There is more to life than just grasping knowledge

Every faculty of the University of Groningen has its own Learning Communities. Every faculty interprets the concept in a slightly different way. The good news is: it doesn’t matter! Learning Communities provide a kind of safe haven where teachers and students come together with companies and alumni and start working on a specific project. They choose their own goal and direction. Small groups, personal responsibility, real life projects, free choice of topics - these aspects make Learning Communities a wonderful means for enhancing the professional development of students.

The first FEB Learning Community was run by Daan Tavenier in February 2016 – with a serious game on Mergers and Acquisitions of SMEs. The next semester there were three more and this semester there will be seven Learning Communities. Is this steady growth an indication of success and innovation? Febrations asked a few persons involved to give their opinion.

Example 1
Learning Community Programming

Albert Schrotenboer
PHD Candidate Operations Research and Management Science

Albert acted as project leader “graph visualization” for the Learning Community Programming. “Nick (dr. N.B. Szirbik) had been brainstorming about how to bring students into contact with programming – where can I find a concrete project? Well, in my PhD I develop models and algorithms to optimize network logistics and service logistics maintenance for offshore windfarms. I have designed interesting models and accompanying algorithms – but the output of these algorithms is very quantitative. So I thought why not ask a few students to help me and design a graph visualization – so that my theory and solutions are shown as a visual and people can see the windmills and the service boat navigating and so on. Two students applied and one of them stayed: Thom Steenhuis.

Thom and I form the smallest possible Learning Community. I talk to Thom every second week for two hours – we agreed on using the scrum method. Every time we meet he presents me with several new working components, like a zoom function or a voice-over. The basic idea is that he learns to work for a client. I participate because it’s fun and also because I think it is very important for students to learn programming. You need this skill. In addition, the application is for sure going to be used for dissemination of my research results to companies involved in my PhD.”

Example 2
Learning Community Social Impact Assessment

Iris Vis
Dean of Industry Relations RUG and professor at FEB

Iris acted as a leader of one of the projects that took place within the Learning Community Programming – which is coordinated by Nick Szirbik (lecturer at FEB) and Vincent Velthuizen (master student at FHWN). Vis and others have been working on developing educational materials for kids at primary schools on the topic of logistics. This was a project, funded by the topsector logistics, to show kids the opportunities and breadth of the logistics sector. “At one point in time most materials were ready, but I was still looking for additional possibilities to let children carry their knowledge home to also show it to their parents. Nick Szirbik asked me if I could think of an assignment for students in his Learning Community. This is when the idea of a serious game arose.” Iris admires the way Nick designed his Learning Community, allowing both beginners and senior students to contribute and she is very happy with the final result students presented to her: “They invented and designed a wonderful game that invites children to make smart decisions on managing inventories of different types of food and clothing. I loved their infectious enthusiasm. The game will now first be tested at a primary school and eventually will be made available to primary schools all over the country.”

Kees van Veen
Associate professor at FEB/director of the Institute for Governance and Organizational Responsibility

Kees initiated one of FEB’s learning communities. Together with FEB’s associate professor Mirjam Wilhelm and spatial sciences professor Frank Vanclay he started a Learning Community on Social Impact Assessment in the autumn of 2016. The goal was to dive into the topic intensively and subsequently develop teaching materials for future use. Five students were interested and contributed significantly to the development of the case of a nickel mine in Papua New Guinea. They chose the subject and studied it for a period of twelve weeks – with sessions once every two weeks. Kees thoroughly enjoyed the process of “joint (re)searching” in a less predefined format. As a result, a new Learning Community on “sustainable seafood” is about to start. This time the initiators try to involve external stakeholders as well. Whether this means paying a visit to the shrimp factory Heiploeg at Zoutkamp or talking to a Greenpeace representative is still an open question.
New start-ups?

Miriam Osevoort
Educationalist at FEB

Miriam evaluates all learning communities and noticed the first results are very good. “Our concept is more or less unique because most of our learning communities are extracurricular and multidisciplinary and multilevel. This means that learning communities are special because students participate in learning communities purely and solely out of interest. They meet students and staff from different backgrounds and they learn how to work with interpersonal differences in a group. In addition, learning communities are a great opportunity for staff to work on topics of their interest without the restriction of a regular curriculum.”

Maarten van der Vlerk

Maarten passed away at the age of 54. His death shocked the faculty, and caused profound sadness among his colleagues and friends. We will always remember him for his warm personality, his honesty, and his dedication.

Maarten was not only a brilliant researcher, internationally renowned for his work in Stochastic Programming, he was also an outstanding teacher with a gift for imparting knowledge. He won the FEB lecturer of the year award in 2014. His courses, Stochastic Programming and the Specialization Stochastic Programming, were in the top five of our faculty almost every year. From their master degree ceremonies, his dedication to his students was exemplary.

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Together with Jan Riezebos Nimarta is responsible for the planning and organisation of learning communities. They support lecturers by making arrangements for extra time and budget to run the communities and provide support in promotion, room bookings, company visits and other logistical matters. Jan en Nimarta both are thankful to the staff members who already started and ran Learning Communities. Their contribution has been highly valuable. Nimarta: “We would like to invite all FEB-staff to share their new ideas on Learning Communities for future semesters. If you are passionate about a topic and you want to explore the possibility of starting a Learning Community of your own, do not hesitate to contact me or Jan Riezebos. A community can be an amazing platform to develop new education.” And she adds: “Learning Communities are open to exchange students as well.” Look at www.rug.nl/feb/lc

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The FEB community feels his loss keenly, and our thoughts are with his loved ones and all his friends and colleagues.

Wim Klein Haneveld
Ward Romeijnders