

# **Developing Engaging Courses with Faculty Student Learning Communities—the Bluffton Technology Learning Circles Program**

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**Abstract:** The Bluffton College Technology Learning Circles program (TLC), is a project to enrich courses across the curriculum with digital resources and activities developed by faculty-student learning communities. Beginning in 2000, eighteen faculty members and over seventy students from a variety of departments and majors have collaborated to build understanding and skills with digital media and information technology, and to redesign the Bluffton teaching and learning experience. The following paper/presentation describes the program’s learning community vision, strategies and achievements and lessons learned from a variety of projects designed to enhance student learning and to enable a faculty development strategy. With support from the Ohio Learning Network’s Learning Communities Initiative, the TLC program is sponsoring several projects that are building learning partnerships with diverse regional and international partners. These projects will be featured in this presentation.

## **Introduction—Staying Focused on People and Learning in a Digital Age**

Three years ago when Bluffton College began a comprehensive initiative to integrate information technology across the campus and throughout academic programs, we understood that it would be important to keep the focus on people and learning—and to minimize the tendency for new hardware and applications to drive change. An important part of this strategy was to provide a faculty development program that supports twelve faculty members each academic year with a semester course reduction to explore information technology and to develop strategies for integrating learning technology into specific academic courses. The college is committed to provide this opportunity for 100% of our full-time faculty (39 of 72 to date). We offer faculty members opportunities to participate as individuals, as departmental learning communities, and, with students through the Technology Learning Circles program. [1]

## **Technology Learning Circles Program—Focusing on the Teaching and Learning**

The Technology Learning Circles program features small groups comprised of one faculty member and three to five students, often from different academic disciplines. Since May 2000, eighteen faculty members and over seventy students have participated in the program. There are currently twelve active Technology Learning Circles projects on campus. Faculty members make a two-year commitment to the program and students enroll in a 2-credit seminar and make a one-year commitment. The college provides each participant with a college-owned laptop computer to encourage extensive computing and electronic communication among team members.

Dr. Peter Terry coordinates the program including helping faculty with project ideas, teaching necessary technology skills, and guiding project teams. During the first semester, each Learning Circle team takes a seminar with Terry. Students and faculty learn skills that will support their project work, including how to write HTML, shoot and edit digital photographs, capture and edit video, produce multimedia presentations, conduct effective Web searches, and function as a research and development team.

During the second semester, the teams begin work on a specialized academic project. They meet several times a week to collaborate on the project, and Terry provides ongoing technical support and guidance. Terry notes that the program “works” on many levels: “While groups focus on creating tangible projects, it is really the interaction of the students and faculty, the process of learning from each other, that impacts the participants most. If we removed the computer and technology, the interaction of faculty and students in small groups would still make this program a special and powerful opportunity.” [2]

Each learning circle chooses an academic project to pursue based on their interests. The result has been an array of ambitious projects that are integrating technology across the Bluffton curriculum. Cynthia Bandish, Ph.D., assistant professor of English, is part of a learning circle that is creating an interactive writing lab that students can access to improve their writing skills. Susan Biesecker-Mast, Ph.D., associate professor of communication, is involved in a learning circle that is designing and building a Web site devoted to the critical analysis of emerging media. The site will include resources for study and opportunity for on-line dialogue. She and her student colleagues have already participated in a visual rhetorics conference at Indiana University as part of their work.

Five early education majors are working with Woo Sik Jung, Ph.D., assistant professor of education, to build a Web site resource for BC education majors, both current students and graduates. The Web site will include information about teacher licensing requirements, sample lesson plans, links to other on-line resources, and sample class projects. More important than the web site and even the technology skill-building is the learning-about-learning that leads to deeper understanding and preparation for professional collaboration.

### **Learning About Learning—Achievements and Lessons Learned**

According to Kristen Chozinski, a member of the early education TLC, working as a team can be more challenging than dealing with the technology. “We make all decisions by consensus. Even though we are all friends, that can be difficult,” she said. “If you don’t like what someone has done with their part of the project, you need to find a way to say that without stepping on their toes.” In addition, the students enjoy leveling the playing field with their professor. According to education major, Becky Dunn, learning circles make it possible for students to receive individualized attention and develop close relationships with faculty: “We all have a voice in the project. The professor is learning with us and we all decide things as a group.”

These student comments confirm that TLC participants gain more than mastery of information technology. TLC students discover the potential for integrating technology effectively in their professional lives. Each member of the early childhood learning circle plans to continue with the program next year. The education Web site they are working on will be completed at the end of spring semester, so next year they plan to create a multimedia CD-ROM that can be used by the college to recruit new students. Looking further ahead, all students plan to integrate technology into their future classrooms.

Based on our experience to date, it is very clear that the powerful benefit of the TLC strategy is to develop students who take responsibility for and value learning. By incorporating information

technology as a central ingredient in each project, we ensure that students can identify at least one important area in which they can take ownership and make a significant contribution. Students specialize in HTML, digital media creation, writing text, graphic design and programming. This special expertise makes them all key contributors along with the faculty convener who generally provides the discipline-specific guidance for each project.

When projects are less successful, it is generally not because students lack interest or enthusiasm, but because the faculty member finds it difficult to adjust to the altered teacher-learner model of the “learning circle.” For projects to be successful, faculty members must be willing to encourage student initiative that moves the project in unanticipated directions. In one of our first TLC projects, Dr. Lucia Unrau began with the goal of developing web-based ear training resources for students in Integrated Arts and courses in piano pedagogy. However, as her TLC students developed IT skills, it became clear that they wanted to exercise these skills in a different direction and for a more immediate outcome. With openness to student interests, Dr. Unrau encouraged her team’s efforts to produce a multimedia introduction to the Bluffton music department and its programs. The Music department now uses the production as a recruiting tool—and yes, enrollment has recently increased. Dr. Unrau did not lose sight of her original goal and has continued to work with TLC students on this pedagogical application.

We have also discovered that too many faculty and students initially equate IT integration with assembling a web site of resources to support more traditional instruction. In one sense, this reflects an understandable desire to learn technology to produce a tangible outcome—most of us learn MS Word to create a professional document. However, this tendency encourages the production of average web sites that lack professional graphic design and user-friendly interface and architecture. As our program has matured, we have stressed the need to emphasize building active learning pathways (versus online resource centers) and this has contributed to the two “Expanding the Learning Circle” projects featured in the final section of this paper/presentation.

Although the focus of this presentation is on faculty-student Technology Learning Circles, we want to emphasize that the learning community model infuses the total Bluffton faculty development program. Each year, we have sponsored a departmental initiative that has resulted in significant collaborative effort to integrate information technology throughout the academic programs of that department. For example, during the 2000/01 academic year all members of the Math faculty received a course reduction to work on integrating information technology. Our stipulation is that the department must identify a common theme to encourage synergy and a pervasive outcome in the curriculum. The math department chose to explore uses of Excel across a wide variety of academic courses, from the introductory “Understanding Numerical Data,” to fourth year offerings in the major. Beyond incorporating this common and valuable application, through the process of experimenting with students in a variety of classes, the math faculty also discovered the value of encouraging student practice. As an outcome of their year-long project, the Math department now sponsors weekly program of Math seminars presented by faculty and students. This new emphasis might not have developed without the collaboration and synergy developed through a focus on integrating information technology together. In addition to Math, the departments of Education and Economics, Business, Accounting (EBA) have also engaged in year-length community projects. The complete roster of participating faculty and projects to date includes:

### *2000/01 Technology Learning Circles*

- Ron Friesen (EBA): Web-Based Regional Business Resources
- Lucia Unrau (Music): Ear Training on the Web
- Perry Bush (History): Lima Neighborhood History – Irish Town
- Will Slater (Educational Psychology): Web-based Tutorials and Assessments
- Lamar Nisly (Humanities): Humanities II Web Site
- Susan Biesecker-Mast (Communications): Critical Media Studies Web
- John Estell & Mike Edmiston (Computer Science & Sciences): Computer Controlled Hands-on Experiments for the Sciences
- Math Department: Integrating Excel across the Curriculum

### *2001/02 Technology Learning Circles*

- Pam Nath (Psychology) Virtual Professionals in the Classroom
- Dan Berger (Chemistry): Expanding the Classroom & Lab
- Angela Montel (Biology): Science Achievement for Non-scientists
- Jeff Gundy (English): Writing Differently, Writing Better (?)
- Cindy Bandish (English): Building an Online Writing Lab
- Woo Sik Jung (Education): Special Education in a Digital Age
- Education: Teacher Education and Learning for a Digital Age

### *2002/03 Technology Learning Circles*

- George Metz (Education): Teaching in Diverse Classrooms
- Dan Wessner (History & Political Science): Building Cross-cultural Competence
- Economics, Business Accounting: Scenarios, Simulations, Spreadsheets and Project Management with Information Technology

## **Expanding the Learning Circle—Expanding Our Technological Imagination**

In the May/June EDUCAUSE Review, four higher education thinkers respond to questions related to the relationship of “Moore’s Law and the Conundrum of Human Learning.” [3] One of these, Newton Smith, Director of the Professional Writing Program at Western Carolina University, argues that the Internet has turned the teaching-to-learning paradigm upside down, “Knowledge now is constructed, teaching is akin to coaching, and learning is active or interactive [4].” In addition, Smith argues that the next generation of students (now in elementary school) who are growing up with Shockwave, Mp3’s and wireless technology, will push the new paradigm even further. We can expect that they will be unlikely to sit still for a lecture! Smith’s implication is that we must focus on learning versus teaching: “we should think of learning as a constructed social activity in which students are involved in projects of genuine research with unknown outcomes [5].”

The Technology Learning Circles approach attempts to address these challenges by emphasizing several related learning strategies. Through all projects, we encourage faculty and students to:

- 1) Develop project-based versus content-driven courses and learning modules;
- 2) Design courses or learning experiences where students have a variety of learning activities;
- 3) Involve participants in genuine research and discovery to produce meaningful outcomes;
- 4) Combine enjoyment of technology with professional use of technology;
- 5) Expand our technological imagination to produce meaningful change.

With regards the fifth strategy, in a digital age, change has too often been viewed as a value-neutral and desirable outcome. As an expression of the Bluffton mission, we encourage faculty and students to learn technology for transformational purposes related to our academic program,

their professional goals, and to questions of social and economic justice in a global society. With this transformational intent in mind, we have begun a year-long project titled, “Expanding the Learning Circle,” that will connect the student-faculty learning community on our campus with teams at other institutions to explore and develop online learning resources and activities that can be shared by and benefit students at the partner institutions. We are collaborating with faculty-student teams from Bennett College, a historically black women’s college in North Carolina and An Giang University, located in Vietnam’s Mekong delta. Specifically, we are working to develop learning modules that can be incorporated into existing curricula in three areas: 1) teaching in diverse classrooms; 2) shaping anti-racist teaching and learning; and 3) international development studies and related cross-cultural exchanges. In addition, we expect each module to incorporate opportunities for faculty and students from partner institutions to engage in shared learning and dialogue around the common topics. These three projects are receiving support through the Ohio Learning Network’s Learning Communities Initiative.

Through these projects, we are experimenting with building cross cultural competence and bridging the digital divide. Again, the Bluffton approach to *building engaging courses with faculty-student learning communities* is about learning technology and about learning more than technology. During a 2000 address at Harvard, Bono (pop star and third world debt reduction activist) offered the persuasive observation that our age will be remembered in history texts for two things, the Internet and the AIDS devastation of Africa. This may be a sobering juxtaposition, but it does appear that globalization and the Internet are paired and defining characteristics of our current experience. These developments impact our institutions and our students, whether we view them as threats or as opportunities to sharpen our distinctive position. Certainly, we must continue to achieve the necessary technology integration outcomes to support and graduate students for success in an information-rich economy—as noted earlier, a learning community approach supports significant progress in this endeavor. At the same time, we should also broaden our participation in external collaborations (enhanced by the Internet) that support and expand student/faculty learning and enhance genuine and balanced relationships with other participants in a global learning community. The Bluffton Technology Learning Circles program is oriented toward this goal.

## References

- [1] Faculty development programs for learning technology are supported in part by a Title III – Strengthening Institutions grant (U.S. Department of Education) received in 1999.
- [2] Some text in this section and student quotations are adapted from “Technology Learning Circles,” a feature article in the Bluffton magazine, Spring 2002, Laurie Wurth Pressel, Communications Director.
- [3] Phillip D. Long, “Moore’s Law and the Conundrum of Human Learning,” *EDUCAUSE Review*, May/June 2002, pages 16-19.
- [4] Newton Smith, “Teaching as Coaching: Helping Students Learn in a Technological World,” *EDUCAUSE Review*, May/June 2002, pages 38-47 (citation, page 40).
- [5] *Ibid.*, page 42.