scholarship that are hallmarks of effective faculty leaders.

This article uses the theoretical framework of communities of practice as a means to understand the transformative potential of participation within a group of learner-educators. First, I will briefly introduce the international service-learning course sequence, and the sources of data used in this article. Then, I turn to relevant hallmarks of a community of practice. Finally, I illustrate how the international service-learning program offers several integrated dimensions of participation that engage participants, inspire them to imagine clearer futures in education and development, and challenge them to align their priorities and career aspirations with their principles.

The L.I.N.C.S. Program

The overarching goals of my international service-learning program or L.I.N.C.S. (Learning Integrated with Needed Construction and Service) are to offer a challenging set of service-learning experiences. LINC.S brings together faculty, staff, undergraduate and graduate students to participate in a meaningful, culturally sensitive service-learning project in education and international development. The two-semester sequence integrates five elements: (1) an ongoing Kaffeeklatsch interest group that casts a wide net among interested students and professionals; (2)

a seminar on the theory and practice of leadership in service-learning; (3) a field-based project in May, (4) follow-through reflective writing and arts-based projects, and (5) and numerous community-extension exercises. Together, these classroom and field-based activities offer increasingly complex opportunities for participation.

Several aspects of this multi-faceted program work together to build community among participants, and to push them to reconsider what it means to be an educator on the global stage. First, the variety of activities offers participants opportunities to give of fully of themselves in diverse modalities. The range of ways to serve are meaningful to people located differently within our community. Second, we try to offer LINC S every second year with the same non-governmental organization (NGO) partner in the Sacred Valley of Peru, namely Richard Webb of ProPeru. Thus, our cumulative series of projects helps establish sustainable, long-term commitments to our partners in a particular region, and offer cohorts the opportunity to see the longer-term impact of our building projects. Third, every member did some sort of community extension exercise at the end of the course sequence that helped inform and involve others with LINC S. These included such diverse projects as designing a school curriculum about Peru, establishing a pen pal program between kids here and there, presenting analyses of the LINC S program at professional conferences, hosting a fiesta for our institutional supporters, and helping to staff the university's new Global Service Center, for which LINC S is a cornerstone program.

A fourth element is particularly relevant to this article. LINC S is designed so that participants constantly engage in reflective practice. The situated and authentic nature of our programs spurs participants to critically assess their contributions and culpability in cross-cultural settings. They are asked to regularly submit reflective writing and arts-based projects throughout the course sequence. Members of the seminar helped design the pre-departure surveys, helped create and evaluate group-building exercises, conducted interviews on-site with community partners, wrote two sets of debriefing essays, and contributed to a communal set of ethnographic scrapbooks. Several of those who wished to take on meta-analytical roles were invited to contribute to the ongoing data collection, synthesis, and presentation process as paid graduate student assistants in the year following the course. Two of these joint endeavors have already been published (Porter and Rapoport, 2001; Porter and Monard, 2001). This article presents an analysis of those aspects of participation in LINC S that were significant in participants' development as educators.

Hallmarks of a Community Practice

LINC S is designed to offer the opportunity to do meaningful service-learning within the context of an intentional community of educators. Lave and Wenger (1991) define a community of practice as a, "set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping

communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Participants came to LINCS voluntarily in order to join others in learning about education and development, and putting service learning into practice. They do not give up membership in their teacher education degree programs, families, religious organizations, or other communities. But it is by becoming legitimate and contributing members of the social world of LINCS that they help to create a unique resource for themselves and for the wider world.

Lave and Wenger’s (1998) theoretical approach to communities of practice prioritizes the “learning curriculum” rather than the “teaching curriculum.” The former is not something that can be pre-designed or reified, but must emerge through participation; “a learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 93). While the seminar did have modules, and we did complete group exercises, much of what makes us a community is what transpired during and between these moments of formal instruction.

Service learning is a mode of teaching and learning that links classroom reflection with applied field experiences. LINCS members choose to participate, not only with the mind, but also with the hands and heart. Their insights into who they could be as “educators” are directly linked with these real-life interventions; “If the person is both member of a community and agent of activity, the concept of the person closely links meaning and action in the world” (Lave & Wenger, p. 122). We challenged one another to ask hard questions about what good we could do as educators in a global village; by doing so in conjunction with a service-learning program we had to confront the rewards and real limitations of an actual development project. Participants had to locate their hopes and actions in relation to the circumstances that they found at home and abroad. It is by participating over time and in multiple settings that learning occurs. In this article, I highlight the varied insights gained by diverse participants as they personally experienced, “the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world” (Wenger, 1998, p. 32).

Another significant perspective offered through this theoretical frame is a specific definition of what it means to become a “full” participant. Becoming a central, legitimate member is not so much a result of passive instruction, but of improvisation and imagination. “Learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community” (Wenger, 1998, p. 100). Each member creates his or her own path toward increasingly meaningful and complex participation.

Novices begin as peripheral participants. The centripetal forces strengthen as they become increasingly drawn into the community. Through engaging in useful activities, gaining knowledge, applying new understandings to diverse contexts, earning respect, fostering collegiality, learning the stories and mores of the community, and critically assessing shared values, they become increasingly integrated into the social world of the community of practice. They also become increasingly integrated into the relationships and networks that define a particular community.

Participation is always a relative concept, locating the individual in relation to expertise, experience, power, authority, and possible identities. There is no singular endpoint or present identity to enact. Instead, participation is an ongoing process of becoming. In summary, members do not move from periphery to some simplistic “center,” but rather from partial toward “full participation” (Wenger, 1998, p.37).

In summary, members actively craft a community or practice in which they can not only acquire new information, but also where they can, together, create new understandings of themselves as actors in the world. This forum has benefits that start at a most basic level, i.e. offering a named community with which to identify. As it grows, a community of practice provides for and recognizes many layers of expertise. It points to central members as models and mentors for the more peripheral newcomers. Participants grow by seeing learning as part of their core, life-long purpose. This transformation to a learning community requires active, full participation in the community. By engaging in authentic, hands-on activities that require reflection, such as service-learning offers, members come to see themselves and the world in new ways. They realize that their words and actions can indeed have significant impact. It is in becoming an “educator” in its many senses, “in that formation of an identity that learning can become a source of meaningfulness and of personal and social energy” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215).

Three Aspects of Participation

The unified concept of a “community of practice,” much like the paired term “service-learning,” is defined by the symbiotic relationship between the two components. Alone, neither is sufficient to cause a transformation; but together each concept is greater than the sum of its parts (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5; Wenger, 1998, p. 72). Participation in meaningful, challenging activities in a group setting can create lasting relationships among individuals as well as provide the basis for individuals’ sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. But in order to lead to this kind of life-long passion, participants need to be fully engaged in a catalytic project, imagine new futures because of it, and align their energies and priorities to sustain the newly-founded community. In this section I will highlight synergistic aspects of these three dimensions of participating as a whole person in our LINCS community of practice.

Engagement

In the seminar, we had extensive discussions about what constitutes a team, group, or community. In the end, it is engagement that differentiates a community of practice from the other concepts. Rather than automatically being part of LINCS by virtue of their cohort, job title, or program affiliation, membership requires sustained and coherent participation in “dense relations of mutual engagement organized around what they are there to do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 74).

Engagement is the “active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 173). It is a qualitatively different kind of participation than simply “showing up.” Participants reflected on some of the challenges and rewards of being engaged with others not only with the head, but also with the heart. In their self-evaluations, students felt that they met the standard of engagement when they had “the chance to share one’s thoughts, to take active role in participating in a given project, and to fully involve [sic] in the whole process.” It meant a personal commitment to risk sharing, and laying your priorities and sentiments on the line. As Mike noted, “meaningfully engaged means to have a real connection with the group/project, to have invested some sincere part of yourself — small or large, but a *sincere* part — in it.”

First, full participation in LINCS requires that participants dare themselves to give physically as well as psychologically. Participants contributed in relation to what they brought with them to the seminar, and in relations to what they encountered once on site in rural Peru. Sanjay wrote, “We were engaged with our minds, our words, our sweat, our hearts, our loose bowels, our beers, and for some, our fleas.” He summed up participants’ new understanding of the totality of belonging, “being part of a group is a physical experience whereas being meaningfully engaged is a total mind/body experience.”

We established high expectations in the course, during our fund raising campaign, and on-site in Peru. Within these guidelines, each person was challenged to carve out a niche for him or herself, and to push themselves to participate fully while still taking care of their health and need for rest at over 9,000 feet above sea level. The group varied widely in physical capacity, and most participants came to understand, “that every one had different needs and that they needed to be doing different things to keep sane” “We all pushed ourselves,” acknowledged Sarah, “and obviously this means different accomplishments for different people — but we all accepted the challenges and pushed our comfort zones — and we did the work.” Ryan echoed the importance of giving for the greater good. He wrote that he saw:

a huge difference in just being part of a group and then being meaningfully engaged. To me being meaningfully engaged means getting involved in as much as possible. Getting covered in dirt, carrying loads of rocks and boards, taking as few breaks as possible; these are all examples of when I truly felt engaged.

In a post-trip essay, Sanjay reflected that coming to recognize these individual differences did not mean that some were contributing less, “will give me great confidence to join similar and maybe not-so similar groups in the future.”

Working together with local residents to construct the first permanent home for their Head Start-like preschool program gave us a focus. We knew that we had a job to do, and limited time to accomplish as much as possible. Finding ways of laboring without such technologically simple tools as a wheelbarrow, created spaces for what Wenger calls “situated improvisation within a regime of accountability”

(Wenger, 1998, p. 240). Cecelia, one of several faculty members of our team, wrote that we had to put our heads together, because “working out a system of efficiency seemed imperative since there was so much work to do.” The result of having authentic problems to solve, facilitated a genuine sense of needing one another. Like so many others, Cecelia wrote that she really felt engaged when she became caught up in the rhythm of moving the tons of raw materials that were needed for the project:

Being meaningfully engaged represents responsibility for self and others, in most if not all endeavors, within a framework of a community. I certainly felt engaged both with our group and within the community when we were in the throes of adobe passing (tossing), tile shuttling, dirt/rock moving, wall building, etc.

Adele concurred that being an integral link in the human chain of North and South American workers was pivotal in her feeling needed. “Doing coordinated group efforts that required simple, rhythmic repetitive efforts,” set the cadence for a sense of camaraderie on the worksite. The teamwork that we developed has helped fortify our discipline to work together constructively on site, and afterwards, in the numerous community extension exercises.

The result of pushing themselves was that over the course of the spring and early summer, LINCIS offered a range of ways to fully engage in learning and belonging. This holistic approach helped restore a critical sense of balance to their education. The opportunity to connect theories with practice, and words with actions, helped participants radically rethink what it means to become create truly educative experiences (Dewey, 1938). The tangibility and physicality of the work emphasized the contrast with classroom-only schooling. Jen wrote passionately that that participation in this voluntary community helped her restore a lost sense of balance:

[I]n terms of my own personal growth, physical work is good for my spirit. For the past couple years, I have spent so much of my time challenging my brain and my intellect, and it is important to me that I also challenge my physical self. I feel unbalanced without also working my body. I am both an intellect and a physical person. By doing service, I am able to give more of myself — to involve all of my senses in my learning. This is important because when I spend a good part of each year just working my brain I feel unbalanced and have a tendency to burn-out. By working my both my body and mind, I feel more in sync.

Joining the LINCIS community of practice provides momentum that can have a catalytic effect in other contexts. Hopefully, by providing a means of engaging as a whole person, we will not only have grown as a community of practice, but as human beings as well.

The second major mode of engagement is taking the time, both formally and informally, to join in discussions with one another about personal as well as professional things. As Kathryn noted, it was certainly “possible to participate in this project without being meaningfully engaged.” She explained the difference as, “putting forth effort to get to know the local community, to give group feedback,

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to work together as a supportive team, to continually question the experience and its meaning.” Sarah added that the qualitative difference between being present in a group and engaging as a member of this community was moving beyond the superficiality of polite discourse in classes, and asking hard questions of one another and about the project we were undertaking together. She particularly valued the “meaningful (and personal) conversations with most of the members of our group where I got to know people beyond sharing time in a classroom and let people know me beyond the surface.” For her, being meaningful engaged means, “being fully present and participatory. It means giving of myself and sharing who I am. It means letting down my guard, and letting people see me — the me deep down inside me — and challenging myself beyond just getting by.”

Living and working together in crowded conditions “that resembled a half-way house for women” meant sharing the 5 gallons of hot water that we could generate every three days (if the electricity stayed on), trying new foods on a queasy stomach, and speaking up at evening meetings. “With our group I felt engaged in the sense of trying to be tolerant, caring about others and being positive about working and living as a group,” wrote Yolanda. Moving beyond tolerance to mutuality was a shared goal, one that we struggled to keep in mind. Judy summarized the significance of taking that additional step to move from being forbearing to fostering community, from simply being present to becoming engaged:

The quality and sincerity of one’s contributions mark the difference between joining the group and being meaningful engaged. . . During meetings or conversations with local community members, it meant the difference between merely listening in, and contributing an idea to the discussion, or to initiating a discussion with one person after the group talk. Meaningfully engaged meant being a spokesperson, being willing to pronounce a Quechuan word incorrectly, translating creatively to get a point across, being in the moment, learning about another person’s personal life for the sake of getting to know someone better who you know you wouldn’t outside of the experience.

LINCS is a real-life, down and dirty means of finding individual paths through group study projects and collaborative work. It is about negotiating boundaries and finding commonalities, and accepting the unique strengths and foibles we each bring to the process.

By engaging with our heads, hearts, and hands on a common task, we have created a set of stories, experiences, and hopes that can continue to connect us. Indeed, although the service-project in Peru looms large in our recollections of what we have already accomplished together, it took up a relatively short period of time, and will take on meaningfulness only in relation to the other activities that continue to define us as a community. Mike, a student from another program who has stayed in touch with the Kaffeeklatsch, commented on the most valuable thing that he has gained, new friends and colleagues:

I do have very positive feelings about the physical work we did — and my personal

role in that - and also about my relationships with others in the group. This to me is potentially the most far-reaching. I will probably never see most of the Peruvians again, but may have long-term contact with some of the people from our group back here at home.

As a result of allowing themselves to become meaningfully engaged, they came to know one another as human beings with individual priorities, goals, and needs. We also came to better understand the things that link us together as a community of practice. It is these long-term connections that will determine if our community is both substantive and sustainable.

Imagination

Engagement provides the grounded experience that enables LINCS participants to “act locally;” imagination provides the impetus to take these embodied experiences to the next level, and begin to “think globally” about the world and our places within it. Imagination, while rooted in personal experience, is about expanding horizons, putting theories into perspective, of “transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). It is about becoming part of a community, and on the basis of that connection, being able to imagine relationships to other professional communities and service partners in the future.

One of the continuous threads that connected the various components of LINCS was explicit reflection on what it means to be an educator in the world. In the initial applicant profiles, prospective members usually described their connection to education narrowly in terms of their degree program. Asked to describe their goals, answers ranged from “ideally teach fifth grade” to “continue work in service-learning somehow.” One of our shared goals was to bring possible trajectories into focus for each person.

During the course, and then in Peru, we organized meetings with teachers, Peace Corps workers, community leaders, and service-learning professionals. While discussing the work lives of other educators, all of us gained valuable perspectives on developing educational infrastructures, and building local community support for formal schooling. We tried to live what we believed. To these ends, the students’ sacrifices of financial and physical resources in order to participate in all aspects of LINCS, were a testament to the value that we as U.S. Americans place on education. Faye reflected that this was not initially designed, but emerged as a key contribution:

We were teaching the locals about our beliefs and behaviors about work and the importance of education in our culture. Our words and actions stated that education is an important part of our culture in the United States and other represented countries.

As educators, our actions often have unintended consequences; it is often these that are the most far-reaching. Yolanda summarized the scope of our legacy:

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[W]e accomplished to leave an almost finished building, we accomplished breaking many cultural barriers, and I think we left a positive message about what is possible to accomplish through organizing and goodwill. We probably also accomplished changing peoples' stereotypes.

As a result of working together over the weeks, community leader Juan Sebastian was able to comment on impact of our example of commitment:

[Our community] has gained experience in organizing, has gained through participation, has gained credibility in you all. Because sometimes the authorities we have offer and they offer, but they never follow through. Maybe because you came to collaborate with us, people maybe feel more encouraged to be able to participate. . . . You came without selfishness but to make a cultural exchange. You came and expected us to contribute.

Each of our partners and members assumed that we could be successful in our cross-cultural, collaborative service project, and for the most part, we did accomplish mutual goals. Our shared success helped stretch all participants' imaginations of what was possible.

As representative of our (eight) home countries and our degree programs, we acted as ambassadors as well as teachers. Many times the two roles were hard to pull apart. Part of fostering imagination in students is sponsoring simulations, playing with forms, and recombining elements (Wenger, 1998, p. 240). One of the debriefing questions dealt with the nuances of the roles of being ambassadors and educators. Yolanda was one of many students who found the complexity to be both frustrating and illuminating:

I was both of them in every moment. The similarities are that both of them are looked upon in a certain way, and both of them have responsibilities towards the community they are working in and towards the community they represent. The basic difference in my opinion would be that the priority for the ambassador would be his own country and its citizens while the educator is always focused in the community that requires his work, sometimes even if he doesn't belong to it. An educator can easily be adopted as part of the community by its members. An ambassador has a political and a social function. The same is true many times for teachers. Both learned that in every situation you have to combine both roles. In many aspects you have to be very diplomatic and in many others you have to be ready to learn and to exchange ideas.

Highlighting the contrasts and similarities between these roles pushed participants even further to clarify the complex roles an educator takes on in different contexts. In this, they grew in their understanding of the many different functions of an educator within his or her community.

"It is not enough for education to provide a locus of engagement. If the purpose of education is not simply to prepare students for a specific capability, but rather to give them a sense of the possible trajectories available in various communities, then

education must involve imagination in a central way” (Wenger, 1998, p. 272). Participation is not linear toward a preset goal, but dynamic and expansive. Thus, members are not herded toward a singular identity or career goal, but rather are encouraged to think broadly and deeply what being an educator personally means to them. Given the range of generations, genders, and ethnicities within our group, participants can see that there are many possible ways to contribute to the broad field of education and development. Further, it is not simply a vocation that one leaves behind at the end of the work day, but can become part of who one is as a person in the world. It can be a life-long passion.

In summary, it was through reflection coupled with action that participants found their own paths toward increasingly full participation. It was through the formal events as well as in the shared moments between the organized activities that our community came into being. This responds to Wenger’s call for flexibility in design and creating provocative “teachable moments” rather than pre-scripting, and thus limiting, modes of participation. In terms of fostering imagination, “it is more important for the informational content of an educational experience to be identity-transforming than to be “complete” in some abstract way” (Wenger, 1998, p. 273). Indeed, leaving strategic gaps for students to bridge is part of crafting good reflective exercises. At the end of the series of reflections, Ryan was able to articulate insights that he gained about himself:

I learned that I can be a strong and contributing member of a community. There haven’t been many times in the past when I have felt like I have made a difference — a big difference. Communities here are so large that while you are helping, you are only helping a small percentage. In Urubamba, while we were technically helping only the students of the school, we really went down there and did everything that we could to reach out to all members of the community. So for the first time I felt as though I was a strong member of a community.

He added that he saw direct applications of these revelations to his future career as an elementary school teacher: “In the future I will use that confidence to do as much as I can in the future. Not to overextend myself, but rather to not fear a leadership position, to take advantage of that position to do as much as I can.” Imagination can provide the basis for further action, thus spurring on the cycle of growth. It is to this third phase of participation that I now turn.

Alignment

Through “local engagement and panoramic imagination” (Wenger, 1998, p. 273), LINC provides participants with first-hand experience in putting their muscles and money where their mouths are. In this way, it fulfills Wenger’s charge that, “[e]ducational design must engage learning communities in activities that have consequences beyond their boundaries, so that students may learn what it takes to become effective in the world” (Wenger, 1998, p. 274).

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Alignment is about coordinating energies, actions, and practices so as to achieve a closer and more meaningful connection to a community of practice. The long-term outcome of LINCS will become apparent as the years, and decades, pass. However, there is clear reason to believe that participants' experiences have already had a significant influence on how they view their place as educators in the world. Before the May project, participants candidly shared the fears and doubts that they carried as baggage on this adventure. One of the most common was whether or not they could "walk the walk and talk the talk." Sarah poignantly expressed concerns voiced by many about pushing herself to live up to the high ethical ideals she saw as being worthy of the title, "global educator." She wrote:

I know I have a lot of strong opinions about what being responsible means. I also realize that I do not fully live up to my ideal of responsibility (social, environmental, and personal). . . I welcome the opportunity to take a step back from my soapbox and look deeply inside to determine who I really am in relation to these issues and how I can fully incorporate them into my life.

Communities of practice grow as learning communities as they fulfill members' ongoing needs for affiliation and challenge. Mike reflected on his goals for initially joining and then persisting with LINCS. Putting his ideals into practice over the course of time means:

[C]ompassion and interest in searching for the TRUTH. We have to be willing to go out of our comfort zones to see what effects our actions REALLY have on others. By going out of our comfort zone, I mean not being satisfied with the easy answer, but digging deeper to find reliable sources and evidence on a given topic even if the answer is not what we want to hear. Even if it would make us change our way of doing or having something or our way of being.

As this essay reveals, we struggled to find effective venues for bringing up difficult, potentially divisive issues. This process of mutual exchange is frequently not easy or comfortable, and is part of our continuing growth as a community of practice. As a learning community, we were also challenged as a group to live up to our professed ideals of compassionate service and learning with one another. We are still working to learn how to give (and receive) reciprocal critique that is constructive and caring. Certainly, we have much yet to learn about how to effectively function as a learning community. But we are evolving as teachers just as LINCS is evolving as an institutionalized forum.

One of the main insights participants gained was that in order to align your career and your values you need to acknowledge the importance that the latter have on your actions in class and out. Alejandra noted that being a critical member of LINCS has taught her that, "It is impossible to teach someone anything putting aside who you are, and what your background and beliefs are." You have to understand your own commitments, need for others, and willingness to sacrifice before you can ask the same of your own students.

This questioning is an ongoing process. “An educator, of course,” reports Kathryn,” is also constantly and at the same time a ‘student’ and is someone who is always striving for continual learning (at least I hope so)!” The idea that being an educator was a particularly open-ended vocation was hard for some participants to initially accept. After all, they were in degree programs that would, finally, come to an end and let them enter the ‘real world’ as credentialed professionals. The prospect of continually having to learn was a bit unsettling. However, having several generations of students, teachers, and faculty as part of LINCS reinforced for everyone that they could learn something from the examples set by those at other life stages. “Practice is a process of interactive learning,” writes Wenger. Younger members saw their professors volunteering to go to the rural Andes for the first time. Past cohorts saw newer members go through the initial hesitations that they, too, had faced. But as Wenger continues, “It is the learning of mature members and of their communities that invites the learning of newcomers. As a consequence, it is as learners that we become educators” (Wenger, 1998, p. 277).

Another, often overlooked, aspect of aligning their actions with their (new) insights came when they approached their own stance to being educated. For some of the graduate students, coming back to school meant struggling with whether or not to adopt the passive pose of “student” that had characterized their undergraduate schooling. LINCS provides an active learning context whose very success was dependent on students taking leadership roles in setting the rhythm of how our community would move forward. After our return, students reflected on the new expectations that they had for their other graduate courses. Many, like Aladin, wanted to be part of (generating) “more opportunities similar to our Peruvian experience where I can learn and teach at the same time.” They wanted to continue to actively shape their education. This synthesis of roles and new understanding of leadership was one of the most rewarding, serendipitous results.

At its best, a community of practice is not a static, closed system with predetermined dogma. Recruits may initially come, expecting to find life-directing answers and prepackaged solutions; they remain because they are drawn into an engaging discourse that eschews simplistic responses. LINCS certainly helped us raise more questions than easy answers. What are the key differences between service and development? How can we effectively transform academic modes of debate and discourse into forums more conducive to sharing in the field? How can we as teachers motivate more community members to take a stake in the success of the preschool they said they needed? These are the kinds of compelling issues that propel us forward on our collective search.

Participants also gained insight about the importance of contributing to a community of practice. By strengthening this shared resource, they helped nurture a (para)academic support network in which it is not only acceptable, but also anticipated, that members will take risks, stretch their horizons, and reach out to

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others. Sanjay reflected that he had gained valuable insight about creating a sense of community:

I also hope that I can carry on the mental and emotional aspects of such an experience where you are not thinking about yourself but the welfare of the whole group first and foremost. I believe that this type of thinking is absolutely necessary if we truly wish to be part of a global community.

Through a small scale, local effort he gained insight that will serve him (and us) well in a more global context. Being part of LINCS helped him think about the bigger picture where our actions have incremental consequences and thus, collectively, take on significance.

Some members came to LINCS with substantial experience in the field of service-learning, and were contemplating a future in leading and administering experiential education programs. Others intended to become classroom teachers or policy analysts. Both groups gained understanding about the mutuality and reciprocity involved in being an active learner who leads learners. As one student noted, in order to be good leaders, he had to be willing, “to put myself out there, so to speak, if I ask others to do the same.” Being an educator means continually modeling a willingness to grow and listen to others. Noted a teacher candidate:

I learned that I am always willing to learn, that I can and will play both roles that is an educator and a learner. There is always knowledge to be learned if you even from the most simple things in life. I have committed myself to being a lifelong learner and I strive to always learn lessons from every aspect of life, I feel that the more I learn the more I have to offer. I know that this skill will benefit me greatly in both personal and professional growth for the future. You have to be able to take a step back and check your pride every now and then so then you can learn something new and advance yourself, the lessons are always there, it is just that we do not always look for them.

Ryan also recognized the many teachable moments from the six months that we were together full time. He built on this insight, adding:

I was a learner in almost the exact same way, by observing. By observing them I could get an idea of what they were about, by asking questions I could get a clearer idea, and I learned so much when I was down here. In the future this will always help me to remember to be a role model because students eyes are always on you and they form some opinions based on what you say.

For these two future teachers, participating in LINCS provided inspiration and insight about the challenges and rewards of continuing along this career trajectory. They will progress through their degree programs, and in their careers with first-hand experience of the reciprocity between learning and teaching roles, and a potent sense of the power and responsibility that they hold as teachers.

Whether their career goals were to teach, run non-profits, or to enter another area of education and development, LINCS offered participants the opportunity to

reflect on their priorities, and align them with a career trajectory in which they could make a difference. Judy summarized the cumulative effect that becoming a welcomed member of the LINC community of practice has had for her. She lists the contributions that newcomers could make as they move toward full participation:

As we became more involved and invested in the work — be in physical or social, our roles as educators were more visible. It was the educator in each of us who analyzed, reflected, shared, and communicated across cultures, gathering the whole of an experience which we will undoubtedly recycle and reuse in our roles as teachers, administrators and facilitators. As educators, we were in a sense, preparing a resource base for ourselves by engaging in this experience. I think as Ambassadors, our work is complete; we have left the site. Though as educators, our work is far from complete. We will reflect, transform, and create a new knowledge base from which we will pursue new experiences (complete Kolb's learning cycle). Furthermore, we will also be synthesizing this experience into our dissertations, research papers, career goals, etc. to recycle and reuse it later.

Through this explicit focus on critical reflection and real-life applications, LINC has become a service-learning community. Hopefully, we will continue to evolve well beyond the next biennial field project. The current cohort of participants, and the new members of our community of practice, as well as our supporters and community partners, together constitute a real force for social change in our home institution as well as in the world at large.

Summary

LINC is just one of many experiences during students' and faculty members' time at our School of Education. However, I believe that it can be a significant, even transformative, means of engaging with the question of what it means to be an educator in the global village. Through our program, Learning Integrated with Needed Construction and Service, we laid a solid foundation for a community of practice among those interested in education and development. We forged connections, put theories into practice, accepted the discipline of living and working together under challenging circumstances, and reached out to one another and to those in Peru as partners who each have something to give and to gain.

But we did more than simply lay the groundwork. Each member of the team built upon this foundation in ways they found personally meaningful. On an individual level, international service-learning done within the context of an intentional community offers participants the chance to affirm personal and professional priorities, and to explore (new) career trajectories. It is a process of creating new openings, and courageously following the line of sight to see where it may lead. One of the mottoes inspiring us on site at the preschool we built was, "If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door." LINC opened doors to learning both figuratively and literally.

Forging L.I.N.C.S. among Educators

This program brings prospective educators right into the thick of things, rather than relegating them to the stands as student-spectators. The hands-on, real-life experiences enhance, rather than artificially simplify, the complexities of actually working for social change in the realm of education. In this way, participants move beyond reified theories and categories and create their own understandings.

Participation over time and in multiple settings (e.g. in the classroom, field, reflection meetings, community outreach, the Kaffeeklatsch), is the key to members' continued growth. Members each found personally meaningful niches within our community in which they could grow according to their personal goals. Through mutual engagement with a joint enterprise, they found the basis for appreciating both unity and diversity within our community. Cultivating a shared repertoire of jokes, slogans, and references creates a rich repository of shared culture. Taking risks within a community of practice in which others are also stretching themselves offers young leaders the chance to see that mature members of the community are also continually learning as part of their ongoing professional lives. As a result, students who have positive, even transformative experiences of community while earning professional degrees, enter their diverse occupations, not only with skills critical to their ability to build community in their new workplaces, but also with a greater sense of purpose and focus (Porter & Rapoport, 2001).

On a professional level, I have confidence that the LINCS participants will (continue to) make a significant difference in their chosen professions. Having been welcome to contribute from their hearts, hands, and heads, they more than rose to the occasion of founding our young community of practice. Having sacrificed and been supported within a community, they understand that mutuality and reciprocity do have a place within professional settings. The lessons that they have demonstrated about finding joy in service, asking hard questions about ethical intervention in cross-cultural settings, and linking theory and practice will serve them well as they become teachers.

In summary, the diverse ways that they understand the fluid concept of "educator" are well-suited to an evolving profession. Education is a profession of the possible. But, excellence in the field cannot be achieved alone. To paraphrase a saying, it takes a village to educate an educator.

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Notes

More information, photos, and a video clip about the evolving LINCS program cohorts can be found at the following website: www.pitt.edu/~lincs. We also have a 30 minute

documentary film, *Forging L.I.N.C.S. through service-learning in the Sacred Valley of Peru*, available. It directly addresses what it means to become a community, how hands-on education challenges participants, and what kinds of differences service-learning can make on a global stage. Please contact the author for a copy. The website for our Non-governmental partner is www.properu.org.

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