

## **DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH THE LEARNING COMMUNITY MODEL**

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Learning Communities (LC) represent an alternative model of teaching and learning in higher education that can foster intercultural competence and knowledge. “Some of the distinctive features of LCs are that they are usually smaller than most units on campus, they help overcome the isolation of faculty members from one another and their students, they encourage continuity and integration in the curriculum and they help build a sense of group identity, cohesion and ‘specialness’” (O’Connor 2003). Having integrated a Spanish language LC at our institution we found this model to produce positive academic and affective outcomes. This model engages disaffected second language (L2) learners, helps keep first- and second- year students in school, and helps Latino students feel supported (Trujillo 2009). This paper focuses on how this model additionally helps to develop intercultural competence by describing the implementation of assignments and the interethnic and intraethnic interactions in the course.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As language educators, we are immersed in a dynamic, rapidly changing environment marked by a sense of urgency in the United States due to the nation’s multilingual and multicultural deficit. We face our nation’s inability to communicate with other parts of the world, shortages of qualified language teachers, a lack of understanding of other cultures and languages, and a growing ethnocentric, monolingual society. It is this society that instead of embracing and fostering the linguistic and cultural diversity of its immigrants, encourages an assimilation process that promotes the loss of languages and cultures that are a priceless resource in a global community.

These issues must be addressed by higher education. As universities continue to emphasize the building of international areas of distinction and the need to serve domestic populations that represent languages and cultures other than English, it is urgent that these institutions respond to the societal needs of our state, nation and the world by placing intercultural competence at the center of our curricula. We must begin to provide skills and tools (e.g., languages, intercultural competency, consciousness of social justice issues, communication skills, etc.) that create global citizens ready to

engage in economic growth and social progress. To this end, this paper describes how the learning community curriculum and teaching model can serve to promote intercultural competence among students in institutions of higher education.

## **THE LEARNING COMMUNITY MODEL**

Bennett (2008, p. 97) defines intercultural knowledge and competence as "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts." This concept, which includes cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions in an appropriate interaction, confirms the need to intentionally integrate intercultural competence into the curriculum. In other words, simply sharing space or being exposed to those who are culturally and linguistically different from ourselves is not enough to bring us into intercultural knowledge and understanding. We must engage with the "other" in a meaningful interaction in order for transformative education to happen. The learning community model provides the framework for such transformative education to happen.

Learning Communities (LCs) represent an alternative model of teaching and learning in higher education. Though the size and format vary, generally speaking, a learning community is a group of students who study together in an intense, integrated, thematic course that meets for large blocks of time (Eby et al., 2006). According to O'Connor, et al., "Some of the distinctive features of LCs are that they are usually smaller than most units on campus, they help overcome the isolation of faculty members from one another and their students, they encourage continuity and integration in the curriculum and they help build a sense of group identity, cohesion and 'specialness'" (O'Connor et al., 2003, p. 8).

The first LC was founded in 1927 by Alexander Meiklejohn at the Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin. Meiklejohn was concerned with the fragmentation, compartmentalization and departmentalization of the university experience as well as the lack of social responsibility being required of students (O'Connor et al., 2003). Like his contemporary in Brazil, Paulo Freire, Meiklejohn believed that one of the purposes of a liberal education was to prepare students for civic action (Freire, 2004). In order to unite the various disciplines and offer students an opportunity to become involved in their community, Meiklejohn developed what he called a learning community. This first LC on the University of Wisconsin campus integrated varying disciplines and incorporated a service-learning component into one articulated course. Joseph Tussman followed Meiklejohn's lead and created LCs at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960's. Both of these pioneers formed interactive communities of

learners and professors who explored various integrated themes across disciplines and worked to put these ideas into action in their communities through civic engagement (O'Connor et al., 2003).

LCs now exist in over 600 educational institutions across the nation (Eby et al., 2006). Some are residential where students and faculty live and study together, others are non-residential and vary in size, intensity, scope and format. The target audiences vary from program to program. Some LCs are designed for incoming first-year students while others are designed for Senior-level capstone experiences and/or underrepresented student populations. The duration of programs differ as well. Some communities of learners begin college together and stay in contact throughout their studies; others meet for only one term or one semester.

The focus of this paper is the learning community established in the Spanish program at Oregon State University. The university offered its first Spanish language LC, also known as the Advanced Spanish Coordinated Studies course in the spring of 2006. Motivated by Vincent Tinto (2000b) and his research-based evidence that LCs produced positive academic and affective outcomes, the faculty began to collaborate to develop the pilot Spanish language LC as a way to engage students with each other, the faculty and the community. The faculty was encouraged by this alternative model of learning that could provide a way to engage disaffected second language (L2) learners, help keep first- and second- year students in school, and help Latino students feel supported (Trujillo, 2009).

Currently, the Spanish learning community is an intensive, team-taught course in which learners gain knowledge and skills needed to interact with Spanish-speaking communities through the interdisciplinary exploration of a single theme. Course themes are designed to highlight points of convergence or contact between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking communities. Themes have included Media as an Instrument of Social Change, Exploring Borders/Fronteras, SABOR looking at issues of food, language, culture and identity, SABER the Latino Education Crisis and the theme for Spring 2010: SUSTENTO exploring issues surrounding poverty and hunger. The course addresses all communicative skill areas (reading, writing, speaking and listening) as stated in the National Standards in Foreign Language Education (2006), and includes content in the areas of literature, linguistics, culture, and civic engagement. Undergraduates receive 15 credits for successful completion of this course.

The student demographics of this program are unique in that the course was created with an intentional grouping of half native/heritage speakers of Spanish (N/H speakers) and half second language learners in the class. There were several reasons for

creating this intentional grouping of learners: first, the need to bring the two communities of students, traditionally separated and isolated from one another, into the same classroom and integrate them into one LC. Second was the fact that N/H speakers, an at-risk student population for dropping out of school, could benefit from finding a safe place or community, and enhance their self esteem by having their Spanish validated. In addition, the benefits to the L2 learners were many in that they would have the opportunity to learn Spanish, to learn about Latin American culture and to learn about the real issues Latino students face by interacting with their classmates instead of knowledge from a book. At the same time the L2 learners would have an opportunity to share their culture and personal experiences with the N/H speakers. In essence, both groups could come together and share and learn from each other in the safe environment of the LC. The course meets five days a week for five hours a day and, in addition, has a community service component of a minimum of 80 hours during the 10-week term. This community service has to be tied to the LC theme and provide interaction with the local and regional Latino community.

## **THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY**

Though there are many outcomes that form part of the LC, the rest of this paper will focus on the affective outcomes of the learning community as they relate to the development of intercultural knowledge and competence. Specifically, we wanted to know if students reported an increase in consciousness or awareness of the themes covered in the LC and of the needs of the local/regional Latino community. In addition, we explored what students reported about new ways of thinking and learning based on their experience in the LC, and if they continue to use those new strategies in the traditional classroom. Two additional areas were explored: what students reported about relationships and friendships they formed in the LC, and if students sustained those friendships beyond the course. In these last areas, we sought to determine if these relationships and friendships were between students of differing cultural or ethnic groups, and if students sustained these intercultural/interethnic friendships beyond the course.

It was hypothesized that due to the immersive environment, interdisciplinary approach, increased social interaction between class participants, and community engagement, students would report achievement in all these affective areas. Previous research demonstrates that LCs stimulate students' involvement in their learning, enhance student learning, increase skill in and respect for collaboration, and contribute to improved academic performance while creating stronger connections to the community at large (Spear et al., 2003; Tinto, 1997, 2000a; Tinto & Russo, 1994). In addition the

research literature also indicates that participation in a LC helps integrate students into college, provides a supportive community of peers and serves as a bridge for the academic-social divide that many students face (Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Russo, 1994).

### **The LCs SABOR and SABER**

The data collected for the present study come from SABOR and SABER, our two most recent learning communities offered in the Spring Terms of 2008 and 2009. Students helped plan the 15-credit course in a one-credit, two-day workshop/retreat around each theme. Students selected course reading materials from numerous options, and writing activities to meet the Writing Intensive Course (WIC) requirement for the university. In addition to selecting which tasks would fulfill the WIC requirement and provide meaningful interaction with the materials, students also developed rubrics for self-evaluation of class work. Furthermore, students and faculty planned field trips and other activities outside of the classroom and met with community leaders to design the community service component of the class.

The Spanish language thread of the learning community consisted of oral and written opportunities for interaction and engagement. The class was conducted entirely in Spanish except in the case of visiting professors who were non-Spanish speakers. Students gave oral presentations, wrote daily in their journals, responded to literature and articles in formal response papers, offered comments in the form of peer editing of written works, wrote blog entries, attended community service trainings, and provided 80+ hours of community service work which required the use of Spanish and interaction with the Latino community. In addition to class and community service activities, there were numerous opportunities to speak Spanish in community events attended by the students (theater, dinners, lectures, etc.) and in after-class social interactions.

The Latin American literature thread was related to each theme and consisted of a variety of literature and related readings. Students read books such as: *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel, *Fast Food Nation*, by Eric Schlosser, *Voices from the Fields: Children of Migrant Farm Workers Tell Their Stories*, by S. Beth Atkin, and *Latino Education Crisis* by Patricia Gándara and Francis Contreras. Students also read numerous articles related to the themes on food, culture, oppression, and stereotypes. The Latin American culture thread consisted of many hands-on authentic learning experiences for students. Because almost half of class participants had personal experiences to share as they were Native or Heritage speakers of Spanish, they provided a wealth of cultural information for the class. The community service component also provided contact with the Latino communities in the area.

Opportunities were provided for meal planning and cooking and eating together which allowed for interaction with the Latin American culture. SABOR students worked in groups to plan and then prepare a meal. SABER students volunteered for numerous educational organizations and schools as class assistants, teaching English as a second language, adult education programs, and readers for elementary school children in bilingual schools. The culminating project for SABOR was a series of short films, each featuring a different Latino in Oregon and his or her story. Students worked in small groups to create a story-board for their interviewee that would provide an honest reflection of that person's life experience as a Latino in Oregon. Teams interviewed a wide variety of people and made five-minute videos that were presented at the Public Library in a free event open to the community. SABER students designed bilingual information in the form of pamphlets and hand-outs that addressed the needs of the community organizations for which they volunteered. These were then presented to the community in public fora organized by students.

Other projects with the Latino community included working with the OSU Extension Service on a project called *Comidas Latinas* Food Security Assessment. In this project, 106 Latina women were interviewed by students about foods they purchased and prepared for their families and their level of acculturation. Students also gathered demographic and socio-economic information from the participants. Child care during the event was provided by students as well. In addition to the interviews with Latina women, students conducted four focus groups with Latino adolescents about their food preferences at local high schools.

### **Data Collection**

Data for the present study came from three main sources: student's written final evaluations of the LC course, their final videotaped course statements/summaries, and interviews with LC students approximately one year after they completed the course.

In the final course evaluations, students were asked to assess their progress in the area of language proficiency, using the Five Cs + 1: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities, and the sixth Consciousness (National Standards 2006; Trujillo 2007, 2009). Although faculty provided students with feedback throughout the term on papers, presentations, projects and other class work, LC students evaluate their own work based on rubrics developed in collaboration with faculty for each assignment. At the end of the course, students reflect on what they learned in relation to the language standards and the course objectives and outcomes, and give themselves a final grade for the course. Each student prepares a written self-evaluation

and determines his or her final grade in this written document which is then presented to the faculty team in the form of a face-to-face interview.

The course evaluations were analyzed for general themes within the sample which related to the research questions in the present study. Forty final course self-evaluations were analyzed; 19 from N/H speakers and 21 from L2 learners who participated in the SABOR or SABER LCs. In addition to final course evaluations, 19 videotaped final statements were viewed and transcribed. These were final interviews made by students when they met with one of the professors of the LC to review their course work and to assign themselves their final grade. In addition to turning in a written final self-evaluation of the course, each student also met with a professor to communicate how course objectives were met and to assign her/himself a grade. Ten L2 learners and nine N/H speakers made final statements on videotape. The statements were analyzed following the same process as the final course evaluations.

Lastly, 15 students were interviewed; eight L2 learners and seven N/H speakers, approximately one year after their experience in the LC. The interview questions were designed to collect more in depth information about two areas of interest: new ways of learning and thinking that students developed in the LC, and friendship development, both in terms of intracultural and intercultural interactions.

All participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. All quotes from students, either written in Spanish or spoken in Spanish, appear in the original language and have been translated into English for this paper. There are also quotes that exhibit the use of code switching or the use of both Spanish and English. These phrases and quotes have been presented as they were spoken with words or phrases in Spanish in italics and the English translation of those words or phrases after the quote. Quotes have been recorded as written or as stated in the videos, and have not been corrected for spelling or grammatical errors.

## **The Sample**

Students must apply to be admitted to the LC program. The teaching team works to balance the LC with an almost equal number of L2 learners and N/H speakers therefore, the demographics of the students in both SABOR and SABER were intentional; each LC reflected the approximate mix of 50% L2 language learners and 50% N/H speakers. This cross-cultural and linguistic mix is one of the dimensions that students particularly enjoyed. One L2 learner wrote:

Me gusto como la clase es mitad hispanohablantes y anglosajones. Para mi es la mejor manera para aprender. Porque había gente quien ha tenido experiencias y podemos compartir nuestras experiencias y podemos conversar sobre nuestras perspectivas. *[I liked how the class was half English speakers and half Spanish speakers. For me, this is the best way to learn because there were people who have had different experiences and we could share our experiences and talk about our perspectives.] (L2 learner)*

In terms of gender the course demographics reflect the predominance of females in language programs in that nearly 70% of the participants were female. It should be noted that female Latinas are represented at higher numbers than male Latinos in higher education and the class makeup reflected this phenomenon (Fry, 2002).

In addition, each learning community also included two or three graduate students, reflecting a range from freshmen to seniors to graduates in college. Five students were seniors and graduated after Spring term. Of the total student sample only 5 had previous experience with the LC model. The rest of the 35 students had taken traditional college courses only.

## **FINDINGS**

Though many areas of learning were explored. The results for the present study will focus on the findings as they relate to the affective dimension of learning and its relation to the development of intercultural competence.

In the area of culture, 81% of the students gave examples of what they had learned about Latin American culture and Latino culture in the US during the course. Of the N/H speakers, 67% expressed that they had extended their learning of culture. Of the L2 learners, 92% reported learning information that was new to them about Latino culture in class. In general, students reported that their awareness of culture came from two types of experience: their experience with classmates and their experience with the Latino community in their community service work. One of the participants described how she learned of culture from her classmates in this statement:

Aprendemos sobre la cultura todos los días porque nuestra propia comunidad está formada de [estudiantes de] diferentes culturas. Por ejemplo, tenemos compañeros de México, Guatemala, Tonga y Americanos. *[We learned about culture everyday because our own community was made up of [students from]*

*different cultures. For example, we have classmates from Mexico, Guatemala, Tonga and Americans.] (N/H speaker)*

Another student highlighted the role that the community service component played in her learning about cultures:

*Durante las cenas, hable con mucha gente aprendí sobre la cultura Mexicana mas que otros. Ellos están emocionados de hablar con alguien que quiere aprender y charlar en español. [During the dinners, I talked with a lot of people and learned about the Mexican culture more than others. They were excited to talk with somebody that wanted to learn Spanish and to talk in Spanish.] (N/H speaker)*

A third student mentioned his interaction with both classmates and the greater Latino community in his final self-evaluation:

*Lo bueno de esta comunidad es que he podido tener una interacción con hispanos mas amplio que lo que he tenido en cualquier momento desde hace dos anos, cuando estudie en México. (L2 learner)*

The good thing about this community is that I have been able to have a greater interaction with Latinos than at any other time during the two years that I have been here, since I studied in Mexico. (L2 learner)

With respect to consciousness/awareness of the themes covered and the Latino community, 76% of students reported an increase in consciousness of the themes covered in the LC and of the needs of the Latino community in the US. A few students used the terms “opening their minds” or “opening their eyes” to explain that they had become aware or conscious of course material as they interacted with the Latino community and each other. The themes from the LCs that were often mentioned were: the understanding and rejecting of Latino stereotypes, recognizing the impact of fast food companies and the food industry on the Latino community, understanding the hard work behind the food we eat and that many Latinos do that agricultural work, issues affecting access and success of Latinos in the educational systems, covert prejudice and racism that is present in educational institutions, and the plight of a large percentage of the Latino population in the area surrounding the university. In reflecting on stereotypes, an L2 learner wrote:

*Con los videos me siento como mi grupo afectivamente extendió el conocimiento de la experiencia latina en Oregon porque introducimos una vida excepcional que explica como es posible tener una vida de éxito como una latina. (L2 learner)*

With the videos I feel like my group effectively extended the understanding of the Latino experience in Oregon because we introduced an exceptional life that explained that it is possible to have a successful life as a Latina. (L2 learner)

In relation to how the fast food industry impacts Latinos, an N/H speaker wrote:

*También la lectura Fast Food me abrió los ojos a como veo la industria de comidas rápidas en los Estados Unidos. Como les está afectando a la comunidad latina por los trabajos mal pagados. (N/H speaker)*

The book *Fast Food Nation* also opened my eyes to how I view the fast food industry in the United States. How it affects the Latino community through low-paying jobs. (N/H speaker)

In regards to hard work performed by Latino agricultural workers to get food to our table, one student wrote:

*Mi perspectiva cambió sobre la comida que yo como, y los alimentos y la comida que compraba y compraré. Antes de esta clase, nunca pensaba sobre las personas. Las manos, que hagan los alimentos que yo como... Ahora cuando ore para la comida, pienso sobre todas las manos que trabajen para la comida que este enfrente de mí. (También, no voy a decir 'inmigrante ilegal' pero inmigrante indocumentado' ahora.) (L2 learner)*

My perspective changed about the food that I eat and the food that I used to buy and will buy. Before this class, I never thought of the people. The hands that made the food that I eat... Now when I bless the food, I think of the hands that worked so that this food can be in front of me. (Also, I am not going to say 'illegal immigrant' now but undocumented immigrant.) (L2 learner)

Lastly, an N/H speaker wrote about her increased awareness of the difficult situation of a large part of the Latino community.

*Wow...que puedo decir del servicio comunitario con mi comunidad latina. Para mí fue una experiencia fantástica que me ayudo pensar y reflexionar en mi*

*misma...Fui testigo de historias de sufrimiento que no he experimentado en carne propia. (N/H speaker)*

Wow... what can I say about the community service with my Latino community. For me it was a fantastic experience that helped me to think and to reflect about myself. I was witness to stories of suffering that I have not experienced myself. (N/H speaker)

In terms of new ways of thinking and learning, over half of the students (67%) reported that they had learned new ways of thinking and learning in the LCs in their final evaluations and in interviews. Of the students who wrote and spoke about learning in new ways, students reported learning from classmates, learning by doing (community service), doing real work that matters (community service), expressing and communicating learning through artistic responses, collaborative learning, and learning outside of the class in other venues. Almost all of the students who commented on these new ways of engaging with material, mentioned that it was a challenge in some way at the beginning of the term but they overcame the challenge and, in the end, embraced the new approach. Many students wrote that performing the required hours of community service work was difficult but most met the requirement and reported the experience was one of the most valuable parts of their learning in the LC. Many students also reported the novelty of group work and collaborative work and that it represented a digression from their previous study habits but that they found they enjoyed it and found it to produce quality results.

These two student quotes demonstrate how students valued the learning from other students, not just the teachers. An N/H speaker, shares his feelings about learning from other students:

*Me encantó poder aprender de mis compañeros. Creo que aprendí más de ellos que de la clase. Pude apreciar las historias que cada quien contaba y aprender algo de ellas. Estoy agradecido de haber compartido mi vida con ellos y escuchar como ellos también han pasado por apuros y superado muchas etapas oscuras de sus vidas. Me dio gusto ver que somos tan diferentes pero iguales a la vez. (N/H speaker)*

I loved being able to learn from my classmates. I think I learned more from them than from the class. I could appreciate the stories that everyone told and learn from them. I am thankful for having shared my life with them and for having to have heard how they have gone through hard times and triumphed over many

difficult stages of their lives. I was pleased to learn that we are different but the same. (N/H speaker)

Many students mentioned they liked the community service work because they learned by doing and it was meaningful and real work. The quote below from an L2 learner summarizes her attitude about this new way of learning:

*Después de trabajar con personas que viven en la pobreza, me parece una pérdida del tiempo escribir algo que nunca va a influir en la vida de nadie. Sé que los artículos de muchos investigadores son sumamente importantes para cambiar la política de la educación, la salud, etc., pero la mayoría del tiempo los trabajos de estudiantes solo les ayudan a si misma. El desarrollo personal es importante, pero ¿no es más importante la reflexión junta con la acción? (L2 learner)*

After working with people that live in poverty, it seems like a waste of time to write something that is never going to influence anyone's life. I know that many researchers' articles are really important in order to change the politics of education, health, etc. but most of the time student papers only help the students. Personal development is important but, isn't it more important to reflect and put that together with action? (L2 learner)

Working together on projects and collaboration was mentioned by many as a new learning experience and one that many students enjoyed. One student explained her experience in this way:

*Al principio de esta clase estaba muy acostumbrada a estudiando sola y aprendiendo independiente de alguna otra persona...En contraste, este clase me hace que compartir el trabajo con otras y cargar el peso con mis compañeros. Fue difícil al principio a preguntar por ayuda a los estudiantes en vez de un maestro, pero poco a poco, cambie mis hábitos de estudio...Este fue lo más poderoso estilo de aprender tan importante trabajando juntos y haciendo todo juntos es en la cultura latina... (L2 learner)*

At the beginning of this class, I was used to studying alone and learning independently of other people. ... In contrast, this class makes me share the work with others and carry the burden with my classmates. It was difficult at first to ask students for help instead of the teacher but, little by little, I changed my study habits. ...This was the most powerful way of learning, it was so important

to work together and do everything together like in the Latino culture. (L2 learner)

Finally, extending the learning outside of the class was powerful and effective for many students. One L2 learner explained in the interview:

It was huge for me to leave the classroom, when we went to the farm. La granja me afectó un montón. [*The farm affected me a lot*]. Teachers could tell me a thousand times to be conscientious of where to buy my food but this was so much stronger. (L2 learner)

Students were asked about the relationships and friendships they developed in class and how these differed from those in the traditional classes. The majority of students indicated that the many hours they spent together during class and outside of class, the collaborative efforts required by group projects, the eighty hours of community service, social engagements related to class and unrelated to class all led to the strong sense of community and fostered friendship development. One student speaks for many when she describes the experience in this way:

Lo que más me gustó fue la gran amistad que nació entre muchos de nosotros. Antes de tomar esta clase, no tenía muchos amigos por diferentes razones. Primero porque es mi primer año aquí en esta universidad y cuando me moví aquí no conocía a nadie. En la clase de SABOR, conocí a muchas personas maravillosas que me brindaron a su amistad incondicionalmente y sin conocerme. [*The thing I liked best was the deep friendship that developed amongst many of us. Before taking this class, I didn't have many friends for different reasons. It is my first year here in this university and when I moved here, I didn't know anybody. In the SABOR class, I met many marvelous people who offered me their friendship unconditionally without knowing me.*] (N/H speaker)

Not only did students describe their classmates in the LC as friends, but many used the word family to describe their fellow students. An L2 learner wrote this about her experience:

SABOR es parte de mi vida para siempre. La clase me da el sentido que tengo familia y comunidad en la universidad. [*SABOR is part of my life forever. This class gives me a sense that I have family and community in the university.*] (L2 learner)

The message is clear in student evaluations, statements and interviews that the LC experience provided them with a strong sense of belonging, sense of community and fostered the development of many friendships that the students considered important. For many, they stated this was “*lo más grande e importante de la clase*” [the biggest and most important part of the class].

Students also reported that this experience of making so many good friends was unique to their college classroom experience. They reported that in traditional classes, there is very little time to interact with others and to get to know them whereas in the LC the class structure required students to be interactive from the very first day and negotiate many of their cultural differences with one another. One of the students explained the difference between the LC and a traditional class by saying, “In the regular classes, you don’t talk to students. It’s like, ‘I’m here to just take notes and I’m out of here.’ In the LC, you are engaging in class, you get to know students, “*participas más*” [*you participate more*]. An N/H speaker, explained that even though she has had many of the same students (a cohort group) in her classes over the years, she still does not know them well. An L2 student states:

Sí, somos de religiones, países, culturas, preferencias sexuales, idiomas, edades, géneros, tradiciones, familias, historias, etnicidades, y niveles socio-económicos diferentes. Cada de estos factores contribuyen a nuestra identidad, y nos hacen ser diferentes y únicos....hay diferencias, por ejemplo, una persona ha tenido una vida muy difícil...y por eso es difícil relacionarme con él/ella. La primera vea que le conocí, me ofendió porque su actitud era fuerte para mí. Después de nuestra actividad...entendí mejor que venimos de vidas muy diferentes y pude comprender. [*Yes we are from different religions, countries, cultures, sexual preferences, languages, ages, genders, traditions, families, histories, ethnicities, and socio-economic levels. Each of these factors contribute to our identity and make us different and unique...there are differences, for example, one person had a very difficult life...and that’s why it was difficult for me to relate to him/her. The first time I met him/her, I was offended because his/her attitude was aggressive to me. After our activity...I saw that we came from very different lives and I was able to understand.*] (L2 learner)

Not only did the LC students get to know each other, they got to know each other very well. The terms that students chose to describe the quality and nature of the friendships were “deep”, “not superficial” and “real”. Students attributed their deep friendships to the amount of time they spent together, the difficult but rewarding work in the LC and the sharing of personal values. An L2 learner wrote, “I have learned to connect with myself and others in a new way and in a deeper way!” Students connected and spent so

much time together during the term that many compared it to “*convivencia*” [living together]. Although it was not a residential LC, many said it felt like they lived together as they were either in class, doing community service, studying together, attending cultural events together or going out dancing together. The group video projects and the community service projects were both considered difficult but rewarding work by the majority of the students and were reported to help students get to know each other better. The metaphor of family was used to explain how they had shared both good times (dancing, cooking, community service) and difficult (a professor falling gravely ill, a student who had a death in the family, a student whose family had been deported) and how those experiences had brought them closer together. The sharing of meals was reported to be a bonding experience and something that created intimacy within the group and among friends. Many, during the interview, mentioned the desire to have a LC reunion of sorts. The affection for the course as a *familia* was evident in talking with students and reading their evaluations.

Perhaps this feeling of family was strengthened by the fact that the LC also encouraged students to connect with their friends and families and the friends and families of other students. Unlike the traditional classroom which has a closed-door policy, the LC had an open-door policy where friends and family were welcome. Many students invited others to help cook in the kitchen or to share in a meal with the class. Students with young children also felt comfortable bringing their children to class. Every visitor was made to feel welcome and accommodations such as translations were made for non-Spanish speakers.

The students interviewed who were still on campus nine months later, reported having sustained the friendships they made in the LC. Two participants, who have moved away, reported they have not sustained the friendships they made in the LC. One of those two reported to still text fellow students and expressed an interest in seeing and reconnecting with the other classmates but finds it hard to maintain contact from afar. The students who still attend the university maintain contact and consider each other close friends. They are all busy with classes and reported not always having the time to “hang out” together like they did during the LC but they text message, call, stop and talk, stop and give each other hugs when they see each other. Some still find the time to have meals together, go to the movies together or study together. An N/H speaker closed her evaluation with this quote:

*La amistad que creció entre nosotros fue algo muy bonito y esperamos que los que tuvo un comienzo no tenga final.* (N/H speaker)

The friendship that grew amongst us was beautiful and let's hope that that which has begun does not end. (N/H speaker)

In regards to inter-ethnic or intercultural friendships and how these differed from other traditional classes, all of the students interviewed, reported they made friends with classmates from a different cultural or ethnic group other than their own. For a few students, this type of friendship was the first with someone from a different cultural or ethnic group. One Latino student confided that in the community where he was raised, Latinos held a negative view of Anglos and for this reason he did not believe that Anglos could be trusted or that they really wanted to be his friend. He said that this LC experience proved to him that this was not true and he learned "not to judge a book by its cover" but instead get to know the person. This feeling is confirmed by an N/H student who states:

En clase cuando hablamos de estereotipos me ayudó a entender que todos tenemos estereotipos sobre otras culturas, gente y grupos. Entendí que estos estereotipos son construidos y se mantienen estereotipos porque todos los apoyamos cuando creemos en ellos. *[In class when we spoke about stereotypes, it helped me understand that we all have stereotypes about other cultures, people and groups. I realized that these stereotypes are constructed and they are maintained because we all support them when we believe them.]* (N/H Speaker)

Another Latina student shared that she had tried to make friends from other cultures and/or ethnic groups before but it was "hard" and she worried they thought she was weird, perceived she was different and would not want to spend time with her. In the LC, however, she was able to feel accepted by others that were not Latinos and made friends with them, friends she classified as "real" friends and who warrant a hug when she sees them on campus. A third student said his motivation for taking the course was to get to know different people. This N/H speaker explained, "*Es difícil conocer a los Anglos, son diferentes.*" [It is difficult to get to know Anglos, they are different]. This student had had friends from Russia and from China but not friends he considered Anglos. He reported he too made Anglo friends in the LC.

An L2 learner, confided that although she had few friends from other cultures and ethnic groups, the experience of being in a diverse group was new to her:

The town I grew up in was not very understanding of people from other cultures. It was based on white supremacy and it is still rooted in those ideas, even people my age think like that. If we had a person of color, they left pretty soon after,

went north or south. [x] was one of the last sundown towns<sup>1</sup> in Oregon... Therefore, growing up, it was hard to have friends from different cultures. As a kid, I knew there must be more than just white people in this world... [In SABOR] I wondered if I would be the only white girl. Would there be other ethnicities? It was hard, I thought it was great, the amount of diversity.

For participants for whom this was not their first experience with friends from other cultures or ethnic groups, they often commented that although they had experienced intercultural friendships before, many were formed before coming to the university – in their home town, in a smaller liberal arts college and in a residential summer program, and were not as meaningful as the intercultural friendship they formed in the LC. For example, when one of the students was asked if this was the first friendship from another ethnic or cultural group he had made, he answered, “Pues, no pero el único que he llevado a vivir a mi casa.” [*Well, no but the only one that I have brought to my house to live*]. A few participants met students from other cultures and ethnic groups in the dorms, in classes or at their job on campus, but students reported that the campus climate in general did not facilitate making friends from other cultures. Students reported that the LC presented one of the best opportunities they had experienced to make friends with students from other cultures on campus. Most students reported that they have sustained these intercultural or interethnic friendships. They reported seeing each other on campus, studying together, talking on the phone and going out together.

These experiences were true not just for those who developed intercultural friendships, but also for several N/H students who became more aware of their own identity through the intraethnic relationships they established both in class and in the Latino community. An N/H student states:

Aunque soy latino, la mayoría de personas latinos que conozco son personas en mi propia familia. Mi trabajo comunitario me dio la oportunidad de conocer nuevas personas Latinas y me ayudo a sentirme mas conectado a la comunidad latina. [*Though I am Latino, most of the Latino persons I know are in my own family. My community work gave me the opportunity to meet new Latino people and helped me feel more connected to the Latino community*].

The conditions identified by students in the LC that facilitated the development of intercultural and intracultural friendships were very similar to the conditions they identified for the development of friendships in general. Time spent together in class and outside of class, collaborative projects and projects that elicited sharing of personal

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<sup>1</sup> “A sundown town is any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it and thus was ‘all-white’ on purpose” (Loewen, 2005, p. 4).

experiences and opinions were the main experiences and activities that they felt helped them to become friends with students from other cultural groups. Students felt that assignments such as artistic responses in the form of poems or songs allowed LC members to open up and get to know and trust each other. Another important factor that ensured intercultural contact and fostered intercultural friendship development was the encouragement by professors to form groups for projects that were diverse in gender, age, ethnicity and skill sets. In short, students were placed in situations where they had to work with others that were not like themselves. An L2 learner describes the experience like this:

Creo que naturalmente nos juntamos con las personas más similar de nosotros...En esta clase, fue necesario a pasar tiempo con personas muy diferentes de nosotros... en esta clase, teníamos que salir de esta “zona de seguridad” de funcionar. *[I think that naturally, we team up with people most similar to ourselves...In this class, it was necessary to spend time with people really different from ourselves...In this class, we had to leave our “comfort zone” in order to function.]*

The requests made by the professors for students to mix, coupled with other shared experiences and activities seem to have provided the impetus for this student and others to step out of their “cultural comfort zones” and get to know and become friends with people who they perceived different than themselves.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this study, it was hypothesized that due to the immersive environment, interdisciplinary approach, increased social interaction between class participants, and community engagement, students would report a high level of achievement in all areas of the language standards and in the area of intercultural competence as defined by Bennet (2008). In other words, that students would meaningfully engage with others not of their own culture, that they would be able to compare and contrast cultural contexts, gain a deeper understanding of intercultural differences and similarities, and empathically adapt to unfamiliar ways of being and thinking.

Given the many statements shared by students, it is apparent that the interaction with the Latino community in and out of class made for an enriching and transforming cultural experience. The large blocks of class time (five hours three days a week) and the many hours of community service (80 hours in the 10-week term) meant many hours of each day were dedicated to sharing, learning, interacting and serving the community.

In the area of student engagement, students also reported positive results. Engagement can be described as the amount of time and effort that students put into their studies and dedication to learning (Kuh et al., 2005). The feeling of community and interdependency created a learning environment where students did not want to let each other down. Students attended class, community service events and out-of-class activities and participated on a regular basis. It is not surprising then that students reported that they learned and became much more conscious of not just Latino culture but the themes in the LCs and how these connected to the Latino community.

Students reported forming strong and lasting friendships with others in the LCs. The students' report of developing friendships in the LCs is supported by the research literature. Tinto (1997) reports finding that LCs build supportive peer groups and provide a much needed bridge between the academic and the social environments for students. Tinto explains that LCs allow students, "to meet two needs, social and academic, without having to sacrifice one in order to meet the other" (Tinto, 1997, p. 617).

The fact that for some of the LC students, this was the first friendship they had formed with a person of another culture or ethnic group is significant. The incidence of intercultural, interethnic and interracial friendships is rare (Tatum, 1997; Clement & Harding, 1978, Hallinan & Williams, 1989). Homophily, or the desire to be with others who are like us, plays a large part in this phenomenon (Moody, 2001). The lack of opportunities for people of different cultural or ethnic groups to mix together also discourages intercultural and interethnic friendship development (Blau, 1977). Allport's Contact Theory (1954) explains that not only contact but prolonged and meaningful contact is necessary to form intercultural, interethnic and interracial friendships (Allport, 1954; Aberson, Shoemaker, & Tomolillo, 2004). The LC model meets the conditions of Allport's Contact Theory in that it brings together students of different cultural and ethnic groups in a community where they have equal status and where they work collaboratively, as a team or in smaller teams, on purposeful pursuits such as completing the classroom and community-based projects. When describing what allowed him/her to make so many friends from different cultures in the LC, an L2 participant described the LCs participants' equal status that Allport found to be essential to contact that produces positive results:

La cultura como tema borró la separación entre nosotros y el uso de español nos hice iguales [*The theme of culture erased the separation between us and the use of Spanish made us all equal*].

On the same topic an N/H student stated:

En esta clase no veo etnicidad porque todos somos igual y nadie tener más poder que otro. Así mismo todos tenemos la oportunidad de conversar....y veo que todos están saliendo de sus burbujas de cómodo. *[In this class I don't see ethnicity because we are all the same and no one has more power than the other. In the same way, we all have the opportunity to converse....and I see that everyone is coming out of their comfort zone].*

As our country and our universities become more and more diverse, we need programs that include and engage all learners. On the national level, the numbers of Latinos and Hispanic students have steadily increased at institutions of higher education. A full 10% of all Latino high school graduates are enrolled in college, either a community college or a four-year institution (Fry, 2002). In the Oregon University System, the number of African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic/Latinos students *increased* by 57.7%, while the total number of students *decreased* by 6.5% in the 5-year period between 1991 and 1996. Hispanic/Latino students had the largest increase in their numbers during that time compared to any other underrepresented group (Oregon State System of Higher Education, 1997).

It is essential that universities reach out to students and continue to research, create and implement ways to increase student involvement and student engagement as a way to keep students in school and ensure that they graduate. These strategies to increase student involvement and engagement are especially important for underrepresented student populations. For Latino students, who may be the first in their families to attend school, the lack of a support network at home that most North American college students take for granted, presents a challenge (Fry, 2002). Our universities need to provide experiences that provide ways for these students and others to engage in deep learning, become involved in the university and connect with each other and with their communities.

As demographics continue to shift and the current economic crisis increases negative sentiment towards immigrants, the need to reduce prejudice through meaningful contact and friendships with others from different cultures and ethnic groups is also essential. The LC model should be considered as one way in which students from diverse backgrounds and differing ethnic and cultural groups, many times isolated from each other, can be brought together in an environment that fosters intercultural competence. It is through these types of interactions that people can lay aside stereotypes and prejudices they hold about others, thereby adjusting the cognitive and affective lens

through which they interpret their experiences and make sense of the world around them.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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