



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## THE LEARNING FORUM: AN ALTERNATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Cedar Valley College has attempted to implement the learning community philosophy by coordinating two or three classes with a common theme and a cadre of instructors who coordinate assignments and philosophies. This approach has had limited success. The primary problem has been finding a cohort of students willing to participate in a group of classes in a fairly small commuter college where two-thirds of the student body is part-time and most students have job and/or family responsibilities. In addition, more students are opting for distance learning instruction that does not fit the traditional learning community model.

The Learning Forum is a new model for alternative learning communities that has emerged from focused conversations around our campus. It is modeled on the successful Tomorrow's Teachers. Students interested in becoming public school teachers are enrolled in classes designed around this interest and are brought together periodically for support and group learning about their chosen profession. This model works because participating students are free to select class schedules that fit into their busy lives (including distance learning classes or hybrid classes, part-time or full-time basis) and still have the benefit of cohort activities and peer-learning opportunities.

One project currently underway is Tomorrow's Health Professionals. Students with career goals in the health fields were invited to attend information sessions in summer 2005, to learn about the opportunity of participating in cohort activities. [This project is being sponsored by a science professor and a faculty counselor in fall 2005.] Another emerging project comes from a small team charged with implementing a partnership between Cedar Valley College and the University of North Texas—Dallas Campus. The team chose to include criminal justice, business, and teacher prepara-

tion as its disciplines of choice; however, the first pilot will involve only criminal justice and business.

The emerging Learning Forum model includes:

- Finding community partners to support the model by providing tours, guest speakers, career advice, and intern opportunities
- Developing seamless transitions from high school to community college to university for degree-seeking participants
- Assigning a faculty or other employee as a group mentor
- Scheduling regular meetings and field trips for the cohort, including evening and weekend activities, if needed
- Developing peer support and study relationships
- Implementing listserves and/or other electronic communication vehicles and teaching options, using Blackboard or similar software
- Providing information about career opportunities
- Developing the best methods of instruction, optimum course times, and support structures for the disciplines represented
- Regularly gathering student input to improve instruction and services
- Tracking student progress.

The Learning Forum has the potential to increase retention and completion among participants as it provides many of the services that current research tells us will help students achieve their goals. It helps the college establish mutually beneficial partnerships with area ISD's and universities, as well as with related employers. While this model requires some allocation of resources to support the project—e.g., staff time and miscellaneous expenses, it should prove less expensive than supporting our older team teaching model.

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## USING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM

The ultimate *high* for a learner should be knowledge, but I think the ultimate *high* for me as a teacher is to have students *pass on* what they learn from me. I am not talking about just passing along facts, statistics, and information, but I am talking about passing on the processes of learning. Traditionally, I have always used collaborative learning process in my classes to enhance student success, cultivate connectivity among students, and engage students in the learning process. Collaborative learning is a time-proven learning tool, well documented through pedagogical research and application. It helps achieve these objectives: student success, connection, and engagement. I have taught the collaborative learning techniques to my students, and now many of them have given me the ultimate *high*. They have passed on that technique to their children and/or spouses. I will share an example.

### Student Success

One student, we will call him Bob, shared with the class that he is using the collaborative learning techniques with his children at home. He shares his work with them and has them work through assignments with him. For example, he defines his vocabulary words, and then he teaches those words to his middle-school-age children. Together, they create sentences using those words. He is finding that he understands how to use the words in a more efficient manner and that his children's English scores and reading skills are improving at school. He works through his critical thinking exercises. He explains to his children the process of critical thinking and then allows them to work through critical thinking activities with him. He is finding that their problem-solving skills improve each day, and their student success factor is improving each day through improved grades and attitudes toward homework. They are modeling an attitude that says education is important.

### Connection

Bob and his children are able to spend more quality time with each other. We all know that for adult learners who have families, time with loved ones is a rare commodity. Bob said he and his children enjoy challenging each other's thinking and answers. They learn together, share together, and laugh together. They are connecting on a new level, not just as parents and children, but as learners and teachers. As a result, Bob has a new outlook at school because he worries less

about reduced time with his children, and he says his grades are improving.

### Engagement

He says his children eagerly await new vocabulary words, and they try to find words to stump him. They all learn a new word each day and use that word during their time spent preparing meals. They look forward to this learning time together, to trying to find answers before he can find them. Their engagement in his learning process is enhancing their engagement in their own, encouraging them to improve their performance on their own homework and tests.

He says they now compare grades. It is no longer just the father who looks at the children's grades. The children look at their father's grades and question why he missed certain facts, details, or processes.

### Conclusion

We need to create more opportunities for examining and experiencing how our students use the information and processes they learn from us. Knowing about these experiences inspires me to continue to be an engaging teacher who challenges her students to take knowledge and *pass it on*. I may be able to achieve what Henry Brooks Adams, an American historian, observed: "*A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.*"

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