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Learning Communities as a Vehicle for Improved Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Learning communities are widely recognized as an effective tool for improved teaching and learning. To improve teaching and learning, intentional planning and implementation are required. Learning communities that are implemented intentionally and supported by scheduling, budgeting, materials, and institutional leadership can be a powerful tool for improved teaching and learning. There are specific steps and practices that school systems can follow to build and implement learning communities that increase institutional capacity for sustained improvements in teaching and learning.

Overview

What is a learning community? What conditions and design elements are necessary to have learning communities that result in changes in instructional practice and increased student achievement? As universities and school systems strive to increase student success rates, it is more important than ever to plan for, and provide, a vehicle for achieving this goal. This chapter will present professional learning communities (PLCs) as a vehicle for improving the quality of both instruction and learning. Learning communities will be discussed within the context of adult learning principles, building instructor capacity, building a culture of collaboration, mentoring for both new and experienced instructors, distributed leadership, and social media and technology. Various practical examples for implementation and tips for success will also be included.

Review of the Literature

What Is a PLC?

According to Fenning (2004), "learning organizations must not rely only on previous achievements they have made, but must also be visionary and perceptual in building learning communities" because this increases student success and retention. DuFour and Mattos (2013) asserted that PLCs are one of the most powerful strategies for improving both teaching and learning. The reason for this is that PLCs create collaborative culture and collective responsibility for improving teaching and learning. Instructors in PLC schools

- take collective responsibility for student learning and have higher levels of professional satisfaction;
- share teaching practices that work;
- improve both student achievement and professional practice; and
- are more likely to remain in the profession.

Caine and Caine (2010) described PLCs as a learning group that collaborates to improve teaching practice. This collaboration can take the form of study groups, action research teams, communities of practices,

conversation circles, and online communication. Caine and Caine (2010) emphasized the social nature of learning and the underutilization of educators' colleagues as resources for learning and professional development. Caine and Caine (2010) also recognized the importance of school culture as a critical piece in creating the necessary conditions for successful learning communities. They asserted that:

- Life is a process; successful relationships and communities are a process; and they need to be built, nurtured, and sustained.
- The goal of these communities is successful and effective professional development that increases real-world or classroom teaching competence.
- To become more expert at anything, the community needs to encourage and support the brain/mind principle of relaxed alertness. Fear can hinder the intake and processing of information. Positive affect supports higher-order brain functions.
- Learning communities need opportunities to research information, link it to what they know, and plan for how to apply the material to their classroom.
- Types of learning communities include study groups, action research teams, communities of practice, conversation circles, and online learning groups. These each have different purposes, routines, and procedures.

Adult Learning Principles and PLCs

In our quest for effective professional development, attention to adult learning principles and conditions that support effective professional development is critical. Wei, Darling-Hammond, and Adamson (2010) and Killion and Hirsh (2013) recommended the following conditions for successful professional development:

- Professional development days embedded into the workday
- Schedules that allow for periodic collaboration meetings of three to four hours
- Support for technology and the necessary infrastructure
- Differentiated staffing and compensation

- Funding for consultants, technical assistance, conferences, professional books, and journals

Wei et al. (2010) provided detailed recommendations about what needs to happen during the professional development time to support increased teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Wei et al. (2010) defined effective professional development as comprehensive, sustained, and intensive activities that improve instructor and leader effectiveness in raising student achievement. According to Wei et al. (2010) and Killion and Hirsh (2013), effective professional development

- helps develop a collective responsibility for student achievement and is aligned with rigorous standards and school improvement goals;
- is conducted at the institution/school level (job embedded) and led by institution leaders or practitioner leaders;
- is a continuing cycle of determining learning needs based on data analysis;
- includes strategies such as lesson studies and the development of formative assessments;
- includes job-embedded coaching to support the transfer of skills/ knowledge into the teaching of courses; and
- is assessed on the effectiveness of the professional development, and this helps to guide ongoing improvements.

The PLC groups described by Caine and Caine (2010) meet the guidelines for effective professional development as described by Wei et al. (2010) and Killian and Hirsh (2013). Study groups, action research teams, and communities of practice involve ongoing, intensive, job-embedded activities that support instructors in changing their practice. The collaboration that changes instructor practice is also most likely to have a positive effect on student achievement and success.

Building Capacity for PLCs

Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, and Gallagher (2007) studied the professional development (PD) practices of 454 instructors. This examination included the duration and time span of PD, the focus of PD and how active learning was incorporated into the PD, and instructor perceptions of how PD aligned with their own goals, how the PD efforts were supported, and what barriers existed. The study concluded that the initial PD activities did affect overall program implementation and that it was effective to engage instructors in aligning PD activities with standards and in planning how to implement the PD information in the classroom. Effective PD was critical to building instructor capacity.

Penuel et al. (2007) acknowledged that curricular reforms and changes are highly demanding on instructors. They emphasized the need for interactive PD that allows for cycles of learning, and practice is critical in building the capacity necessary for instructors to successfully navigate and implement these numerous reforms. The learning cycles are similar to the PLCs discussed by Caine and Caine (2010) and DuFour and Marzano (2011). Collaboration, which is also part of a PLC, was specified by Penuel et al. (2007) and DuFour and Marzano (2011) as promoting successful instructor implementation of reforms. Implementation was also influenced by instructor perception. Instructors needed to perceive that the change was necessary and that is was also embraced by their peers (Penuel et al., 2007). According to Caine and Caine (2010), DuFour and Marzano (2011), and Penuel et al. (2007), time spent on PD, using university partners, and data reporting, analysis, and collaboration are important for successful implementation of PD and for building instructor capacity.

Distributed Leadership, Shared Culture, and Vision for PLCs

DuFour (1997) emphasized that institutions cannot produce students who are continuous learners and collaborators if the instructors in the institution do not act out these characteristics. Traditionally, instructors have worked in isolation. When PD occurred, there was no follow up or support for implementation. The training was not assessed, and there was no relationship to school or district goals. There was an assumption that adult learning only happened outside of the school. In a learning organization, the following would be present, according to DuFour (1997):

- New staff would be oriented and would have a mentor, support groups, regular observations and supportive, constructive feedback.
- Curricular or department teams would meet regularly to review and agree on standards, pacing, materials, and assessments.

- Peer observations would be common with the giving and receiving of feedback as standard practice for all instructors.
- Instructors would participate in study groups and action research.
- All instructors would serve on improvement task forces at some point in their career.
- Professional sharing at meetings would be expected.
- These collaborative support structures would be supported by time and schedules.

According to DuFour (1997), these conditions will build instructor leadership, and also support a shared mission and vision in an institution. These conditions are also necessary for successful PLCs as described by Caine and Caine (2010) and DuFour (1997). DuFour (1999) also described actions that leaders can take to build a shared mission and vision in their institution and to support successful PLCs. According to DuFour (1997; 1999) and DuFour and Mattos (2013), successful leaders:

- lead through shared vision and values, not rules and procedures;
- enlist faculty members in decision making and empower individuals to act;
- provide staff with information, training, and parameters to make good decisions;
- are results oriented; and
- ask the right questions instead of presenting solutions.

DuFour (1999) emphasized that effective leadership is vital in planning any change initiative or PD program. Because PLCs rely on the effective communication and functioning of small teams, a leader who builds staff capacity and a shared mission and vision is important for PLCs to be effective. If PLCs are to maintain reflective inquiry, they must be given the power to act and make decisions that support the shared mission and vision (DuFour, 1997; DeFour, 1999).

A Culture of Collaboration and PLCs

An understanding of change in institutions and how instructors and staff respond to change initiatives is critical when attempting to build a collaborative culture that will support successful PLCs. Evans (2000) discussed some important differences between business change models and how change occurs in schools. Instructors can be more sensitive to change than their corporate peers, and they can value stability and tradition over change and innovation. Therefore, business or corporate change models may not succeed because school life is different from the corporate world. In a school, relationships can be more powerful than change initiatives. If change in instructional practice is a goal of any PD model or PLC, the model must account for instructor preparedness and reaction to change.

DuFour and Marzano (2011) provided specific steps that leaders can take to build a culture of collaboration and implement effective PLCs to improve teaching and learning in their institutions. Important points included:

- Effective implementation of PLCs increases that capacity in adults.
- Learning communities must have norms, protected time to collaborate together, and leaders should carefully monitor their work.
- It is important to celebrate PLC team achievement and address situations of nonparticipation.
- The purpose and goal of the PLC must be revisited, articulated, and celebrated on a regular basis.

Mentoring New and Experienced Instructors

Gagen and Bowie (2005) presented a case for formal training of mentor instructors. Mid-career instructors have expertise and skills that can be of benefit to new instructors. Mentor training can support these mid-career instructors in providing an important service to new instructors. The PLC model described by Caine and Caine (2010), DuFour (1997; 1999), DuFour and Marzano (2011), and DuFour and Mattos (2013) can also provide mentoring for instructors. When instructors meet in collaborative groups to do PLC work, the conversations and exchange of information that occur are a natural vehicle for mentoring and transmitting valuable expertise to one another.

PLCs and Minority Instructors and Students

Abilock, Harada, and Fontichiaro (2013) and Smith and Ingersoll (2004) highlighted the shortage of minority instructors and the need for minority instructors. The discussion also addressed the low numbers of minority instructor candidates. Minority instructors are needed because the subgroups that are often labeled as "not meeting adequate progress" by some federal laws include groups of minority students, and special education and English language learners. According to Abilock et al. (2013) and Smith and Ingersoll (2004), mentoring programs are needed to recruit minority students into fields such as teaching because research indicates that the results of minority instructors include:

- positive gains by minority students;
- fewer minority students in special education;
- a decrease in the absenteeism of minority students; and
- more minority students in extracurricular activities.

PLCs are a natural vehicle for supporting minority instructors and minority students. The relationships that are built in a PLC support a safe exchange of ideas around culture and strategies that can be important for changing instructor practice and supporting minority students. The discussions around student data that occur in a PLC help to ensure that students are considered as individuals and that their progress is carefully and continually monitored.

Technology and PLCs

Borko (2004), McConnell, Parker, Eberhardt, Koehler, and Lundeberg (2013), and Schrum and Levin (2013) provided information about the elements of effective professional development and a comparison of face-to-face and virtual PLCs. They highlight how technology can be used to support PD that is differentiated for the goals and needs of individuals. By carefully choosing and planning for technology that is part of a larger comprehensive system, the following aspects of PD and PLCs can be supported and successful via online PD:

- personalization,
- collaboration,
- access,
- efficiency, and
- learning design.

The use and success of technology for PD and PLCs is limited when it is not planned as part of a larger vision, if there is no tech support, and if there is inadequate support for learners. Virtual professional learning communities have the same function and goals and face-to-face PLCs, except that they utilize technology to meet and communicate. Both face-to-face and virtual PLCs require the same key components for success:

- supportive and shared leadership,
- shared values and vision,
- collective learning and application of learning,
- supportive conditions, and
- shared practice.

DuFour (1997; 1999) put forth three "big ideas" for successful PLCs:

1. Emphasis on learning
2. Development of a culture of collaboration
3. Focus on results

McConnell et al. (2013) reported on a study that compared face-to-face PLCs with virtual PLCs. Both groups demonstrated equal time on task, the same types of discourse, and addressed the same types of issues. Both groups reported the following uses of their PLC:

1. Sharing articles and information
2. New perspectives from group members about evidence
3. Hearing practical solutions from others
4. Accountability to the group
5. Focus on professional discourse
6. Developing professional friendships

McConnell et al. (2013) concluded that virtual PLCs are an effective mode for PLC meetings when time, driving, or remoteness of location prevent face-to-face meetings.

Integration into the Student Experience

There are various best practices that can be implemented in the classroom that ensure the PLC is an effective, supportive structure. These practices are easily implemented but require consistency over time:

- Provide explicit explanations to the students at the beginning of the course about the purpose and importance of a learning community.
- Illustrate specific examples that show how collaborating in a learning community will support both their success in the course, and also how it specifically relates to a career they are preparing for.
- When possible, allow for flexibility in the course syllabus so that students may discuss as a group possibilities for due dates, the best types of groupings for projects, and input on scoring rubrics.
- During discussions, take a step back and allow students the time to arrive at decisions as a group. This will cement their perception of themselves as a successful learning community.
- As often as possible, ask students for feedback about the course, projects, and learning, wait for responses, and be prepared to adjust instruction and projects after collaborative discussions.
- Ensure that students know the value of collaborating in a professional learning community. Their ability to collaborate with others can have more impact on their future career than their intellectual ability.
- Commit to facilitating the growth of a learning community mindset in their courses and share successes and challenges across an academic program.

Integrating the learning community mindset into the student experience can be done with a high rate of success when the instructor provides the time, flexibility, and facilitation of conversations that allow the learning community to grow. A school- or department-wide commitment to this mindset will have a significant effect on its success.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

The strategy of building a strong learning community cohort is best used by planning for the group to address essential questions and develop shared group norms. Goss (2007) provided specific discussion questions for facilitating the development of the students from a group to an intentional learning community. According to Goss (2007), questions for the cohort members to discuss during an orientation may include:

1. How will we schedule our time, what will we give up, to commit to the work of this cohort?
2. What common investments will we all make consistently?
3. What are our shared norms for attitudes and behaviors that will not be part of our community?
4. How will we promote harmony in our cohort and growth for every member?
5. What does it mean to be a member of this cohort?
6. Why are we in this together?

Establishing a quality cohort model will promote student success. More students will complete the program. The quality of learning and achievement will be higher. Students will be more confident and become effective leaders as a result of participating in a quality cohort.

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

Advertising a "cohort model" or stating a support of "learning communities" does not equate to increased student success. These models require intentional planning and an understanding of the practices needed to ensure success. The literature provides us with many examples of best practices for cohorts and learning communities, and specific steps to follow in establishing a successful cohort or learning community. A program

or department that commits to both an awareness of best practices and intentional implementation will see the most impact in student successes.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented and explained PLCs as a vehicle for improving teaching and learning. Various practical examples for implementation, and tips for success, have also been included. PLCs have been presented in the context of building instructor capacity and distributed leadership, shared mission and vision, adult learning principles, building a culture of collaboration, instructor mentoring, and the use of technology for PLCs. The research cited demonstrates that effectively implemented PLCs support improved instructor practice and increased student achievement.

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