

Appreciative Coaching for RC-Based Learning Communities with a Caring Perspective

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Abstract

The article outlines an actionable model of appreciative coaching, from the perspective of holistic student development (HSD) in the context of residential colleges (RCs). The framework of analysis is based on scenario-planning, accommodating the dynamics of strategic design, decision making, and prototyping of organizational systems that could encourage the formation of different learning communities. The premise of exploration is to cultivate the living and learning experiences of undergraduate students with the holistic concerns of student development. The perceived challenge is how exactly to personalize the caring for each member of the RC communities, albeit the very behavior of hoarding personal presence is what makes people feel secured and safe. It is believed that an appreciative form of community sharing should enable students to say what is on their mind without fearing being put on the defense. However, the task of identifying what to watch for in establishing holistic care for individual RC members is not at all straightforward. This article provides a basis to envisage an appreciative form of life coaching, to realize the goals of holistic student care, expositing on the effective meaning behind RC's creation of learning communities for personal and communal growth through which purposeful individual or organizational learning could be enabled.

INTRODUCTION

Student development has always been the priority of university campus. This is the foundation of many a putting-students-first campaign. Indeed, creating conditions that matter for student success in college has been one of the essential long-term concerns at different universities around the globe. Under the mission of holistic student development (HSD), the University of Macau (UM) has put together an undergraduate system, innovative enough to produce students' meaningful learning. Firstly, there is the undergraduate curriculum reform (http://www.umac.mo/curriculum_reform/), bringing forth the importance of liberal arts tradition, in the form of a core curriculum called General Education (GE), which is meant to produce all-round graduates who are capable of lifelong learning, and of making contributions for the larger good of the local and global communities. Secondly, there is the installation of a residential college system, ready to offer students the experience of learning and living in communities. In 2010, two RCs under the respective names of East Asia College and Pearl Jubilee College (http://www.umac.mo/rc/pilot_rcp.html) have been established as the pilot residential colleges at UM's Taipa campus. It is expected that when UM's Hengqin campus (http://www.umac.mo/new_campus_project/), is ready by the end of 2013, several more RCs will be created to serve the educational needs of students. Indeed, many activity-based RC programs could be designed as important parts of UM's HSD services. This chapter is aimed to elaborate on the

aspirations of one such service to help produce well-rounded UM graduates through providing appreciative coaching (AC) in the RC setting. It is presented through a scenario-planning context on the part of the author, as a former member of the RC development team. In particular, the perspective of life coaching throughout students' college years will be outlined as an important HSD element to induce students and staff alike to naturally connect together as communities of learning or inquiry, where AC should act as the core engine to sustain student involvement in the RC experience, so as to help realize the commitment of UM's holistic student development.

BACKGROUND

It is convinced that an effective and ideal undergraduate education is one that centers on holistic student development (HSD), including the search for meaning and purpose in life. In launching any student-centered programs today, many a university has included important concerns of who a student is and becomes, as well as what a student does during college (Barkley, 2010; Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). Universities guide students to become what the college thinks and believes is a desired end for students. They educate and work with students on purpose, not accidentally. In particular, colleges develop students in ways that recognize and build on the student's purpose in life, intellectually and morally. They intentionally create environments that center on purpose, helping students reflect on such questions as – Who am I? What are my goals in life? How do I want to make a difference with my life? Addressing questions such as a life good to live, is an important part of holistic student development across many campuses today.

However, any institution of higher education that deliberately characterizes itself as student-centered should certainly be judged on its capacity to facilitate student success. The learning paradigm advocated by Barr and Tagg (1995), defines success by focusing on outcomes, specifically student learning outcomes: What have students learned? How much have students learned? Are students able to make connections in their classes across disciplines? How successfully are students able to apply what they have learned to out-of-class scenarios? Answering these questions requires assessment before, throughout, and following the learning experience. Consequently, defining outcomes in this way should shift the focus of faculty involvement from the hours, spent teaching a class, grading papers, or holding office consultation to the amount of learning students achieve, and to the environments structured by faculty and the methods faculty members create for students to learn the best.

The use of learning communities (LCs) as the channel to transcend student college experience is increasingly seen as a promising means to focus on student learning outcomes. In this regard, Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) were the first to describe learning community models; indeed, their models have been redefined and customized as the LC movement progressed over the years (Goodsell Love & Tokuno, 1999; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Stein, 2004). Among different LC models explored, it is found that the connections students make between their classes depend heavily on the faculty's resources and efforts to integrate the curriculum. At one end of the spectrum, the amount of faculty investment can be minimal, so that the curriculum and planned activities are loosely tied together, and students benefit socially from having the same peers in multiple classes. On the other hand, faculty can invest significant efforts in integrating their syllabi and activities for maximum student learning. Namely, the more intentionally syllabi and activities are coordinated, the more likely it is the learning community will realize the learning outcomes intended. Since LCs address different needs unique to each campus, the best model is yet to be crafted

in each peculiar campus. The following characterizations, attributed largely to Hurd and Stein (2004, pp.12-14), and Peckskamp and McLaughlin (2010, pp.21-23), should serve as a common language to explore the flexibility and relevance of some LCs' features:

LC Model	First-Year Interest Group (FIG)	Paired or Clustered Courses	Coordinated Studies	Residential and Theme Housing
Introduction	A FIG is composed of a small group of students who take a shared seminar class, generally led by an upper-class peer advisor.	This LC model intentionally links two classes together with a theme. Typically, a skill course like writing is linked with a content course, say, introductory psychology.	This LC model requires the largest investment of resources in terms of faculty time and curriculum integration. It involves setting up the inter-disciplinary theme, planning the curriculum, teaching the classes, planning activities outside the classroom, and meeting regularly to discuss course integration and student development.	This LC model provides a plethora of opportunities for interactions between faculty, staff, and students. It can stand alone as its own model of a LC, sometimes under the name of theme housing. It can complement any LC experience.
Curricular Design	Small groups of students can be linked together in several courses as subsets of larger classes. This model gives freshmen a support system for large classes.	Two courses are paired, and the same group of students takes both classes. In a clustered model, three or four courses are linked together, and the same group of students takes the entire cluster. Often the courses have a common theme.	Courses may have various configurations, but faculty members generally develop a common theme that fits the disciplines involved in the community.	Residence-based LCs, when connected with courses, create permeable boundaries between in-class and out-of-class learning through collaboration among residence life professionals and faculty, who work to integrate scholarship into the living environments of their students.
Faculty Responsibilities	Faculty members do not have to coordinate their syllabi or do any co-planning or integrate their material with other disciplines	In paired classes, faculty members may coordinate their syllabi and some assignments though they teach individually. The amount of coordination varies, depending on faculty commitment. In clustered courses, faculty plan together on a regular basis to build intellectual connections and to reinforce common expectations.	Faculty members work together to select the theme, plan the curriculum, and teach the courses.	This type of LC requires coordination with residence life and student affairs staff. Faculty members may visit the residence hall to participate in various programs, may eat in the dining hall with groups of students, may hold classes or have offices in the residence hall, or may even live in the residence hall. It also requires an added effort of partnership between students and academic affairs.

Peer Leadership Possibilities	A peer advisor meets with the group at the beginning of the semester and then continues to meet with the group on a weekly basis to discuss adjustment issues, campus resources, study groups, or just to talk about student concerns and issues. The peer advisor also draws the intellectual connections among the academic courses in the FIG.	Usually paired courses do not include peer leaders, but they can be used for advising, tutoring, or as undergraduate teaching assistants. In clustered courses, peers may assist with or help teach weekly discussion groups.	There are many opportunities for peer leadership, ranging from weekly discussions about various aspects of the inter-disciplinary programming to planning committees that work along with the faculty.	Students have many options for leadership in this environment as they may participate in learning community committees within the residence hall. Upper-division students and resident assistants have multiple opportunities for becoming involved with the LC.
Curricular Possibilities	Activities organized by the peer leader could involve having dinner together, attending a cultural event, or having an informal get-together.	If classes are scheduled in a block, faculty members can plan common activities such as field trips, speakers, or experiential learning activities.	The full-time nature of these LCs often renders it possible to incorporate a variety of experiences into the block of time, ranging from community building activities, to field trips, to book discussions, to service learning.	Numerous opportunities exist for connecting the intellectual life of the classroom to life in the residence hall: discussion groups, speakers, service projects, transition to college life, community building, or academic support. Space in the hall, such as lounges, can be used as classrooms, for study or review sessions, for intimate conversations with academic speakers, or for faculty office hours.

Tellingly, the LC concept is increasingly considered as an ideal solution to major campus concerns (Stein, 2004): creation of a more stimulating academic environment, new student adjustment to the college environment, and increasing retention. But creating LCs is not a task that should be undertaken without extensive forethought and planning, even though some models are easier than others to implement. Still, despite all the work involved in planning an effective LC, many colleges and universities are looking to the same to tackle their HSD concerns. It is believed that student development and success make the LC efforts all worthwhile. Hurd and Stein (2004) remind us that there is no single way to organize LCs and no simple formula for creating successful LCs. Each campus should establish communities according to its unique culture. Each campus must develop its own vision of what a successful learning community is like. The nuts and bolts of organizing LCs require careful planning and work, whether the impetus for such an initiative comes from the college administrators, from faculty members, or from student affairs. The work entails much communication and negotiation among various campus entities. In particular, it requires designing the specific LC model that works for the specific purpose, recruiting faculty members to develop the LC courses and teach in the LC, crafting the residence life component if it is meant to be a RC-based LC, recruiting students for the LC, and assessing the development of the LCs longitudinally. These steps serve as a hint

of what goes into planning a LC, but whichever type of LC to be innovated, the conceptual issues of the LCs, must be closely examined and supported to steer the course of LC planning, especially in the RC setting.

BUILDING SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

Indeed, through some intentional restructuring of the curriculum and elaborate design of the spaces for learning, it is believed that well conceived HSD practices could be realized in various forms of RC-based learning communities. According to Michael Porter (1985), it is not uncommon to use scenarios in strategic planning to identify what types of practices are appropriate for specific organizations (campuses). Living-learning programs, also known as residential college programs, are characterized by scholarly community, deep learning, strong sense of belonging, a careful integration of the intellectual and social dimensions of university life, and democratic education with a spirit of innovation and experimentation (Meiklejohn, 1932; Goodman, 1964; Newmann & Oliver, 1967; Boyer, 1987; Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997). These are elements expected to introduce and integrate academic and social learning in residence hall settings through faculty involvement with the goal of an enriched learning experience for all participants (Schoem, 2004). At their best, such programs represent the genuine model of learning in community (Ryan, 2001; Waltzer, 1992) that is so much desired but still so elusive at many colleges and universities; yet, the inadequacies observed on different campuses to fully tap into the rich intellectual potential of bringing our students and faculty members together do call for a renewal and strengthening of the bold vision represented by such programs.

The Scenario of Appreciative Coaching

The practice of appreciative coaching (AC) attributed to (Orem, Binkert, & Clancy, 2007) is developed from the context of appreciative inquiry whose philosophy is based on the assumption that inquiry into and dialogue about strengths, successes, hopes and dreams is itself a transformational process (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AC describes an approach to coaching that shows individuals how to tap into or rediscover their own sense of wonder and excitement about their present life and future possibilities. It is an approach deemed very promising to enable students to grow psychologically, morally, intellectually and spiritually in the RC setting.

Appreciative coaching (AC) is meant to guide individual students through different stages of personal development: discovery, dream, design and destiny – that inspire them to an empowering view of themselves and their future. The core process of AC begins with the selection of a topic, such as “enhancing student learning through implementing a LC in the RC setting.” At the outset of the coaching relationship such as in the discovery stage, core questions serve to explore the student’s strengths, past successes, work and personal values, and the one or two things he or she longs to have more of in life. From the answers to these questions come the tools for learning and change.

Throughout the RC experience, as in the dream stage, student and coach/mentor come together to make sense of the answers to the core questions so that they may apply these answers to the chosen topic to create something with which both the student and the mentor can explore and experiment. Once the student client could bring his or her dream into clear view, it is time to design a plan for the dream.

Design implies a plan or an impression or a mock-up of some future reality. There is no assumption that an initial design is the final design. Experimentation is the order of the day. The ultimate design should incorporate as many of the skills and strengths of the client as is possible or appropriate. Typically, student clients step out of the design stage once they have begun to implement the concrete actions and practices they identified in the design stage for realizing their desired future.

The destiny stage is a time for student clients to acknowledge and celebrate the accomplishments they are making in either moving toward or actually realizing their dream. At the conclusion of this stage, students may choose to move to a second cycle of AC by expanding on other elements of their dream or creating a new dream. This is an excellent opportunity for coaches/mentors to help student clients reflect on the work they have done and appreciate the result they have achieved. This AC process of emphasizing the positive should turn out to be a pleasurable experience in the process of student development; hence, it is highly recommended as a practice of student HSD coaching or mentoring in the RC setting.

The Challenge in Promoting Appreciative Coaching

Today, an organization's ability to learn is often considered as a process of leveraging the collective individual learning of the organization. We identify with Peter Senge (1990) that the organizations which will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn, and to produce a higher-level organizational asset. For many organizations, that often means leading and fostering the kind of culture that mobilizes people to share what they know with their peers (co-workers or cohorts) without a fear of being questioned, or critiqued. In particular, this culture of sharing which should be in the driver's seat for conceiving and designing the paraphernalia of learning communities in the RC setting in support of holistic student development (HSD) could be developed from the idea of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider, 1986; Vat, 2009b) – the basis of AC. Through such an inquiry, it is believed that an appreciative environment is needed in any design of the RC setting, in which developing an appreciative culture of knowledge sharing (personal and collaborative learning) has the generative potential conducive to the fully functioning of HSD in any living-learning programs. It is convinced that promoting AC, as a derivative form of life coaching, is not exempted from such challenge, especially when we expect most of our AC mentors should come from faculty members of the university.

According to the current University of Macau (UM) strategic RC plan, it is intended to establish LCs within the institutional setting by intentionally redesigning curricula and mostly the residential life component to build a community of learners among students and faculty, for such obvious reasons as (Hurd & Stein, 2004):

- *To promote intellectual communication between faculty and students*
The concern is to tackle the lack of intellectual communication between faculty and students as well as among students. In many classes, faculty members see students only during lectures, particularly if students never come in during office hours. In addition, students often have no opportunity to interact with other students in the class because the class is set up with no time for discussion or the exchange of ideas.
- *To make connections among courses*

The concern is to tackle the lack of a relationship or connection among courses, especially courses that are outside students' majors. This problem is exacerbated when students do not think about looking for courses that connect when selecting courses and faculty do not help students make connections among the courses that they are taking. Courses should be geared toward stimulating critical thinking among students who are taking the courses, not just fulfilling core requirements.

- *To bridge students' academic and social worlds*

The concern is to bridge students' academic and social worlds, especially for first-year students. It is not uncommon that students are searching for people to help bring the two worlds together. With a support network of people as in a residential college (friends and professors), we could make it easier for students to build bridges between their academic and social worlds.

- *To give faculty members new perspectives*

The idea is to enable faculty members to accumulate experience from teaching in learning communities. If faculty members teach in linked courses, the planning with other faculty gives them new perspectives on their discipline and how they present it to students. The conventional mode of faculty work is to teach in isolation, sharing their work (typically research) at conferences or through publication. LC's with linked courses encourage collaboration through teaching. Faculty members meet on a regular basis to plan their courses and to discuss where their courses have in common. They work together to build connections among their courses, so that each class supports and enhances the other classes in the learning community. The focus changes to student learning rather than subject-matter teaching. Instead of lecturing to students, faculty members are obliged to design activities that actively engage the students with course concepts. The learning environment thus becomes learning-centered (or student-centered), and faculty members should begin to approach teaching quite differently.

Eventually, integrating students' academic and social lives in a residential LC, should allow greater interaction between students as well as among students, faculty members, and professional staff. The perceived benefits that result should include enhanced intellectual and social development; improved GPA, involvement, and satisfaction; and increased persistence to graduation. Tinto (1997) suggests that enhanced intellectual and social development may continue over the course of the first year in college, and possibly the entire student career. LCs that do include a residential element such as in our RC's, are supposed to benefit our students the most because their connected courses enable them to feel attached to a community of students.

FUTURE TRENDS OF HOLISTIC STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

Indeed, HSD is not a new way of viewing the college experience. According to Boyer (1987), HSD was the core of the mission of the first colleges and universities in America: "The early American college did not doubt its responsibility to educate the whole person – body, mind, and spirit; head, heart, and hands" (p.177). The American Council on Education (1937/1994) referenced that the student personnel point of view emphasizing the importance of education for the whole student have been advocated in terms of fostering civic and moral engagement of college students. The Kellogg Commission (1997) states, "The biggest educational challenge we face revolves around developing character, conscience, citizenship, tolerance, civility, and individual and social responsibility in our students"(pp.26-27). Dalton, Russell, and Kline (2004) state

that our education has always been deeply invested in the development of character as an outcome of the college experience, and this notion of character is imbedded in the most basic concepts of liberal education, public service, and student development (p.4).

Accordingly, this article advocates for a caring approach of life coaching for students (Nash & Murray, 2010; Stoltzfus, 2009; Collins, 2002), which should include some essential elements of concerns in the RC-based four-year holistic student development program. It is convinced that the use of collaborative learning with a personalized coaching approach could help RC students learn and grow more effectively. Indeed, it is also believed that such an approach should accomplish a larger educational agenda, one that should encompass several intertwined rationales.

1. *Student involvement*: Our RCs should generate calls to involve students more actively in their college experience. Such calling are actually echoed by ample research findings from (Astin, 1985; Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education, 1984). Student involvement in learning and with other students, and faculty members, is an important factor in accomplishing student success in college education. By its very nature, collaborative learning is both socially and intellectually involving. It invites students to build closer connections to other students, their faculty, their courses, and their living and learning activities.
2. *Cooperation and teamwork*: Our RCs should render ample opportunities for our student residents to appreciate diversity of the RC community. In any collaborative endeavors, students might inevitably encounter differences in thinking and actions among community members. Our students must grapple with recognizing and working with diversity. RC programs must help develop in our students the capacities for tolerating or resolving differences, for building agreement that honors all the voices in a group, for caring how others are doing or feeling. Such abilities are crucial aspects of living in a community. Too often, the development of these values and skills are marginalized in our curriculum; however, cultivation of teamwork, community involvement, and leadership skills are legitimate and valuable classroom goals, not merely for our RC setting.
3. *Civic responsibility*: Our RCs ought to realize that if democracy were to endure in any meaningful way our living-learning programs had to foster habits of participation in and responsibility to the larger community. Collaborative learning encourages students to acquire an active voice in shaping their ideas and values and a sensitive ear in listening to others. Creative dialogues (deliberative bridge-building) among differences are strong threads in the fabric of collaborative learning activities. These certainly apply to our civic responsibility as well.
4. *Rationale Management*: The term *learning community* (LC) in the RC context is often considered as an embodiment of collaborative learning. It is meant to be a purposeful restructuring of our undergraduate curriculum to link together courses so that students could find greater coherence in what they are learning and increased interaction with faculty and fellow students (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). As such, LCs is a pragmatic educational delivery system and a facilitating structure for the practice of collaborative learning. In particular, our RC programs should aim to build both academic and social communities for students by

enrolling them together in a large block of course work. Such an arrangement should confront multiple problems currently plaguing our undergraduate education: the fragmentation of general education (GE) and disciplinary courses; isolation of students to deal with his or her academic planning; lacking of meaningful connection-building among classes; the need for greater intellectual interaction between students and faculty members; and the lack of sustained opportunities for faculty development.

Living-learning programs in the RC setting provide a structure for realizing the ideal of learning in communities (Waltzer, 1992; Smith, 1992; Ryan, 1992). They provide a setting for faculty and students to come together to explore ideas across disciplinary boundaries and beyond the limitations of classroom meeting times. They open doors for intellectual creativity and pedagogical innovation, and they provide opportunities for reflection, inquiry, and discovery. In such living-learning programs, students must be recognized and respected as emerging scholars and are given voice to express ideas and opinions. Oftentimes, students' ideas are linked to social problems, and students are involved in real-world communities and their concerns, too.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One excellent example of life coaching program with a caring perspective worthy of our attention is the Sleight Servant Leadership Program from Albion College (www.albion.edu/sleight):

First-Year Participants: Self and Others

- Complete a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator@ and Strong Interest Inventory@ as part of students' First-Year Experience (FYE) program, if there is any.
- Participate in inventory group assessment with FYE Seminar class
- Begin students' digital portfolios
- Complete some hours of volunteer service
- Reflect on student assessments and volunteer experience in their digital portfolios

Second-Year Participants: Ethical Servant Leadership

- Sophomore students should begin to focus on larger issues of leadership including ethics, communication, and teamwork. Making connections and building relationships are key focal points during this year
- Participate in some kind of summer Sophomore Leadership Camp
- Engage in regular discussions with small groups focusing on topics of ethics, critical thinking, diversity, and service projects
- Have opportunity to complete the StrengthsFinder@ assessment in the spring semester if they are interested in applying for some kind of a Peer Educator position
- Begin developing a career plan, including seriously thinking of his or her declared major.
- Update reflections and co-curricular experiences sections of their digital portfolios

Third-Year Participants: Global Citizenship

- Junior students should engage more in their role as Peer Educator (if any), and should be serving others through their active involvement on-campus. It is a year with a focus on continuing

personal development, while engaging themselves as leaders in a larger community.

- Continue service to others through their peer roles, leadership roles or other volunteer experiences
- Update the reflections and co-curricular experiences sections of their digital portfolios

Fourth-Year Participants: Legacy for the Common Good

- Senior students are largely transitioning into active, engaged, global citizens who are role models of service and leadership within their RC communities.
- Participate in more frequent (say, monthly) reflections related to their transitions
- Design, implement, and assess a service project for First-Year students
- Serve as a mentor during the, say, Sophomore Leadership Camp
- Finalize career plans and steps to find their first professional job or gain entrance to graduate school
- Update reflections and co-curricular experiences sections of their digital portfolios
- Present their legacies to other members of the RC community.

CONCLUSION

Finally, to conclude this article, I fully identify with Grady Bogue (2002) who indicates the following quite consistent with the rationale behind rendering appreciative coaching in the RC setting, especially with a perspective of caring and loving: Community is a laboratory of discovery in which we come to value the possibilities found in mistake and error and serendipitous moments. It is a venture in human learning and association, where moral meaning may be factored from moments that can be both elevating and wrenching to the human spirit. It can also be considered figuratively as a dance of paradox, in which personal aspiration and personal sacrifice are found in embrace. Oftentimes, these are lessons to be learned again and again, by faculty, staff, and students as they work to fashion community in our colleges and universities. Indeed, a sense of community in any setting implies an agenda of common caring and grace. It cares for the individuals in the community, for those whose welfare is held in trust. It cares for the policy and the physical systems in which men and women relate in both living and learning. In a community, there is a vision of shared purpose. There are shared values that shape and guide behavior. There is also a shared giving and sacrifice to cause beyond self. Accordingly, there are spaces in community to respect private interests and public interests; a space for intimacy and a space for solitude; a space for laughter and a space for lament, for shared moments of joy and pain; a space for the harmony of our togetherness and the conflict of our differences; a space for dark struggles and night journeys and a space for dawn arrivals of imagination and inspiration; a space for fellowship of conversation and a space where our silence is honored. Such are lessons to be learned by faculty, staff, and students as they construct communities of learning.

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