

## **Enhancing Community Service Learning Via Practical Learning Communities**

Ilana Ronen and Tal Shemer-Elkiyam

### **Abstract**

The advantages of learning communities focused on analyzing social issues and educational repercussions in the field are presented in this study. The research examines the contribution of a learning community to enhancing student teachers' responsibility and their social involvement. The assumption was that participating in learning community would further implement student teachers' community social involvement while enhancing responsibility in their field of action. A questionnaire aimed to present the student teachers' attitudes involving all aspects of studying in the learning community and their social activity in the community was conducted. The findings pinpointed that there were positive contributions of the learning communities from a personal aspect such as developing self-learning, and learning about “me”, as well as broaden their teaching skills, through methodology for teacher training, and developing reflective thought. These insights can also be implemented in various educational frameworks and during service learning as part of teacher training.

**Keywords:** Learning communities; service learning model; practice–reflection circle; tolerance for ambiguity.

## **Introduction**

One of the central challenges of education is to instill educators with a sense of social responsibility to their communities. Training student teachers in combination with in-depth exposure to social and educational issues by way of relevant academic learning and exposure to working in the field, accompanied by discussions of the ethical values of the relevant issues, is to us the desired way. Within this framework we need to foster an equal and non-hierarchical exchange among the learners where there is a common responsibility based on self-learning, an individual choice of content, common discussions with an ethical stand being taken and agreed upon results by all. A learning community is a framework permitting a division of responsibility between students and the lecturer.

This article deals with student teachers who are participating in a learning community, who concentrate on analyzing social issues and their educational and social repercussions in the field. The research is focusing on the learning community's extent of contribution on a personal level for the students from both a learning and teaching aspect as well as social involvement activities.

Our assumption is that through participation in a learning community, as well as practice teaching, these student teachers would implement community social involvement furthermore and improve their responsibility in their field of action.

Although the research is a time limited project and is focused on college student-teachers its insights, including personal and professional aspects of learning communities and improving students' social community activities, could be implemented in school learning processes as well.

In this manner the article summarizes the active student involvement in the community and their role in education; the learning community's extent of contribution on improving students' social involvement activities; and student teachers' attitudes to the effect of the learning and activities within the framework of the learning community.

## **Theoretical background**

### **Learning community**

Learning communities which began to gain popularity during the 90s is a heterogeneous framework bringing together learners around an explicit focus, emphasizing research whose purpose is to deal with a chosen problem and possible solutions (Brown and Campione, 1990; Rogoff, Matusov & White, 1996). Learning community is based on a number of qualitative principles of learning: active and effective learning, choosing the appropriate learning strategy, and is aimed toward a directed and defined purpose. The participants are encouraged to share responsibility for learning and its results, to meet particular needs by expressing personal opinions, to ask for help or specific information and to share stories of events with particular issue included emotional experiences (Brown and Campione, 1990; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009).

The aspects relating to learning community are summarized by Eraut (2002): the geographical and environmental aspects deal with inclusion and exclusion; the ecological aspect focuses on relationships between community partners; the political aspect describes a group of interests that should be satisfied; and the ideal aspect relates to participation and democratic human relationships including emotional component. Such a community considers learning a central part of interaction between people focusing on professional development. Professional development is based on constructing knowledge by sharing knowledge through meaningful dialogue while turning tacit knowledge visible. In a similar way, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993), relate to a

learning model, Knowledge Building, where knowledge is built collectively by the community. According to this idea the goals of learning is a cooperative effort of both teachers and students to reach an understanding of events in the world and their evaluation. An improvement in learning occurs when the research on the pheromone is directed by learners' questions where the emphasis is on the required process to analyze the problem and present the solution.

The social activities within the learning community during the process of learning were highlighted by Rogoff (1996) and his colleagues who suggested that learning is a process that they defined as the "transformation of participation", in which all members of the learning community are required to be active partners in planning and designing the schedule of the changing learning process while changing their participation during various stages of learning, in line with their needs and wishes.

Thus, Harpaz (2009) emphasized the advantages and additional value of learning communities as a framework for preferred learning between the two dichotomous possibilities, positioning the centrality of the teacher or alternatively the centrality of the learner. In the learning community the traditional position of the teacher as the source of information changes, as each participant (learners and teacher), can choose his place at each stage of the learning process.

In addition, characteristic clusters which are necessary for learners, who desire to implement the vision of teaching and learning in a learning community, were defined by Shulman and Shulman (2004): a cognitive cluster that includes diagnostic ability, understanding and analysis; a behavioral cluster that includes prediction, belief in the way and mutual respect; a motivational cluster that includes seriousness, the ability to change and perseverance; an operational cluster that includes adaptive use of the curriculum; a reflective cluster that includes evaluation, reevaluation and self-criticism. Finally, Shulman emphasizes the community cluster that includes planning, thought, cooperation, mutuality, support and common knowledge. These clusters emphasize the complexity of the development of the desired and appropriate teachers for education.

But as Price (2005) argued, learning communities can offer more: curricular coherence; integrative, high-quality learning; collaborative knowledge-construction; and skills and knowledge relevant to living in a complex, diverse world. Since studies show the powerful effect of a learning community on student learning and achievement, this unique framework can also contribute to learning and participation in ethical and social issues from an academic point of view, as well as from a practical need to solve problems. Such interaction may lead to the development of social involvement that Service Learning model suggests.

### **Development of social interaction according to the model of Service Learning**

As was stated, the development of responsibility and social interaction of students as part of their teacher training is an important pillar for basing their identity as influential leaders in their society. The part students' exposure to ethical-social issues including activities at community centers, will help the students develop the ability to serve as well as to teach and will enhance their community social activism as is suggested by the Service Learning (SL) model (Eyler & Giles 1999; Fiske, 2001; Webster & Rajotte, 2006). According to this model, learning occurs in a practice –reflection circle. Learning includes educational activities that utilize the acquired knowledge of the students, planning and adaptation of activities to the needs of the community and reflection on their experience. In this way the students gain a deep understanding and abilities and combine their cognitive academic development with their personal social development. Studies have shown that SL activities based on the combination between support in a theoretical

academic course to practice and reflection strengthen student teachers (Davis & Moely, 2006). Moreover, Bartlett (2013) emphasizes that reflection is the element that connects service and learning by planning and implementing reflection activities such as: continuous reflection, connected reflection, challenging reflection and contextualized reflection.

In research carried out by Sullivan (1991), it was found that students who were involved in community social activities during their teacher training were on a higher operational level than their peers. They showed better performance in many areas such as using variant teaching styles, the quality of interaction with their students, the level of confidence and ability that they showed in lesson planning, the quality of their communication with parents and effective use of the required abilities to carry effective discussions with adolescents. Their pedagogic performance and professional abilities won them commendable approval more than students who did not receive this training. In general, it seems that students who practice SL activities show a higher degree of commitment to their work in their discipline (Gallini & Moely, 2003).

### **Learning communities and the strengthening of values in the Service Learning model**

The strengthening of values for training students who are active in service learning within the framework of learning communities may come through in three inter-connected ways.

1. Subject matter – intensive discussion of social issues, consolidation of moral, ethical and educational attitudes by way of exposure and understanding of various attitudes (Price, 2005).
2. Methodology and activities – a non-hierarchical discussion in the discourse community enables attentiveness and substantiation that supports the learning (Lipman, 1991; Shor & Freire 1990). It provides for a sensitive and positive climate that allows learning from mistakes (Brandet, 2000), students learn to receive and give continuous feedback (Brooks & Brooks, 1997; Perkins, 1998).
3. Integrating practice with learning – learning communities integrate theoretical discussions on social and ethical issues and reflection activities (Bartlett, 2013) alongside of practical initiatives for their solution.

This article is focused on the learning community's contribution to developing responsibility and social involvement in teacher training students.

### **Research questions**

1. What is the students' satisfaction level from the framework of a learning community and from the accompanying contents of the course?
2. What is the learning community's extent of contribution on a personal level for the students from both a learning and teaching aspect?
3. What is the learning community's extent of contribution on improving students' social involvement activities?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research context**

#### **The learning community**

We have defined the goals of learning communities based on the five clusters that are characteristic of education as defined by Shulman and Shulman (2004). In the cognitive and reflective clusters we assessed the contribution of learning communities from a personal aspect,

learning aspect and educational aspect. In the operational, behavioral, and motivational clusters, we assessed the contribution of learning communities in developing activities and the social involvement of the student teachers in their community.

Five learning communities, each with a leading supervisor and 12 second year student teachers, were included in this research whose subject matters were:

The Rebels in Israeli society - focused on developing students' social awareness and acknowledgement to those who are denied a voice around us. The following questions were raised: Who in Israeli society is ostracized? What does this ostracism say about us as a society and as individuals? What voices are not heard and why? During the course, a series of meetings were held with students and representatives of these communities to conduct an up close investigation by means of meetings, discussions, recordings and developing personal contacts.

Being elite - The educational elite is supposed to formulate the ethical direction of the educational system and to be involved in implementing the ways to achieve these goals, the questions that were raised: Why do we need this elite group? What do they take upon themselves and who would want to be part of this educational elite? What are the operative steps needed to establish an educational elite?

The valor of holocaust survivors and elderly soldiers - The goal was to find a worthwhile place in the public's and community's consciousness, to bridge between the past and the future of Holocaust survivors and veterans of the Second World War, and to change attitudes towards them and reveal their contribution.

Excellence and fantasy - Defining and achieving process by means of fantasy and science-fiction texts learning the standards of excellence and their relevance to the students: What is excellence? How is it possible to become attached to this abstract concept and how can science-fiction and fantasy assist us in the process?

Critical view of mass communication in the post-modern era - The era of post-modern communications, that attempts to blur the conventional contrast between the individual and the public, good or bad, especially when presenting reality, must go through the deep understanding and criticism of communication behavior. The students were obligated to integrate both theoretical understanding to analysis of actual cultural-commutative texts, and to go through three "public" stages that were presented to the learning community in order to receive feedback. In the beginning of the workshop when defining the work objective and the goals, in the middle when presenting the partial data that had been collected, researched and analyzed – and at the end when presenting the final results.

### **Research tool**

A quantity research based on a questionnaire whose aim was presenting students' attitudes involving all aspects of studying in the learning community and their social activity in the community. The questionnaire was given at the end of the course and included three parts:

- a. On satisfaction: the extent of student agreement with the different aspects of the course was examined, based on a Likert scale 1 (very low) -5 (very high).

This section was divided into four primary satisfaction measurements:

1. The learning community model- included questions like: "Were you satisfied learning about the learning community?" or "Was dialog learning used as a format?" Reliability based on Cronbach's alpha =.88.

2. The contents of the course – included questions like: “Did the learning increase motivation for social activities” or “Were the course contents interesting”. Reliability based on Cronbach's alpha = .91.
3. The cognitive challenge of the course – included questions like: “At what level do you think was the discussion in the course?” or “Were the contents challenging?” Reliability based on Cronbach's alpha = .81.
4. The communication between the lecturer and the students – included questions like: “Was communication with the lecturer of a high level?” or “Did the lecturer encourage differences of opinion?” Reliability based on Cronbach's alpha = .88.

In addition, the students were also asked in an open and closed manner on additional aspects related to their general satisfaction, such as, would they want to study an additional course with the same format, would they change the content of the course.

**b.** A questionnaire on the contribution of the course to the students examined the extent in which the students felt they had benefitted from studying in a learning community. The questions were on a Likert scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) and consisted of five indexes:

1. Learning about me as a person – A measurement of the extent the student felt the course had contributed to his/her personal development. Reliability based on a Cronbach's alpha = .84
  2. The development of skills and learning abilities – included questions like: “improved my capabilities” or “empowered me as a person”. A reliability check showed a Cronbach's alpha = .77.
  3. The contribution of the course to my training as a teacher - included questions like: “developing my skills as a teacher” or “improve me as a teacher”. Reliability based on Cronbach's alpha = .78
  4. Development of reflective thinking and the ability to evaluate colleagues – included questions like: “improving reflective thinking” or “developing feedback ability”. Reliability based on Cronbach's alpha = .76.
  5. Development of social awareness - included questions like: “developing social awareness” or “reinforcement community contribution”. Reliability based on Cronbach's alpha = .77
- c.** The connection between student participation in a learning community and their social involvement in the community. The students were asked if social involvement is to be carried out in the framework of a learning community, are there advantages in this connection and if they would be interested in continuing social involvement beyond the required hours of the program.

Weekly feedback of the learning community lecturers – every week each lecturer presented a reflection of the activities of the learning community. These reports were the basis for discussions, reflection and evaluation in the each course.

### **Population**

The survey was answered by 48 students, 83% were women (N=39) and 16% men (N=8). Most of the students (97.8%) are in their twenties, where the average age was 25(SD=2.18). The students, who come from various disciplines of study, are in their second year of study at the college (N=47). The students chose one out of five different courses of the learning community and for 77.1% of them the course that they had chosen was their first preferred choice (N=37).

### Findings

The data shows us that the average response of the participants to four out of the five learning communities were similar, therefore the analysis will be separate from the analysis of the fifth community, which had a deviation in its average responses.

#### Student satisfaction from the learning community

1. From table 1 we can see the students who express satisfaction from the various aspects of the study in a learning community (M=4.22). They are satisfied with the content of the course and that it has aroused in them a high motivation to continue social activity (M=4.42). In addition, they are of the opinion that the level of the cognitive challenge of the course was high (M=4.21), and mainly that the communication between the lecturer and the students was good (M=4.43). The average of the satisfaction of the students from the learning community course was very high (M=4.53, SD=.68).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of student attitudes towards studying in the course (n=39)

Satisfaction	Mean	S.D
Satisfaction of Learning Community Model	4.22	.85
Satisfaction of course content	4.42	.65
Level of cognitive challenge	4.21	.56
Contact between lecturer and student	4.43	.58

2. To the question whether they would be willing to study an additional course in this framework 50% of the students answered “perhaps” and commented on the lecturer, the subject of community, a clear understanding of the goals of the course, and at which hours it would be given. 39.5% (N=15) answered that they were interested in studying an additional course in this format and commented that the format of the course was unique and meaningful. Only 10.3% (N=4) answered that they were not interested in studying an additional course in the framework of a learning community, because of its unique learning style and because of a limitation of time.
3. Most of the students 92.1% (N=35) commented that they were not interested in changing the content of the course because the course was interesting and contributed on the one hand to their self- awareness and on the other hand to a recognition of various groups in society. Seven responders qualified their answers and commented that in spite of the fact that they wouldn’t change the content there was a noticeable lack of time that resulted in the inability to delve into certain aspects and would choose to discuss fewer topics or extend the course for an additional semester. Only three students (7.9%) commented that they would change the content of the course. One suggested to cut some of the material in order to delve deeper into other subjects, another suggested to give more theoretical background in the beginning in order to be better prepared for the field work.

4. The students were asked if they would change the nature of the study and were asked to specify in an open manner their choice. 71.1% (N=30) would not change the nature of the course. Just four expanded on it :29.9% (N=11) would change the nature of the course, they suggested defining the goals more clearly, using a variety of learning styles by adding field trips and/or students raising dilemmas and giving greater possibility of choice of articles to read or changing existing reading material.
5. Most of the students felt that obligation to the course on learning communities was higher than to other courses (M=3.94, SD=.82).

A summation of the assessment of satisfaction from learning communities: the course was enlightening, enriching experiential that allowed a lot of learning about oneself, on excellence and on studying in a learning community. In addition, they praised the lecturers of the learning communities. Along with their satisfaction they commented on the problem of time – they requested an extension of the course complained on the amount of study material and requested more peer teaching.

### The contribution of a learning community

The different aspects of the extent of the contribution of a learning community to the student are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Means and standard deviation of the contributions to the students in the course from a learning community (N=39)

Area of contribution	Mean	S.D
Learning self-awareness	3.57	.88
Developing learning skills	3.35	.90
Contribution of the course for teacher training	3.78	1.0
Developing reflective thinking and self- assessment	3.48	.95
Developing social awareness	3.88	.84

From the table we can see that the students felt that their contribution in several aspects was above average, and that they developed as a result of the course a relatively higher social awareness (M=3.88). The course greatly contributed to their training as a teacher (M=3.78) and an above average on learning about themselves (M=3.5). In addition, in the student's opinion only contributed on an average level to developing reflective thinking and the ability to give feedback to another (M=3.48) and developing their learning skills and abilities (M= 3.35). The relation between students' satisfaction from the learning community model and the variables based on Pearson correlation is presented in table 3.

Table 3. Pearson correlation between satisfaction measures and contribution measures

	Learning Community Model	Course Content	Cognitive Challenge	Student - Teacher Relation
Learning self-awareness	<b>.55**</b>	<b>.55**</b>	<b>.62**</b>	<b>.38*</b>
Developing learning skills	<b>.35*</b>	<b>.45*</b>	<b>.58**</b>	<b>-.01</b>

Contribution of the course for teacher training	<b>.21</b>	<b>.45**</b>	<b>.30</b>	<b>.05</b>
Developing reflective thinking and self- assessment	<b>.41**</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>.41**</b>	<b>.47**</b>
Developing social awareness	<b>.26</b>	<b>.68**</b>	<b>.43**</b>	<b>.17</b>

A positive and significant correlation was found between most of the aspects of satisfaction from the learning communities to the contribution they had for the students. That is to say, the more the students felt greater satisfaction from the learning communities the more they felt their contribution to them.

The elements that had the highest correlation between satisfaction and contribution were – satisfaction from the content of the course and the level of cognitive challenge: as long as the students felt a higher level of satisfaction from the contents of the course they felt that they experienced a cognitive challenge in the learning community, and therefore they felt they benefited more from it.

The contribution measurement with the strongest correlation to measurement of satisfaction was learning about oneself as a person. The more the student felt he was learning about himself as a person he felt greater satisfaction than any other aspect. On the other hand, the feeling that the learning community contributed to student training as a teacher was connected only to the satisfaction from the discussed contents.

### **Social involvement**

More than half of the students (58.5%) commented that they were planning to be active in social involvement in the framework of the learning community. 20% cited alternative involvement, and others would do it in their first year of study. 73.3% of the students felt that there was an advantage to participating in a learning community in parallel to being active in social involvement (N=22), 61.5% (N=16) answered that they would like to continue their social involvement even after the required hours.

The lecturers in the communities, who had documented weekly the activities of the community, felt that their supervision in the learning communities was as significant for them as it was for the students. From these reflective documents it is evident that the interaction in the framework of the learning communities was just as challenging for the lecturers from the aspect of content and their method of supervision. The innovation of students and lecturer's sharing responsibility required appropriate preparation and dealing with unknown situations. These led to ambiguous and uncertain learning situations that challenged both the lecturers and the students in the learning community.

In comparison to these findings, in one of the other learning communities (A Critical view of mass communication in the post-modern era) there were different findings. The satisfaction of the students from the different aspects was average to less than average. The students had only an average satisfaction from the level of challenge (M=3.52), just average for the model of the community (M=3.52). A low level of satisfaction from the content of the course and the communications between the lecturers and the students (M=2.66, M=2.94 compatibility). On the average the level of satisfaction from the students of the learning community course was low (SD=1.00, M=2.66).

The students felt that their contribution from the learning community was average or less than average. As the students reported they only developed average learning skills ( $M=3.14$ ) and reflective thinking and peer assessment ( $M=3.11$ ). In addition, the learning community had contributed a very small extent to their learning about themselves, to their training as teachers and to their social awareness ( $M=1.83$ ,  $M=2.33$ ,  $M=2.33$ ). The lecturer in this learning community encouraged ambiguous situations that gave the students feelings of uncertainty that hindered the success of the learning. In a sense this ambiguity is an essential part of this challenging learning experience of a learning community but in this community it turned into a frustrating experience.

## **Summary and Discussion**

### **The contribution of a learning community**

From these findings we can see that four out of the five learning communities accomplished most of their goals. The students reported on a general high level of satisfaction from the studies, enrichment, experience, and mainly from developing self-learning. In their opinion, the framework of a learning community, which was based on good communications between their peers and lecturer, supported them in learning the content; it placed before them cognitive challenges, and contributed to their motivation for social action.

The contribution of learning communities to the students had many aspects: from the social-community aspect, they developed a high social awareness, and participated in community activities; from the teaching aspect it greatly contributed to their training as teachers; from a personal aspect it contributed to learning about themselves, developing reflective thinking and the ability to give feedback to others; from the cognitive-learning aspect they developed skills and learning abilities. The lecturers reported as well on the challenging and unique experiences that contributed to them as teachers.

The response of the participants suggests the positive contribution of the learning communities to achieve the central goal of developing social involvement in the community, at least during their time studying. Beyond the social contribution the students reported on the contribution of the learning communities from a personal and educational aspect, and pointed out the contribution of the methodology that is the basis for learning communities for additional aspects: for teacher training, developing self-learning, learning about “me” and developing reflective thought. All these are essential elements of teaching in a larger sense, and are connected to the learning clusters that Shulman defined when he referred to the contribution of a learning community to teaching and learning- the cognitive and reflective cluster, as well as the motivational, behavioral, and operational clusters (Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

The learning process that occurred in a learning community is a way to acquire a desirable learning model as described by Harpaz (2009) in relation to a third model of education. According to this model the lecturer has an important role as a senior partner in the learning process that allows “a constructive meeting between the society and the culture”, to find solutions to problems or subjects that invite thought and investigation. Therefore the process of learning in a learning community allows each individual to build on his/her knowledge and develop different aspects as described by students in the research.

From a personal and professional future development aspect:

“As a result of the course I felt a strengthening of my self-confidence and abilities. The learning community helped me develop as a person and contributed to my training as a teacher in the future, it improved my learning skills and ability for self-learning”.

From an interest and enrichment aspect:

“The course was experiential, with very interesting content, varied, engrossing and enriching! It really made me open my eyes and raised my consciousness to the topic. I now see that the studies are much more meaningful and deep for me”.

“This has been the most meaningful course for me and is the only thing that I have gained from the program”.

From the aspect of the level and quality of the course:

“Presentation of the material by the students bringing up current dilemmas, stories that encouraged group discussions – that raised deeper questions for later ideas. Beyond the fact that this course must be a year course, was amazing, enriching and intellectually stimulating. The lecturers were fantastic, real and open to all views”.

From the aspect of the learning community:

“We are talking about a course that I waited for the whole week, especially since the content had fewer studies but more discussions and social activity, we felt we were a select group in a community with an outstanding mentor! The lecturer was open to all views from the students and I felt the lecturer learned from the students as well”.

### **Challenges exposed by a learning community**

In this research we saw that one of the five communities that was checked, reported a lower level of satisfaction than the other communities. The main reason for this lower level of satisfaction, as expressed by the participants, was the ambiguity that accompanied the learning community's progression. What stood out with this community was the demand of participants' responsibility sharing not only in the learning process as in the other communities, but also to determine the learning framework. This ambiguous situation, that exceeded the limits of patience of the learners, was very demanding on the students and expressed by their lower level of satisfaction from the course.

The findings of this group exposed one of the critical challenges that learning community participants have to face. As stated, at the basis of a learning community there exist some vague situations that arise from the need to hold a dialogue among equals where all the participants are responsible for determining the daily schedule, its content, activities and the final results of the studying. These situations are a challenge to the lecturer as well as the students: the lecturer is tested on his ability to navigate the participants into cooperative action, that allows them choice and demands responsibility, and the students are tested on their ability to share responsibility and to develop tolerance for ambiguity. In four out of five communities the level of ambiguity led to satisfaction, while in the fifth community the challenge overcame the ability to deal with it.

The importance of ambiguity to the structuring of knowledge is certain, acceptance of meaning and interpretation ‘that is already formulated’ without giving the learners an opportunity to deal with the problem, harms the process (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, pp.50). Therefore, when presenting problems before a learning community without presenting solutions, where the teacher leaves unsolved ambiguous situations to evolve, he allows the students to build their knowledge independently.

Another important role of ambiguous situations, that change to be important and relevant in learning communities, is allowing the participants to re-organize their group. When the group

organizes in ambiguous situations there is a possibility to organize on a basis of equality and not hierarchal. An organization based on equality offers the possibility of students to lead the subject being learned and to find the appropriate knowledge (Ronen, 2013). For these reasons the students in the group were given a central role but this was not fully exploited.

It was to be expected that the students would prefer equals-situation which would enable them to choose the subject matter, determine the framework of studying and assume the responsibility for learning. It was to be expected that a different attitude to the role of the lecturer would awaken an interest and enthusiasm and challenge the participants for leadership. In reality, it turned out that sharing responsibility and the level of ambiguity in this new situation changed one of the groups from being challenged to being frustrated; instead of being a factor to activate the students, it hindered the students and sometimes even the lecturer. Additional research is necessary to study cultivating limits of ambiguity in learning in the framework of learning communities and the conditions that allow students to succeed in dealing with group problems and activities while structuring their knowledge, as we saw in the other communities.

Researchers have stated that there are additional challenges the learning communities raise and that is the difficulty in implementing learning communities practically and structuring the outcome and its assessment. Bereiter & Scardamalia (1993) explain the difficulty as a result of the responsibility for learning rests on the individual learner, while the implementation and assessment of the outcome are by the group. While Armstrong (2012) pointed that people put in groups lose their sense of individual responsibility. According to them, this complex situation is a deterrent in the success of implementing learning communities.

Rogoff (1990), clarifies the topic from a social cultural point of view, emphasizing the participants' activities in the common work. There is mutual influence of the individual on the culture, while being developed by means of this mutual influence cultural tool. The individual conceives that his actions in the social cultural framework is bound up and integrated with the participation of his peers for the continuous and long term achievement activities. But this can cause difficulty that expresses itself in lack of success in group objectives in the short term.

Opposing these studies, this current study shows that students, who successfully deal with the challenge of ambiguity and sharing responsibility, were satisfied with the implementation of the process connected to the learning communities. They enjoyed cooperating in the group and reached group results through communal action in the community.

### **Conclusions**

Several possible reasons may explain the successful encounters of the students as presented in this research:

The learning contents - the topics discussed in the learning communities enabled a variety of ideas and thoughts, the positions and attitudes of each participant in an atmosphere of respectful discussion allowed for various solutions and appreciation of the process and not only the outcome. There was less pressure that often characterizes other curriculums where one correct solution is demanded, and upon which the student is judged.

The outcome and range of achievement – the type of assignments derived from the learning process of the learning communities dealt with a wide range of social activities that led to significant outcomes. This type of work requires focused and efficient cooperation of the participants and requires an extended period of time to accomplish it. All this was supported by a cooperative atmosphere around the learning outcome of the group. It seems that the learning community is in fact an appropriate setting for learning and working that arises from the joint

responsibility that are connected to these complex issues, that requires discussions and brainstorming, that leads towards working on a mutual outcome over an extended period of time.

Personal and group assessment – in the framework of the learning community at every meeting each student received a peer's and a lecturer's constructive assessment. In addition there was a constructive group assessment and a final assessment that related to the activities, the process and the outcome. Each student knew what their place was in the group and tried to improve his/her way of working on their learning outcomes until the final results. In this way the constructive assessment was used as a personal learning tool, and as a means of generally uniting the group. It was non-threatening and the participants contributed in improving the final outcome.

A possible implication of this study is implementing the learning process that occurred in a learning community, as a way to acquire a desirable learning model in schools from a personal and professional future development aspect as well as from an interest and enrichment aspect.

The limitation of the research lies in its short time period, since the basis for achievement is common for all the members of the learning community (the emphasis is not on the individuals' characteristics), these mutual processes are continuous and long term which can cause difficulty that expresses itself in lack of success in group objectives, that we are witness to in the short term.

Additional research is necessary to study cultivating limits of ambiguity in the framework of learning communities; the conditions that allow students to succeed in dealing with group problems and activities while structuring their knowledge; and the ability of the students to implement the process that they experienced as participants in a learning community, trying to be lecturers of learning communities in their schools.

**References:**

- Armstrong, J. S. (2012). Natural learning in higher education. *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*, 2426-2433.
- Bartlett, N. (2013). What makes service-learning unique: Reflection and reciprocity. Retrieved January 15, 2015, from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/curriculum-development/what-makes-service-learning-unique-reflection-and-reciprocity>.
- Bereiter, C., & Scardamalia, M. (1993). *Surpassing ourselves: An inquiry into the nature and implication of expertise*. Open Court, Chicago.
- Brandet, R. (2000). Powerful learning, in Y. Harpaz (Editor), *New Approaches to Learning, Educating about Thinking, 19*, in Hebrew, Jerusalem: Branco Wiess Institute, 29-47.
- Brooks, J., & Brooks, M. (1997). *In preparation for constructivist teaching: In search of understanding*, Trans. Branco Wiess Institute.
- Brown, A., & Campione, J. (1990). Communities of learning and thinking, or a context by any other name. In Dianne Kuhn (Ed.), *Developmental perspectives on teaching and learning skills*, Basel: Karger, 108-126.
- Davis, T. C., & Moely, B. E. (2006). Preparing preserve teachers and meeting the diversity challenge through structured service-learning and field experiences in urban schools. In T. Townsend and R. Bates (Eds.), *Globalization, standards and professionalism: Teacher education in times of change*. Kluwer/Springer.
- Eraut, M. (April 2002). *Conceptual analysis and research questions: Do the concepts of 'learning community and community of practice' provide added value?* Paper presented at the AERA Annual Conference, New Orleans.
- Eyler, J., & D. E. Giles, J. (1999). *Where's the learning in service learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fiske, E. B. (2001). *Learning in deed. The power of service-learning for American schools*. Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation.
- Gallini, S., & Moely, B. E. (2003). Service learning and engagement, academic challenge, and retention. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 10, 5-14. Retrieved January 15, 2015, from <http://tmedweb.tulane.net/cps/about/upload/BEMoely-Service-learning-and-engagement.PDF>.
- Harpaz, Y. (2009). The third model: description, analysis, and study. In the *Practice of Planning Learning*, (Publication of the Curriculum Department, Ministry of Education, Israel), in Hebrew, pp. 177 – 203.
- Lipman, M. (1991). *Thinking in education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2009). *Sustainable improvement: Building learning communities that endure*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Perkins, D. (1998). *In preparation for smart schools: From memory practice to education for thinking*, in Hebrew, Jerusalem: Branco Wiess Institute.
- Price, D. V. (2005). Learning Communities and Student Success in Postsecondary Education: A Background Paper. MDRC. Retrieved January 15, 2015, from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED489439.pdf>.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context*, New York, Oxford Press.

- Rogoff, B., Matusov, E., and White, C. (1996). Models of teaching and learning: participation in a community of learners. In D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.), *The Handbook of Education and Human Development*, (pp.388-414). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ronen, I. (2013). Personal and collaborative knowledge development: The case of “Goal” semiotic evolution. The 6th International Conference “Changing reality through education”, Jerusalem, Israel.
- Shor, A., & Freire, P. (1990). *Pedagogy for liberation: Dialogues on the changes in education*, in Hebrew, Jerusalem: Mifras Publications.
- Shulman, L. S., & Shulman, J. S. (2004). How and what teachers learn: a shifting perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 36(2), 257-271.
- Sullivan, R. (1991, February). *The role of service learning in restructuring teacher education*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators, New Orleans.
- Webster, N., & Rajotte, E. G. (2006). Service Learning: A Model for Integrating IPM Methods and Practices into Secondary Schools. *American Entomologist*, 52(4), 218-220.
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.