Fostering in-and-out-of-class cultures of learning: The learning community approach

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My project **focuses** on improving student academic achievement and individual development by purposively connecting students' in-class and out-of-class learning through espousing a *learning community* approach to education in order to establish a *self-regulated learning outcome*. This focus interfaces the social system (characterised by personal life and support) and academic system (integration and interaction) in order to establish a *self-regulated learning outcom*e during the first two years of students' participation in the access programme.

Taking into account the current support practices offered to students, especially in the early days of their university entrance, which is mainly academically oriented, this project is investigating the role of **out-of-class learning capital[1]**, particularly during the interfaces between the access programmes and its impact on student learning, in order to develop a model that can inform transitional and academic success at the University of the Free State. To that end, I hope students will:

- learn and reflect on their learning;
- become critical thinkers who know how to ask questions and develop a deep comprehension of issues; and
- share their learning and work with others in the community.

Access programme research documents *student involvement*, *student integration*, and *high effort at academic tasks* as the most important factors to promote *academic achievement* and *individual development* (Kuh *et al*., 1991; Astin, 1993). The aforementioned requires both time on task and a review of the teaching and learning pedagogy. With regard to time, I realised that students spend 51% of the 160 notional hours of my 16-credit module out of class, thus making it inevitable to search for innovative ways to promote the quality use of the remaining notional hours for learning. The answer for me is adopting the ***learning community approach* to**

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[1] The use of learning capital in this report is two pronged, first as a subjective or cognitive in nature, and refers to resources (such as information, ideas and support) that individuals are able to procure by virtue of their relationship with other people. Secondly, is structural, and refers to the individual's involvement in informal networks for productive, in this context, educational purposes (Mulford, 2007).

education, which allows students to take charge of their own learning, engage in a deep learning process, and receive peer support; all of which can be done outside class time. In the learning community approach, the goal is to foster *cultures of learning*. This culture allows students to take charge of their own learning, engage in a deep learning process, and receive peer support; all of this can be done in variety of learning spaces including outside of class time.

The learning communities approach's first recorded emergence was in the 1920s and it found ground in the 1960s with efforts to humanise the learning environment (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). A more modern version of the learning community emerged in the late 1980s, supported by increasing acknowledgement that student engagement in educationally focused activities is the predecessor of high levels of student learning and personal development, as well as educational effectiveness. Other related research reports that the learning community approach to teaching and learning is an effective intervention for increasing student retention (Tinto, 2000; 2003). Zhao and Kuh (2004) described it as an advancement of student engagement, and Larder and Malnarich (2008; 2009) asserted that the approach fosters students' critical thinking skills and optimises integrative learning.

The following three arguments support this assertion. They include, firstly, the *social constructionist argument* views of education that draw from Dewey and Vygostsky's (in Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999) understanding that people learn best not by assimilating what they are told, but rather by a knowledge-construction process. An ideal context for this to happen is in an education context that adopts the learning community approach for teaching and learning. Secondly is the *learning to learn argument*, which posits that students will learn to be learners if they find themselves in a context that shares similar principles Frank Smith (in Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). It almost translates to the old adage *birds of a feather flock together*. Converting this argument into practice will be helpful in breaking down the walls of the classroom, harnessing from the learning capital created in the social constructivist argument, and ultimately encouraging learning out of class. Thirdly is the *multicultural argument*, which advocates for teaching and learning that foster students' abilities to work and learn with other people, particularly those from different cultural, racial, class, gender, etc. backgrounds. An important outcome for this argument is the students' ability to respect each other's views and to synthesise diverse views or multiple perspectives emanating from the learning community, and to use each other other's diverse knowledge and skills as a resource to collaboratively solve problems in order to advance their own understanding (MacGregor, 1991 & Bielaczyc &

Collins, 1999). Furthermore, Tinto, Russo and Kadel (1994:25) and Tinto (2000) documented the following benefits of learning communities at two-year colleges: students create their own supportive peer groups that extend beyond the classroom; students become more involved in both in-class and out-of-class activities; students spend more time and effort on academic and other educationally purposeful activities; and students become more actively involved and take more responsibility for their own learning, instead of being passive receivers of information. Critical for this educational process is the establishment of learning opportunities that will help develop an entwined relationship and to bridge in-class and out-of-class learning experiences. Figure 1 illustrates a process that can be adopted to support self-regulated learning. In particular, it challenges for teaching that adopt a holistic approach in order to help the new student establish a learning culture that is involved, integrated and that apply high effort at academic tasks. A community learning practise is a promising pedagogical approach for integrating both in-class and out-of class formal and informal learning and for creating a social learning environment that can help students aggregate, share resources, participate in collective knowledge generation, and manage their own meaning making process. It is in this context that I imagine an emerging relationship between self-regulation, social presence, and personal agency (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2012) which is fundamental to student learning capital that will translate academic persistence and success.
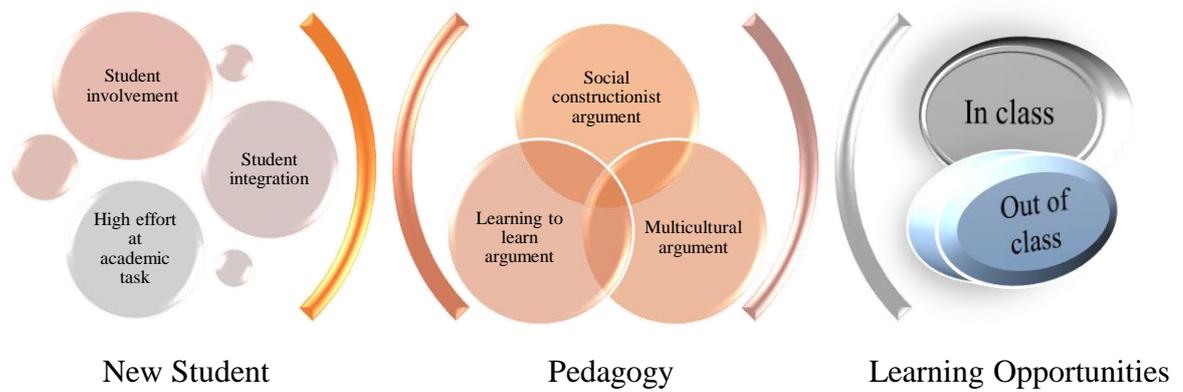
New Student   Pedagogy   Learning Opportunities

Figure 1: Supporting self-regulated learning

The challenge to adopting the learning community approach to learning has implications for pedagogical practices. I put forward Figure 2 as a conceptual model that can be used to reconcile learning spaces (in class and out of class). At the core is the learning outcomes, which essentially serve to point to a specific teaching and learning direction, but also allow participants in the process to actively engage resources at their disposal to maximise the learning output. This process is not oblivious to the dominant teaching position of facts and knowledge (typical of instrumental disposition) – it advances teaching and learning that create space for sense-making or meaning-making.
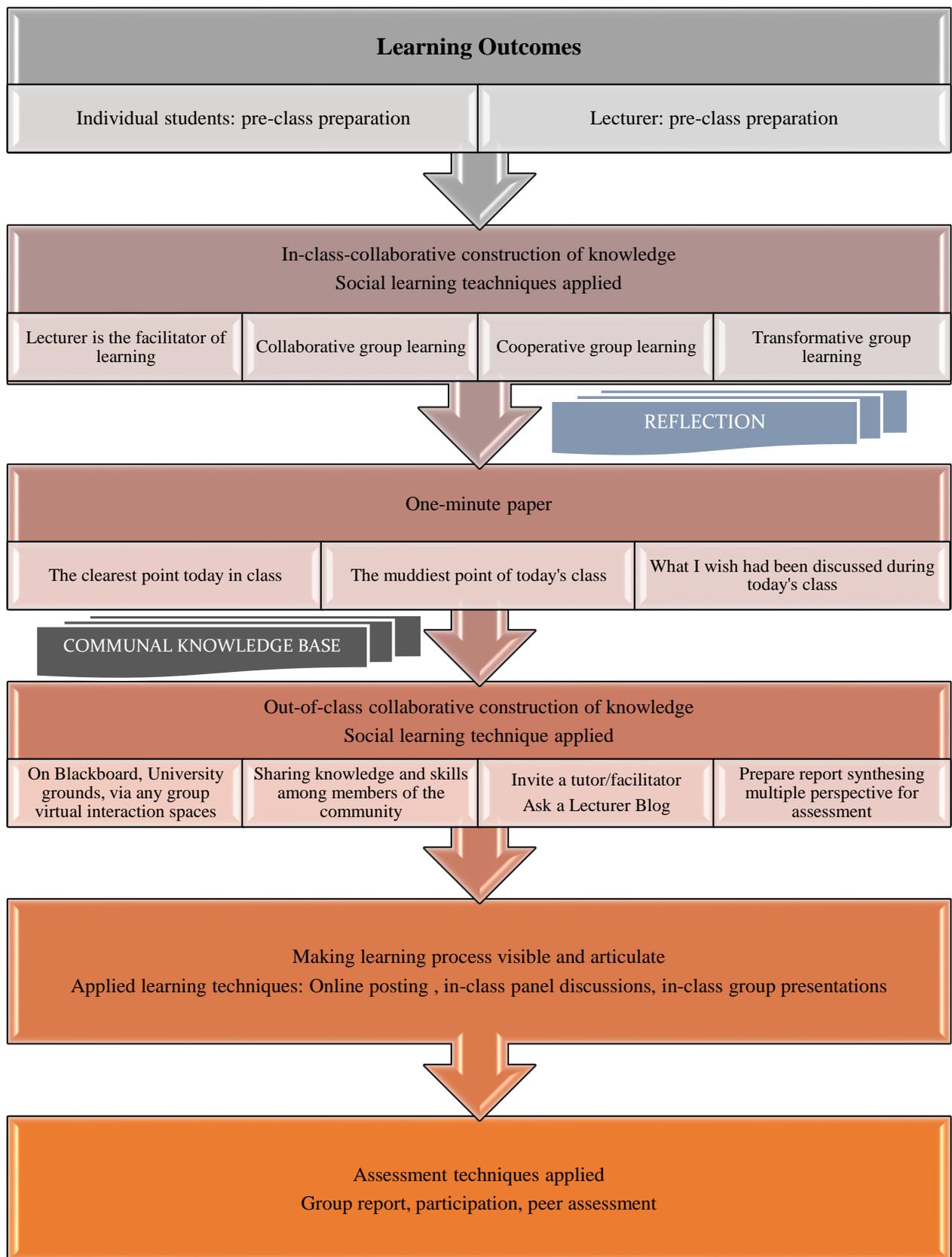
Learning Outcomes

Individual students: pre-class preparation	Lecturer: pre-class preparation

In-class-collaborative construction of knowledge
Social learning teachniques applied

Lecturer is the facilitator of learning	Collaborative group learning	Cooperative group learning	Transformative group learning

REFLECTION

One-minute paper

The clearest point today in class	The muddiest point of today's class	What I wish had been discussed during today's class

COMMUNAL KNOWLEDGE BASE

Out-of-class collaborative construction of knowledge
Social learning technique applied

On Blackboard, University grounds, via any group virtual interaction spaces	Sharing knowledge and skills among members of the community	Invite a tutor/facilitator Ask a Lecturer Blog	Prepare report synthesing multiple perspective for assessment

Making learning process visible and articulate
Applied learning techniques: Online posting , in-class panel discussions, in-class group presentations

Assessment techniques applied
Group report, participation, peer assessment

Figure 2: Learning community model adopted for first-year students

In-class collaboration requires the redefinition of traditional roles of teacher-teaches and students-learn (which effectively reinforces the passive disposition to learning) to that of co-constructors of knowledge (which pushes for an active role in learning). In this context, we acknowledge all actors as experts in their own right. Establishing a partnership approach is critical to teaching and learning. I put forward collaborative group learning, cooperative group learning, and transformative group learning (Cranton, 1996) as key social learning approaches to in-class collaborative construction of knowledge. Cranton (1996) contends that each group-learning approach emerges from varying learning needs and contexts, and each leads to unique kinds of knowledge. The model (see Figure 2) further points to the importance of breaking down lecture halls, so that learning continues out-of-class. An embedded practice of structured meta-cognitive reflection crafts a learning template that is essentially student-directed. I regard student curiosity emanating from points of contention and the need for further engagement as central to successful out-of-class learning. A sign of this is student urgency, characterised by the need to review lecture discussions and active collaborative engagement with the learning community in order to create joint products. Members of the community have the option to invite academic facilitators to their discussions or learning spaces, who will assume a critical friend role or can blog the lecturer. The ensuing in-class contact session provides a space for further engagement, which can take the form of panel discussions or group presentations on issues that emerge out of class. Usually a colleague will be invited to assume the role of a class monitor and discussant. It is important that we close the cycle and elevate to the next learning outcome.

While the founding curriculum layout is important, out-of-class learning is entrenched by university spaces that create a conducive environment that encourages engagement. For in-class teaching to remain effective out of class, I imagine on-ground university learning spaces that are responsive to learning. Public spaces (on the grass, at a cafeteria, student centre, or any place outside the lecture halls) provide informal, spontaneous meeting points and sites for collaboration among students, or students and the facilitator (by invitation), and are ideally suited for more casual engagement with module content. Expected activities include small groups of students, students working together on group assignments, and students generating content to be discussed in class and for tests, and a place for collaborative activities. I argue that this approach to learning will increase student agency, which will have an effect on group productivity. I expect enhanced learning ownership particularly when tasks are student-

initiated – compared to the procedural outcomes of learning for teacher-designed activities. It is important at this stage to bring to the fore the question of how to divide the power and control of the learning process between teacher and student into the respective learning and teaching spaces. De Arriba's (2016) experiment on collaborative learning found that teacher control reduces the effectiveness of the collaboration. If control is given entirely to the students, his observation was that the learning process results in confusion and bewilderment when carrying out activities according to teaching objectives. This assertion begs for an approach that explicitly define the roles of actors in the collaboration and build a process reflection on peer social presence, instructor social presence, sense of connectedness, and sense of learning. I do not think there is an objective rule to guide the process; I imagine that the adoption of the use of a community approach to learning will require a reasonable amount of training on this issue.

Conclusion and recommendation

The aim of this project is to develop a *learning capital model* for an access programme that advances both student retention and graduate success. I deem the integration of both the student academic life (essential for academic achievement) and social life (for individual development) as critical factors for academic persistence and success. In line with arguments that deem learning as essentially *social*, I put forward the learning community approach to facilitate this process. Learning communities increase student engagement through unique learning environments and experiences, it increases students' integration of learning by promoting collaboration in and out of class, and will increase the depth of student learning through experiences requiring the application of knowledge. Important in this learning context is the communal learners that harnesses shared diverse views and learning style and the learning and working with others in the community as a resource. I regard the interplay between self-regulation, social presence, and personal agency as important learning attributes that will equip students to navigate new learning areas in a new learning environment.

I recommend the espousal of this approach on both curricular and pedagogical level. The implication is that module designers and learning facilitators be trained on the learning community approach to teaching. It is equally important that the university creates a conducive teaching and learning-responsive environment for this practice.

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