Linked Psychology and Writing Courses Across the Curriculum

Kima Cargill, University of Washington - Tacoma Campus
Beth Kalikoff, University of Washington - Tacoma Campus

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/kima_cargill/11/
Linked Courses at the Twenty-First Century Metropolitan University

> Kima Cargill and Beth Kalikoff

We argue that linked-course learning communities serve students at nonresidential metropolitan public universities by increasing their academic achievement, reducing their attrition, and engaging them in the project of public education.

“To live the dream you have to afford the dream.”
—Kira H., UWT Student

“Presently, it seems, colleges are getting better at attracting students and worse at meeting their needs.”
—Johnathon Mauk

In this essay, we use a winter 2004 research project to argue that linked courses create supportive learning communities that have particular curricular and co-curricular resonance for students at nonresidential metropolitan campuses. Our study suggests that linked courses are associated with increased retention and increased academic achievement. It also suggests that linked courses create social networks for part-time students with commutes, jobs, and families. Finally, linked courses help us, our students, and our campuses realize the dream of excellent public education for all citizens. We think that linked courses are a way to help students like Kira H., who cannot afford to take their dreams of a college education for granted, stay in school, learn more from their efforts, and form sustaining social and academic connections.

Linked Courses and Student Attrition

Linked courses are classes from different disciplines or interdisciplines that are connected in content, purpose, and organization. The term generally refers to two courses in which students are concurrently enrolled. Curricular models include thematic links (Leonard), “content” course and “applied” course pairs, and team-taught courses. Linked courses, as well as other learning community models, have become a mainstay of higher education (Leonard; Levine; Mlynarczyk and Babbitt; Nutting; O’Donnell; Smith; Whatley and Canalis). While the purposes and ambi-
tions of linked courses vary across institutional sites, they are generally designed to provide students with an integrative and collaborative learning environment.

Often, such learning environments aim to serve undergraduate populations that colleges and universities traditionally have called "nontraditional." Later in this essay, we discuss ways in which the nontraditional has become normative and what that shift implies for us, ethically as well as pedagogically, when we consider our curricular choices. For now, we note merely that many institutions find that linked courses support students who are multilingual, first generation, or immigrant; nonresidential (Brittenham et al.; Raymond); urban; underrepresented; high risk (Fitch and Kirby); and academically underprepared (Brittenham et al.). In addition, all linked-course models offer community college and other nonresidential students more "opportunities to work together" (Barnhouse and Smith).

Our linked courses drew on (without replicating) the "content" and "applied" link model. This particular model features a content course such as sociology or political science linked to a methods course such as math, oral communication, or writing. We linked Writing Effectively, an upper-division composition class, to Abnormal Psychology, an upper-division clinical psychology class, for a ten-week quarter. Writing Effectively functioned in some ways as an applied or studio course. Yet our link differed from the content and applied link model because Writing Effectively explored writing as an interdisciplinary subject, an area of inquiry, rather than simply a craft, a practice, or a means to an end. Also, the writing class and the psychology class each earned students five academic credits, so the former did not function structurally or administratively as an "enhancement" or "support" of the latter. Thus we linked two equally intensive content courses, one that was part practicum. We chose this form of link in hopes of introducing students to two areas of scholarly inquiry, as well as to help them learn to identify and articulate rhetorical choices in different fields. The link was open to all undergraduates who could enroll in both courses (and had not already taken either course separately).

We worked to foster connections among the linked courses, because students usually value explicit articulation of learning goals and methods, and because the structure of the link and of the research project agitated somewhat against integrated learning. We designed our study as a traditional controlled study with two groups: (a) an experimental group, who received the "treatment," i.e., were enrolled in the two linked courses, and (b) a control group, who were enrolled in the single unlinked course of Abnormal Psychology. The linked and unlinked sections of Abnormal Psychology had to be identical in syllabus, assignments, and class session plans in order to test the effect of the writing link. Thus, the integration of learning—the link itself—could not take place within the Abnormal Psychology course. To create connections for linked-course students that did not compromise the research project or disadvantage students in the unlinked psychology section, we focused the integration of learning on Writing Effectively.

Students in Writing Effectively read and wrote about scholarly essays in the field of Abnormal Psychology. These scholarly essays were neither assigned nor discussed in the psychology class. Students also discussed the connection of these
essays to those assigned in Abnormal Psychology. In addition, the writing students were asked to complete and bring in a rough draft of their final paper for Abnormal Psychology. They peer reviewed these drafts in groups as an in-class activity for Writing Effectively. In addition, Kima and Beth met, in person or online, to discuss the Abnormal Psychology assignments, as well as the assumptions, purposes, and methods of composition and psychology.

Our Linked Courses and Our University

The University of Washington’s Tacoma campus was an unusual two-year university in that (until the fall of 2006) it offered only 300- and 400-level undergraduate courses, bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degrees, and master’s degrees. Many of our students completed 100- and 200-level courses at community colleges in the South Puget Sound. A substantial number of students took a break from school to earn money, start families, or both; these breaks ranged from a year or two to twenty or more. Like the students at the two-year colleges from which they transferred, our students are on University of Washington Tacoma’s nonresidential campus briefly and struggle to stay in school and succeed. Our students work to balance and integrate the conflicting demands on their time and mental energy; they also work to achieve a kind of coherence—to make connections—in the face of fragmentation.

The responsibility to help these contemporary undergraduates stay in school is especially challenging, because our students are often, as Mauk argues, nowhere: “They had no dorm rooms, no student lounge (other than vending areas of the main cafeteria), no spirit rock, no mall, no communal lawn or park ... students read their assignments eating a bag of potato chips by the ATM machine” (371). And that is if they are on campus at all. Mostly, they are driving or working or raising children, residing in “a state of ongoing and unsituated movement through time” (371), passing through college on their way somewhere else (372).

Students at two-year, nonresidential college campuses experience this fragmentation with particular force. Most of our undergraduates are adult learners who have jobs, raise children, attend school part time and intermittently, take more than four years to finish their degrees, and attend institutions with open admissions (Alberti; Soliday). The traditional college idyll, with its built-in learning communities, no longer exists. Some argue that it no longer exists on four-year Research 1 university campuses, either. More than ever, students at four-year residential institutions work part time, live off campus, drop out temporarily to earn more money for next year’s tuition (Soliday; Mauk). The “nontraditional” student has become traditional. We believe that learning communities in general and linked courses in particular have the power to address this cultural shift in higher education.

Our Research Project

In the winter academic quarter of 2004, we linked our 300-level writing and psychology courses, requiring concurrent enrollment in both. Each course operated
independently in that lessons, exams, and reading lists were developed separately by each of us. One of Kima Cargill's two winter quarter sections of Abnormal Psychology linked to Beth Kalikoff's Writing Effectively; the other was free standing. The two Abnormal Psychology sections were identical in purpose, lecture, readings, assignments, and exam (as well as instructor) to help us isolate and assess the effect of the writing course link on our shared students.

Beth's Writing Effectively course provided the intellectual, pedagogical, and social link (one section of) Kima's Abnormal Psychology course. In the writing class, students wrote a short personal narrative on health, illness, or difference; read interdisciplinary articles on psychology; discussed writing as an interdisciplinary comprised of psychology, linguistics, and composition; discussed ways to apply their growing knowledge of the writing process to their work in Abnormal Psychology; and analyzed the assigned psychology readings in five one-page treatments and four papers (ranging in length from four-to-five to six-to-eight pages). They also discussed the ten-page final paper assigned in Abnormal Psychology. Lastly, they wrote rough drafts of the Abnormal Psychology final paper and participated in substantial, in-class, small-group peer review of those drafts a week before the final version of the paper was due.

In evaluating the linked courses, we used a triangulated design (i.e., qualitative and quantitative approaches) in an attempt to answer three questions from an epistemologically complex perspective that we believe mirrors the various dimensions of the teaching and learning experience: (1) Are students in linked courses less likely to drop out of the course(s) before the end of the quarter? (2) Do students in linked courses perform better academically than students in the same, unlinked courses? (3) Do students in linked courses report greater satisfaction with their learning experiences? Our essay "Linked Courses Across the Curriculum," forthcoming in the Journal of General Education, focuses on the first two questions, while this essay focuses on the third, on student attitudes.

As we have noted, Kima taught both the linked and unlinked sections of Abnormal Psychology to ensure that content, student assessment, and teaching methods would be the same across conditions. All student work from the Abnormal Psychology courses was coded and graded blindly so that it was not possible to identify which section a student paper was from. There were no prerequisites, other than upper-division standing, for enrolling in either course. Overall, students who enrolled in the linked courses had fewer previous psychology courses and were more often academically classified as minor students in the unlinked control class.

Many of the students who enrolled in the linked courses were brand-new to the university, whereas the students in the unlinked control group had more college experience, more psychology classes, and more previous psychology classes with Kima. Many of the students in the unlinked control group had also had previous writing classes. Once we saw the difference in composition across the two groups, we expected that the results of our comparative study would be at best limited, given that our experimental group consisted of students who were less
likely to have previously studied psychology or writing, whereas the control group would be expected to perform better, given their relative academic experience.

**Methods and Data**

Thus, this was a quasi-experimental field study in which the experimental group consisted of students in the two linked courses, that is, they were concurrently enrolled in Writing Effectively and Abnormal Psychology, and in which the comparison group consisted of students enrolled in another, unlinked section of Abnormal Psychology during the winter 2004. The same psychology faculty member taught both the linked and unlinked sections of Abnormal Psychology to ensure that content, student assessment, and teaching methods would be the same across conditions.

Teaching methods in the Abnormal Psychology course included daily quizzes, a midterm exam, a ten-page research paper that demonstrated mastery of American Psychological Association (APA) style, and a cumulative final exam. Required texts for the course included Comer’s *Abnormal Psychology* (2003) and Sattler and Shabatat’s *Abnormal Psychology in Context* (1998). The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2001) was an optional text, also available to students on reserve in the library.

Our quantitative findings showed that students in the linked courses had significantly higher scores on blindly graded exams and papers compared with students in the unlinked group. Also, students in the linked course were less likely to drop out before the end of the academic quarter than students enrolled in the unlinked Abnormal Psychology class. No students enrolled in the linked courses withdrew, whereas five students in the unlinked Abnormal Psychology class withdrew. It is unclear why fewer students in the linked group withdrew. While students were required to coenroll in Writing Effectively and Abnormal Psychology, nothing prevented them from later withdrawing from one or both of those courses. One possibility for the higher retention in the linked group is that students were more engaged and performed better, and thus had less motivation to drop out. Another possibility is that the social engagement and lack of anonymity simply built in more accountability.

To answer our third question—do students in linked courses report greater satisfaction of their learning experiences?—we collected anonymous student assessments of the link at the end of the course. We used two criteria for selection of these comments for this essay. First, we chose comments that we consider representative. Second, we chose comments that discuss the link in a sentence or more. The comments we do not discuss refer to expectations for the course, where some students say they had wanted to take an unlinked Abnormal Psychology course but liked the writing course anyway, or vice versa.

Unsurprisingly, most students said that reading and writing about interdisciplinary psychology in the writing course supported their learning, giving them more knowledge of Abnormal Psychology. “Having to read about psychology in all readings we had for your class,” wrote one student in Writing Effectively, “gave me
a better understanding of the material I needed to learn." Reading psychology in the writing course, said another, "gave me a broader sense of what that discipline was about." A third student said:

I'm really glad that we read psychology-based articles in the writing class [...] that we had a choice as to which ones we wanted to read. Such an option allowed me to tailor my learning in such a way that I could focus on the subject matter I intended to write about in my psychology paper.

Peer reviewing rough drafts of the final psychology paper in the writing class was identified by many students as a great benefit to the link. One student considered it "the single most helpful aspect of the link." Another wrote:

It also really helped to go over our psych paper with you and also in our peer groups. I liked (or it helped) to have a rough draft do [sic] in order to get things started. If you hadn't mad [sic] it a requirement I never would have done a first draft.

Several students also appreciated the way they were able to bring the critical thinking skills they developed in the writing course to bear on the reading and writing assignments in the psychology course. These student perceptions are supported by our data on academic achievement.

In the assessments, some students identified problems with the link. It is worth noting that problems do not appear often in the literature. A number of students had hoped for a closer link, more connections between the courses. While a couple of these students wanted overlapping or fewer assignments, a kind of ten credits "lite," most wanted fuller integration of the courses for its own sake. One student was exasperated by some of her peers: "there were certain individuals in the class that dominated the class and made others feel uncomfortable [...]" Certainly linked courses may exacerbate difficult group dynamics, because the same students spend twice as many hours a week together than they would otherwise.

Most tellingly, however, students talked about the ways that the linked courses helped them adjust to upper-level undergraduate work on a new campus. The links "provided an easy transition from full-time work to full-time student," wrote one new student, who recommended linked courses to students at all levels of undergraduate work. The learning was "deeper and richer," said another student, and provided "a stable environment to learn in [...] to build intimate relationships with classmates." "It was nice to have the same people in both classes [...] you build strong relationships so you don't feel embarrassed to ask a student for help," wrote a third. The link, wrote many, made them feel more "comfortable" at University of Washington Tacoma and with each other: "it allowed me [to] make good friendships. Now I am sad that I won't see them every Tues. & Thurs!"

Discussion

While these results are preliminary and drawn from a relatively small sample, our data suggest that linking courses across the curriculum may result in lower attrition
rates and improved academic achievement (Cargill and Kalikoff). Links also create learning communities that situate students in their educations, giving them the luxury of engagement and immersion so that they can learn the discourses, genres, and purposes of an interdiscipline. While it would be a mistake to understate the demands on our students' time and resources, our research suggests that the integrative experience provided by linked courses goes a surprising distance towards reducing the sense of isolation and fragmentation that nonresidential students can feel. We advocate further study to replicate these findings and to determine if the improved academic achievement is the cause of the increased student retention, or if the link itself is directly responsible for both.

We also advocate more fully integrated linked courses. Some of our students wrote, in their end-of-quarter assessments, that the courses seemed insufficiently connected. The design of our research experiment (i.e., striving for a controlled study in a naturalistic environment) prevented that fuller integration. The two Abnormal Psychology sections—one linked, one unlinked—had to be identical in content and method in order to isolate the effect of the Writing Effectively link on the students. Beth's experience with another, fully integrated linked course further supports the argument for increased connections among linked courses. Argument and Research in Writing, taught by Beth, and International Human Rights, taught by Rachel May, were offered as linked courses at the University of Washington Tacoma, with a single syllabus and course description. Many International Human Rights assignments were peer reviewed in the writing course, rather than just the one in the Abnormal Psychology link. Beth, Rachel, and a notable number of students appreciated the full integration of course materials; this appreciation emerged in end-of-quarter anonymous student assessments, as well as the assigned reflection paper that introduced the course portfolio.

As teachers, we emerged from our research project with the conviction that learning cohorts have the potential to transform both the academic and co-curricular college experiences of our students. Our linked-course project was limited by our resources: the University of Washington Tacoma could not support team-taught undergraduate classes for fiscal reasons, so we had to have separate courses. It was also limited by our desire, as researchers, to isolate the effectiveness of the link. Other linked-course and learning community models hold great promise, although questions of implementation, when aiming to establish links across programs or campuses, become extremely challenging.

The University of Washington Tacoma now has the opportunity to discover these challenges and opportunities on a larger scale. In the 2006-2007 academic year, University of Washington Tacoma became a four-year and graduate institution. Our new first-year students take twenty to twenty-five credits of a core curriculum together, using a modified cohort learning community model with team-taught interdisciplinary courses and a year-long curricular theme ("Living in a Globalized World"). Most of our first-ever first-year students are eighteen-year-olds for whom the University of Washington is a potentially intimidating new challenge. The results of our linked-course research project suggest that a learning
community approach to first-year curriculum may help these students learn more, persist in their studies, and develop a sense of belonging.

Implications

As federal and state funding of public education diminishes, schools are under greater pressure to accept more students than they can educate (Mauk). Many institutions have responded with an increasing number of internal barriers for students, including sequenced courses, high-stakes testing, and required remedial courses that lengthen the rocky path to graduation (Soliday). These barriers become an implicit way to undermine the historical commitment of “regional two- and four-year schools” (Alberti 565) to public education by pitting “access” against “excellence.” We are, as Mauk suggests, attracting more students, but the length of time it takes them to graduate is growing, as are their attrition rates.

In addition, the “community” part of “community college” has become in some ways a reference to where students live (near the campus) rather than a reference to what happens on the campus. Students need to work part time or full time in order to underwrite their education. They commute from home to work, work to school, school to the grocery or to pick up their children, then home again. Barnhouse and Smith cite James E. Minkler’s incisive point: “The very fact that community colleges are attended largely by commuter students and that many students have jobs off campus and are only on campus during the time of their scheduled classes, means that community colleges often lack a sense of community” (186).

Thirty years ago, Mina Shaughnessy famously urged us to respond diligently and respectfully to the newly comprehensive open-admissions policy that brought “nontraditional” students into the classrooms of university teachers who often saw them as “ineducable.” She saw it as our obligation to assume that our students could learn what we have learned (292). Our obligations she understood to extend beyond the classroom:

Just how we are finally going to reconcile the entitlements and capacities of these new students with our traditional ways of doing things in higher education is still not clear. As we move closer to this goal, however, we will be improving the quality of college education for all students and moving deeper into the realizations of a democracy. (293–94)

The shared civic responsibility for this reconciliation extends beyond the scope of this essay, but Shaughnessy’s demand for teaching and learning models that speak to shifting educational and demographic realities remains timely.

The confidence, comfort, and trust that our students found in their linked-course experience, as well as their ability to reflect on that experience, suggest the significance learning communities play in building civic engagement and solving communal problems. Links as learning communities help students develop necessary democratic skills and dispositions (Edgar) that they use in all parts of their lives. These skills and virtues are especially significant for undergraduates who have in—

188 TETYC December 2007
creasingly tenuous connections to their education and whose lives are increasingly fragmented. Such democratic skills and experiences serve to connect their otherwise isolated experiences as they run from classroom to freeway to work to day care, posting homework online at 3:00 a.m.

To conclude, several of our winter 2004 students recommended that other new students take linked courses: “you spend 4 hours with the same students, which inevitably leads to friendships and makes your first quarters less lonely.” Their interdisciplinary, immersive, and collaborative work in the linked courses, with colleagues who became friends, exemplified, in microcosm, “the cornerstones of finding a way to live together with justice and freedom for all, what Dewey called conjoint living” (Edgar 1). As such, linked courses have the potential to help twenty-first century students create learning communities—academic and non-academic spaces—that welcome them as full partners in the civic project of public education.

Notes

1. We appreciate the Whiteley Center’s support of this project. We also thank Eugene Edgar, Jennifer Stone, and Elizabeth Thomas for their careful reading and excellent advice on the manuscript. Beth appreciates the suggestions of Beverly Conner and Ann Putnam, as well as the editorial acumen of Courtney Putnam. We thank Rachel May. Our students deserve thanks, too, for their willingness to enroll in and assess the link.

2. We refer you elsewhere to detailed quantitative findings that show that students in the linked course group scored higher on blindly graded exams and papers and were less likely to withdraw than students in the unlinked control group (Cargill and Kalikoff).

Works Cited


