“Learning Community” – It’s a Thing

According to the Urban Dictionary, “It’s a thing” is a phrase used to describe a phenomenon, often of some modern cultural significance. Like “Brunch: it's a thing.” Track with me as I explain why “learning community” is a thing of some significance in the field of accreditation.

As I have admitted before, I am a constructivist. I believe the meanings of the words we use are constructed as they are used among us in the normal discourse of life. The meaning of a word is not pre-packaged and handed to us from some external authority. It takes on its own substance, relevance, and nuance as we use it over time to exchange ideas with others.

Then there are those special words, the kind found in a professional vocabulary. Their meaning is shaped as those words are used more narrowly, by a more circumscribed “universe of discourse,” such as among physicists or neurologists. They almost speak their own language, even though the connecting words are familiar to us commoners. This is one reason why professional associations publish journals and convene conferences – so these professionals can use their special language with each other both to share ideas and to refine the very words used to convey those ideas with each other.

Now bring this constructivist notion into a very specific event: An accreditor’s conference. This is when as many as 5,000 educators come together for several days to talk with each other about accreditation in higher education. Their verbal exchanges in the workshops, break-out sessions, plenary presentations, and (most vitally) in hallway conversations are punctuated with words like “assessment,” “continuous improvement,” “Standard 4 on governance,” or “self-study report.” A stranger at the conference venue would hear these terms and, while they would hear familiar words being spoken, they would grasp very little of the vital substance of the dialogue. But this is a thing; it’s a learning community.

This event, however, is light-weight stuff compared to the real “classroom” of the learning community, when members of one institution – administrators, faculty, staff – gear up to be peer reviewers of another member institution as it seeks reaffirmation of its accreditation. Over a span of weeks, these reviewers immerse themselves in the meaning of accreditation standards, evaluative criteria, and interview methods in order to verify an institution’s status. They become the intense learners of this learning community, bringing insight and a renewed commitment to excellence back to their home institutions after their peer reviewer visit.

Drawing on the old saying that “the rising tide lifts all boats,” I can confirm that, as increasing numbers of educational professionals in our learning community enrich their personal grasp of quality practices, all our member institutions become stronger and more effective in serving our students. Shared knowledge is the rising tide.

In the current environment of regional accreditation, learning communities have geographical boundaries. The ACCJC learning community, for example, brings together community college professionals from California, Hawaii, and the Western Pacific. In addition to those on the payroll of a college, this learning community then extends to the state and regional legislators whose policies and decisions support higher education. It encompasses the employers whose needs help to define and improve the college curriculum. It draws in the local media to frame
the narrative about the value of a community college education. It underscores the fact that regional Commissioners are familiar with the players and issues impacting their colleges and can deal more wisely with how to respond to their needs.

The concept of a defined learning community is moving to center stage at a time when uninformed voices in Washington want to dissolve their boundaries. Someone has suggested to key politicians that the historic geographical scope of the regional accreditors represents exclusivity, anti-competitive protectionism, and restrictions on the rights of institutions to choose their own accreditor. This assertion, injected now into high-level debates, ignores the historical and demonstrated value of the current regional concept. Dr. Belle Wheelan, President of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, whose region covers eleven Southern states, shared the following testimony before a US Senate hearing:

> It’s important for federal policymakers to understand why the regional accreditation system has prevailed for so many years. It’s not simply a matter of proximity, though that is an important factor. Each regional commission has in-depth knowledge of their states’ policies and practices, has built effective relationships with their institutions, as well as state and local elected officials and stakeholders, and understands the unique needs of area students. As Congress considers proposals to reauthorize the Higher Education Act and works with the U.S. Department of Education on related regulatory proposals, maintaining and supporting the regional accreditation system is paramount.

Even as “brunch” is a thing, so a learning community – defined by the scope and practice of regional accreditation – is a very real thing in higher education.