

Boundaryless Learning¹

The words "learning" and "community" are commonplace in our vocabulary, yet the way I think of this is far from common in my experience. In my experience, learning communities are rare and sacred. One measure of their existence is if the quality of relationships honors both the individual and their questions.

Learning communities are distinct from our common interpretation of communities because they are not bound by geography, industry, profession, sex, race, religion, or age. Learning communities have the power to transcend these artificial boundaries, binding us together with our shared humanness, curiosity, and creativity. Learning communities are more likely to arise when a few critical ingredients surface, including but not limited to: curiosity, commitment, and a desire to act collaboratively with a spirit of experimentation. I've written about this more extensively in my essay, "The Emergence of Learning Communities," for the anthology, *Community Building: Renewing Spirit & Learning in Business*.

My image of learning communities is distinct from most organizational cultures by its circles of compassion, courage, wisdom, and forgiveness. Compassion is called for in recognizing the dilemmas people find themselves in, unwittingly and unintentionally. Courage is required to take a stand for the long-term health of the system and its people, when the culture predominately rewards short-term, political behavior. Wisdom is needed to let go of the need to know, fix, control, blame, or defend in the face of problems or resistance and to meet these challenges openly with curiosity and reflection. Forgiveness is the gift offered to transform perceived failures into opportunities for learning.

The quality of listening in the community elicits people's true voices and inner wisdom. I know I have touched this sacred space with a group when my inner voice ceases to chatter I feel like I am standing on a bridge over a stream witnessing the past as the water flows to me, the present as it passes under the bridge, and the future as it flows away I am able to connect what has been said with what is just about to be said. It is as if we have begun to communicate with each other beyond our words. Dialogue is one way to name this stream of conversation, where meaning flows between us . . .

Learning communities are places where:

- invisible fabric of relationships [is] tended to and cared for
- vulnerability & diversity are welcome
- curiosity reigns
- experimentation is the norm
- inquiry is practiced with compassion
- questions can go unresolved

The people within learning communities:

- communicate with each other honestly and openly
- offer themselves and others honor and respect
- value and seek feedback
- are challenged to see themselves and others with new eyes
- encourage each other to sense, see, listen to, and speak of the whole system
- are free to be completely themselves, with no masks.

Figure 2. Learning Communities

¹ Excerpted from Stephanie Ryan. Learning Communities: An Alternative to the "Expert" Model. Pp. 289-290. In eds Sarita Chawla and John Renesch. *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*. Portland, OR: Productivity Press.