

David Jackson and Rachel Tasker

Professional Learning Communities

“(One) enduring catalyst for change is a compelling picture of what the school might become – one that projects positive images and practical alternatives that are clearly superior to the status quo.

The concept of a professional learning community can provide that picture.”

DuFour and Eaker (1998)
Professional Learning Communities at Work

We travel through changing times ...

There is a growing consensus around the need for change within our schools and school system. Globalisation, technological advances, the demands of the knowledge economy, changing work patterns and social justice imperatives all point towards the need for an education system that can deliver more, and do so in ways that are different, better and more equal. Raising the bar and closing the gap of attainment, whilst also improving learning and expanding achievement for all children are shared aspirations.

We are emerging from more than a decade of policy-driven reform strategies; outside-in solutions of which the National Curriculum and testing framework, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and the OfSTED inspection cycle are the most visible examples. Such strategies have succeeded in raising attainment levels, but have done little to close achievement gaps and have raised questions about the longer-term sustainability of externally driven change. Strategies that value professional expertise, raise esteem and increase teacher morale now appear to offer greater potential for achieving both immediately visible and sustainable change, both crucial in a system that needs simultaneously to show short-term evidence of success, whilst generating sustainable improvement.

Whilst an accountability architecture is likely to stay, schools are also being invited to take more control by designing inside-out approaches. There is a climate that is encouraging collaboration, freedom to innovate, individual specialisation, learning from diversity, and 'earned autonomy'.

Both government and teachers appear prepared to embrace an era in which 'informed professional judgement' within an accountability framework becomes the norm. Since the mid-1990s, theory, research evidence and examples from successful international practice are converging around an emerging metaphor that embraces these concepts – that of the school as a Professional Learning Community (PLC).

At the 2002 Networked Learning Communities launch, Charles Desforges argued that it is frequently the case that practitioners know more than theorists, and that practical knowledge is often in advance of theoretical understanding. What we need to know in order to produce the desired change in all schools is already being acted out in some classrooms across the country. However, schools that are configured to respond successfully to outside-in change programmes are unlikely to be well designed to capitalise upon their own internal knowledge sources. They are not well placed to learn from one another. As Michael Fullan (2002) has recently written:

“It is one of life’s great ironies: schools are in the business of teaching and learning, yet they are terrible at learning from each other. If they ever discover how to do this, their future is assured.”

Increasingly, though, there are schools emerging that have made this discovery; schools which have used the reform opportunities of recent years to begin to redesign around learning possibilities; which have developed internal cultural and structural conditions hospitable to organisational learning strategies such as enquiry processes and sustained problem-solving. In an example of theoretical knowledge and practical understandings coinciding, they have begun to transform themselves into Professional Learning Communities.

For all schools to be encouraged to make a similar journey, what would be required in terms of knowledge, policy conditions and incentives?

“Community begins with a shared vision. It is sustained by teachers who, as school leaders, bring inspiration and direction to the institution. Who, after all, knows more about the classroom? Who is better able to inspire children? Who can evaluate, more sensitively, the educational programme of each student? And who but teachers create a true community for learning?”

Ernest Boyer (1995)

“A Professional Learning Community is defined as a school’s staff members who continuously seek to find answers through inquiry and act on their learning to improve student learning.”

Astuto, in Pankake and Moller (2002)

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“Professional Learning Communities are places in which teachers pursue clear, shared purposes for student learning, engage in collaborative activities to achieve their purposes, and take collective responsibility for student learning.”

Ann Lieberman in Sparks (1999)

Background

The Professional Learning Community concept has evolved, both theoretically and practically, over the last decade. It has eclectic roots: in the organisational learning literature (eg Senge 1990); the work on school restructuring (eg Lieberman 1995); studies of professional community (eg Louis et al 1995; Sergiovanni 1994); theoretical understandings about communities of practice (eg Wenger 1998); models of distributed leadership (eg Lambert 1998; Leithwood et al 1997); and theories of capacity building (eg Mitchell and Sackney 1999; NCSL 2002, Hadfield et al 2002).

Four large-scale studies have been of particular interest in building the evidence-base. The Teacher Quality of Working Life Study in the USA (Rosenblum et al 1994) looked at professional community in schools and its positive relationship to teacher work-life balance, professional morale and student achievement. A more applied programme was the five year study Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement, based at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) between 1997 and 2002. This focused upon both understanding and developing schools as professional learning communities.

Similarly the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative focuses upon building within-school and between-school professional learning communities built around collaborative enquiry, distributed leadership and joint problem-solving. In the UK, to investigate the potential of professional learning communities, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), General Teaching Council (GTC) and National College for School Leadership (NCSL) have jointly funded a research team based at the Universities of Bristol and Bath to carry out a Longitudinal Study of the Phases of Development of PLCs (Stoll et al 2003).

What characterises a Professional Learning Community?

A Professional Learning Community has the capacity to promote and sustain the situated learning of all its members. Strong emphasis is placed upon the idea of enquiry and collaborative problem-solving. New ideas and knowledge are allowed to travel both internally and externally. The ultimate aim is to enhance pupil learning. Creating positive learning experiences for each child in every classroom remains the top priority – a school for pupils and a university for staff.

As with NCSL’s Networked Learning Communities initiative, the words of Professional Learning Community tell their own story. Each component is resonant with compelling significance for the ways in which school might function.

Professional The distinctive professional knowledge base of education is pedagogy. Teachers and other educational professionals feel professionally supported in an environment that values their ongoing learning within norms of study of classroom practice. A school working as a PLC is populated by staff who constantly seek to be up-to-date with the most recent developments in the evolving educational knowledge-base. Furthermore, they carry out this process of investigation together, so they are not isolated in their work. Through collaboration, the ability to problem-solve together ensures that the school is constantly better able to meet pupils’ needs.

Learning A relentless focus on the learning of all means that educational professionals within a PLC are always searching for new opportunities to study together and ways to improve current practice. When staff have the chance to enquire collectively, the result is a body of wisdom about teaching which can be widely shared – both within and between schools. The more continuously teachers are able to learn, the greater the benefit for pupils. In PLC schools teachers become better practitioners each year just because of the culture of learning available to them.

Community The term community has significance. In PLCs particular importance is attached to the moral purpose dimension of community. Members of such a community are aligned around the common aspiration of achievement for all pupils. They are bound by shared values and an agreed-upon way of being and doing. They strive towards ensuring that all children receive the best possible deal. They care about and celebrate each others’ achievements – and they share knowledge and classroom craft, too.

A PLC is an environment which fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support and personal growth as its members work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone.

“The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as a Professional Learning Community.”

DuFour and Eaker, Professional Learning Communities at Work (1988)

What does a Professional Learning Community look like in practice?

A Professional Learning Community is characterised by shared values and a collective sense of purpose. Its learning is fuelled by collective enquiry, teamwork and the study of evidence. Leadership is distributed, and there is collective responsibility for pupil achievement. Most important, though, there are supportive conditions within the school to foster and facilitate learning – including high mutual expectations and accountabilities.

Research evidence from successful practice suggests that there are six shared characteristics found in Professional Learning Communities. These characteristics appear to cross all school types and to cross international boundaries.

1. Shared values and vision

All staff in a PLC will be involved in a process of developing shared values and collective aspirations which make up a school's distinctive purpose. A sense of shared ownership allows them to live these values and to bring them to every aspect of their work. What characterises a PLC is an undeviating focus on student learning and whole school improvement at the core of their mission.

All schools might lay claim to this. What are the distinctive processes necessary for it to become a lived reality for all members of a school community?

2. Collaborative learning built around enquiry – and the application of learning

Teachers in PLCs constantly question the status quo. They support one another to try out new methods, and they learn together from the results. They examine student work together, read and talk about professional journals and books in groups and pose theories and test strategies together. This application of learning creates high intellectual learning tasks and solutions that are acted out in classrooms.

How far would this description characterise your school's practice? What learning spaces could be utilised differently to begin the journey towards embedded collaborative learning?

3. Collaboration and shared personal practice

In order to increase both individual and organisational capacity, staff work collaboratively rather than individually. Lesson study is normal. Practice is public. Staff work in a variety of collaborative teams. Learning norms enable teachers and other educational professionals to plan, teach and assess work together rather than alone, so that teaching and learning processes are open and shared.

As early as 1992 Judith Little argued that professional learning communities are built when teachers:

- engage in concrete talk about teaching with one another
- observe one another and provide feedback about teaching
- collaborate around planning for instruction

She concluded that joint work (eg team teaching, collaborative planning, peer observation, action research, sustained peer coaching and mentoring) led to the most sustained changes in teaching and learning practices in schools.

What priority is given in your school to collaborative lesson study and to the accumulation of within-school knowledge about teaching and learning?

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4. Supportive and shared leadership

Headteachers and other leaders participate democratically and model learning values and norms. They distribute leadership by sharing power, authority and decision-making within a school's overt value system. Staff are empowered and student learning priorities are always uppermost when time and other resource priorities are set. Innovation and risk-taking are encouraged for their leadership and learning potential.

How far is distributed leadership offered – and how widely is it embraced in your school?

5. Collective responsibility for student learning and success

Educational professionals in PLCs search for better ways to do things. They experiment and innovate because they take collective responsibility for all of the pupils in the school – not just those in their own classrooms; not just those with successful learning histories. They are enthusiastic to adapt, develop and make their learning widely available to promote achievement for all pupils.

What might need to change in your school to make this school-wide within school learning and sharing possible?

6. Supportive Conditions

Physical, psychological, emotional and resource conditions allow members of Professional Learning Communities to make fulfilling contributions. Teachers are provided with time and space to work and study together; resources are made available to them, timetables redesigned, work patterns altered, habitual practices challenged in order to reduce teacher isolation. Social cohesion and trust relationships are fostered, too.

Might a workshop around these themes challenge outmoded practices and generate new working practices in your school?

Where might you go from here?

“Good networks are in the knowledge-creating and teacher-learning business. They are motivated by the desire to improve our schools and the lives of the young people who travel through them.”
David Jackson, Director, Networked Learning Group, NCSL

The progressive transformation of a school into a Professional Learning Community has been shown to have enormous impact upon the lives of both children and adults. It is also the case that, just as collaboration and lateral learning are characteristics of within school activity, so schools seeking to become Professional Learning Communities look outside themselves for learning – they seek out school-to-school learning opportunities. Recycling a school's existing and emerging knowledge-base is unlikely to be sufficiently sustaining over time. The reality of 'sharing

best practice' has also shown itself to be lacking in the dynamics and challenge of learning. Collaboration, interdependence, co-construction and sharing of 'best process' are the between-school learning practices most likely to foster and sustain a Professional Learning Community.

If you are reading this 'think piece', then your school is quite possibly already a member of one of NCSL's Networked Learning Communities. The philosophy of Networked Learning says that schools and practitioners strive to 'work smarter together rather than harder alone' and that they learn 'from, with and on behalf of one another'. It almost goes without saying that schools seeking to be PLCs, will also seek to learn interdependently with other schools.

As internal learning becomes an institutional norm for all, school members are also better placed to start to connect with the knowledge-base of other schools, universities, community partners and other educational organisations. Schools eager and excited by learning will wish to learn from, with and on behalf of others.

Similarly, the shared values of a Professional Learning Community, acted out within individual schools, provide the best possible environment for the learning opportunities for all participants in a Networked Learning Community to flourish and take hold. In this way, outside – in and inside-out approaches become balanced and sustaining. Over time, these Professional/Networked Learning Communities may well prove able to provide sustainable and readily transferable solutions to the closing of achievement gaps, both within and between our schools. If they do, it will have far-reaching implications.

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Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

National College for School Leadership
Networked Learning Group
Derwent House
Cranfield University Technology Park
University Way
Cranfield
Bedfordshire MK43 0AZ

T: 08707 870 370
F: 0115 872 2401
E: nlc@ncsl.org.uk