Think about a learning environment in which you have participated, either as a learner or as an instructor, that had a high degree of community. What did that look like for you? How did it impact the learning?

Part I: The Theory

Inspiration

- TAed a first-year writing seminar with an explosive level of community
- Anecdotally: extraordinary growth from students, particularly FGLI students
- Connection?

Question

How does the community level within a first-year writing seminar impact the writing confidence of and writing skills learned by the students within the class?

Two Bodies of Liturature

Collaborative Learning

- Primary scholar: Kenneth Bruffee
- Movement, started in the '80s, to improve students' writing
  - Connected to the open admissions movement
- Helps students build their own knowledge base, with teacher as guide
- Alternative to teacher-centric classroom

FGLI Experience

- Primary scholar: Anthony Abraham Jack
- "Privileged poor" vs "doubly disadvantaged"
  - Doubly disadvantaged come from backgrounds with different academic norms
  - Teacher/professor as authority figure
  - Stay quiet to succeed
- Result: lack of communication skills hinder in a college environment
- Contributes to imposter syndrome
- How can schools facilitate building communication skills?
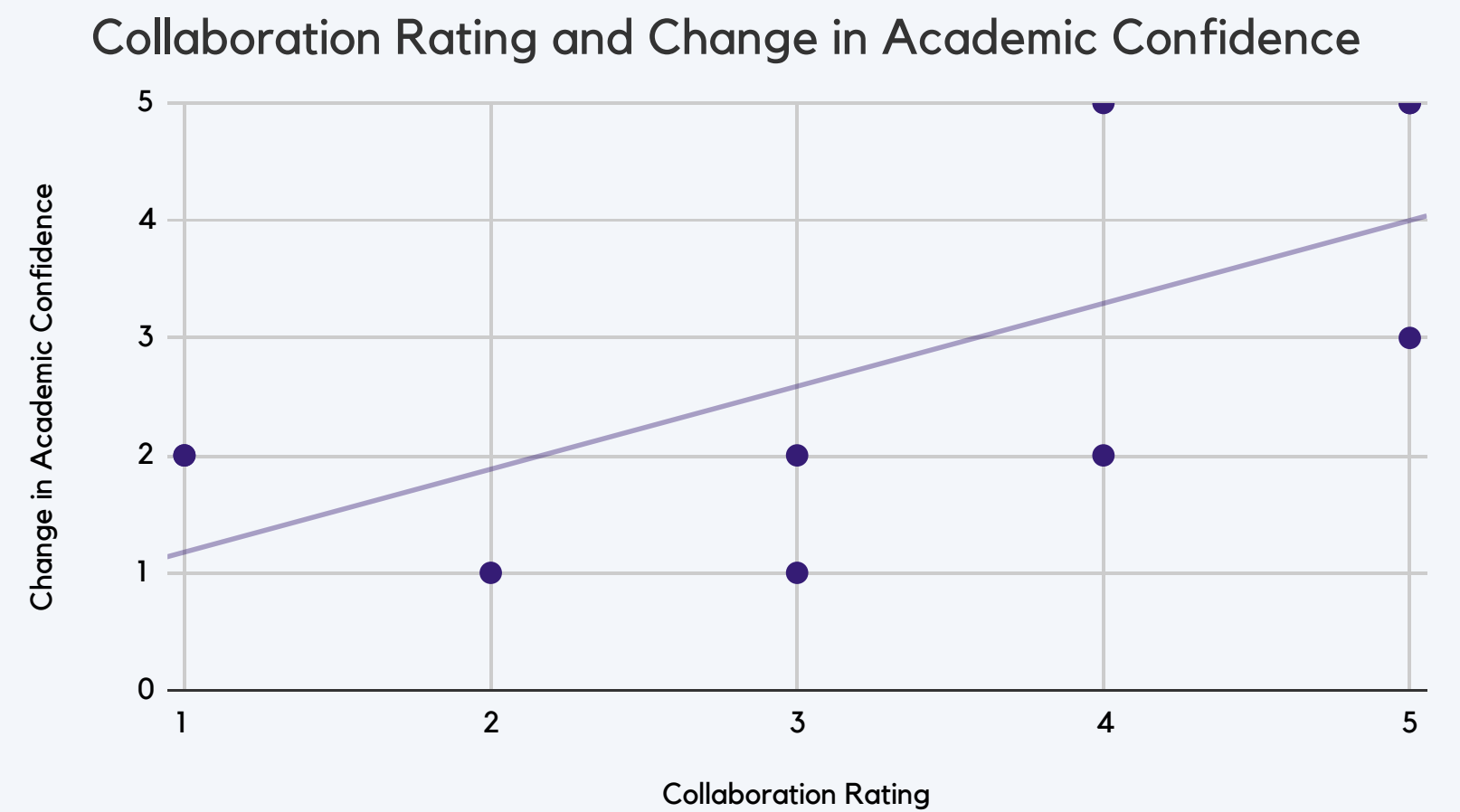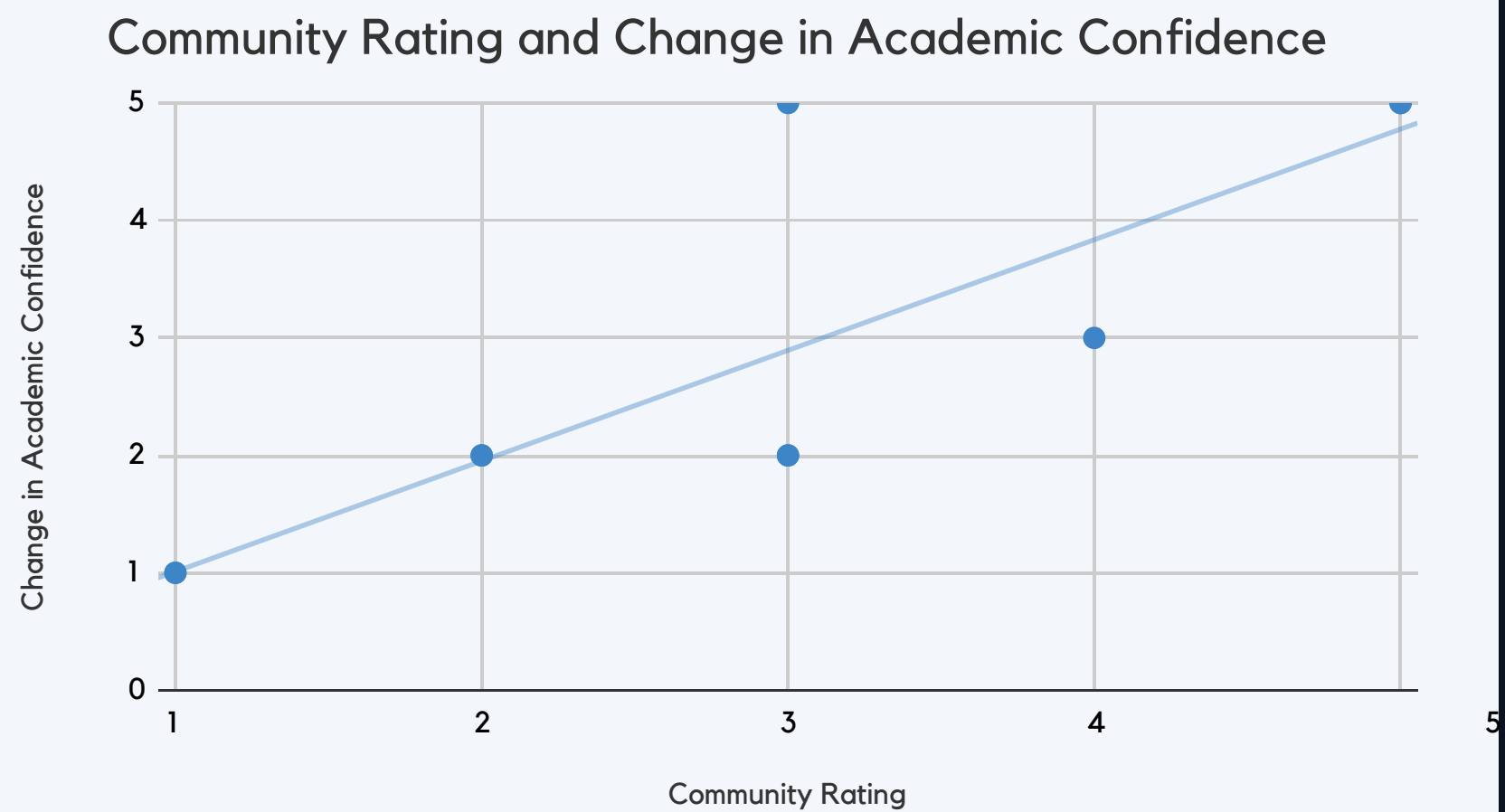- Provide more structure for social/ academic collaboration

Methodology

- Interviews with students in five writing seminars at the end of the Spring 2021 semester
  - Students self-selected into the sample
  - 1 — 3 students per writing seminar

- Questions included:
  - Opinions about community levels and collaborative learning
  - Confidence in writing and in various college norms
  - Prior experience with communication

- Validity check: interviews with each writing seminar professor

- Coded qualitative data using Nvivo
  - Coded student and professor data separately

A Note on COVID

This semester was conducted virtually, which almost certainly impacted results

Community Level	Collaboration Level	How did collaboration help learning?	Changes in Writing Confidence
Low	Medium	• On peer review and outlining, helped with subject matter • Clarified professor's expectations • Overall, no major impact on learning	No major changes in writing confidence
Medium-low	Low	• On peer review and outlining, helped with subject matter • Clarified professor's expectations • Overall, no major impact on learning	Slightly higher writing confidence
Medium	High	• Clarified professor's expectations (Student #6) • Helped with brainstorming for major assignments (Student #10)	Student #6 reported slightly higher writing confidence; Student #10 reported significantly higher writing confidence
Medium-high	Very high	• Helped with brainstorming for major assignments • Increased vocabulary • Increased understanding of structures of new genres • Gave each other excellent feedback	Slightly higher writing confidence overall, significantly higher confidence in writing in new genres/for new audiences
High	Very high	• Helped with brainstorming for major assignments • Gave each other excellent feedback	Significantly higher writing confidence

Figs. 1 & 2

Community Rating and Change in Academic Confidence

Collaboration Rating and Change in Academic Confidence

Conclusions

- Writing confidence increases in almost direct proportion to community level

- Although increased writing confidence is also linked to increased collaboration level, there is a less direct relationship than the one between writing confidence and community level

- Depth of learning from collaborative activities also seems to increase with higher community

- Implication: in high-community classes, students are more deeply engaged with collaborative activities than students in low-community classes, even when the same activities are required in all classes; and when students are more engaged, they report higher levels of learning

Part II: The Practice

Cosmic Writers

- Nonprofit that teaches creative writing education to K–12 students

- Workshops taught by college students

- Instructor training: community-building → collaborative learning

  - Hire instructors in cohorts, conduct training in seminars

  - Training sessions are designed to create social connection before we solicit peer feedback
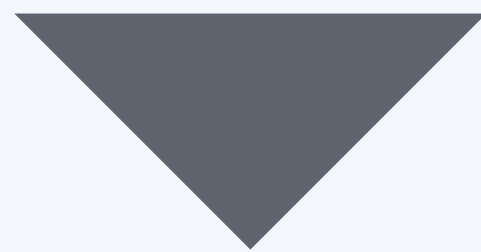
Social Bonds → Knowledge

Icebreakers, social gatherings (ex: picnics), low-stakes collaboration

Bonding

Construction of Discourse Community

Collaborative activities that focus on process more than product

Transition

Peer feedback, co-teaching, knowledge exchange

Collab

Transition Stage

Ex: "Facing Your Fears" Activity

Icebreaker: Name, school/affiliation, role, the role that teaching plays in your life

Quick Write: One thing you feel confident in as a teacher, and aspect that makes you nervous
- Ex: I feel confident in designing activities that get kids excited about writing, and I'm nervous about my ability to be high-energy in front of a group of skeptical teenagers

Go around and share the results of your quick write, then conduct Facing Your Fears simulation

Reflections

- After the "Facing Your Fears" activity, would you trust the people in this room to give you helpful feedback? Would you solicit their opinions unprompted? Why or why not?
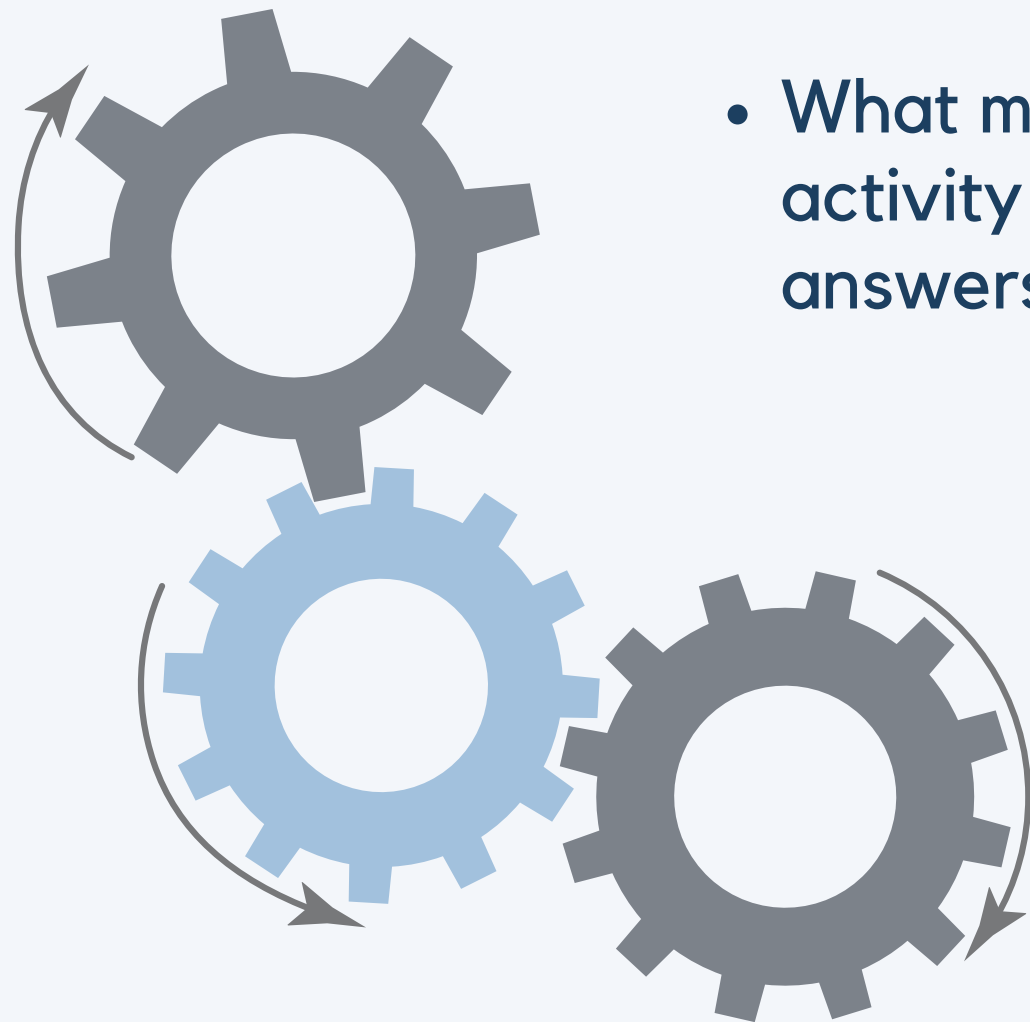
- What makes an activity build community bonds? What makes an activity collaborative? Where is there overlap between the answers to these questions, and where is there differentiation?

- How do you build community within your own classroom? What does a successful discourse community look like in your field? How can you facilitate community-building while standing back as a teacher?

Thank You

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