

ONLINE COMMUNITY

BECOMES A PATHWAY TO TEACHER LEADERSHIP

By **Cindy Gutierrez and Chris Bryan**

"I see myself more in a leadership role after this experience than before. Previously, I thought a leader was the one who always speaks up at staff meetings, but now I believe it's the person who is willing to share and guide ... listen, and expand for themselves, the students, other educators, or future educators that are within their reach."

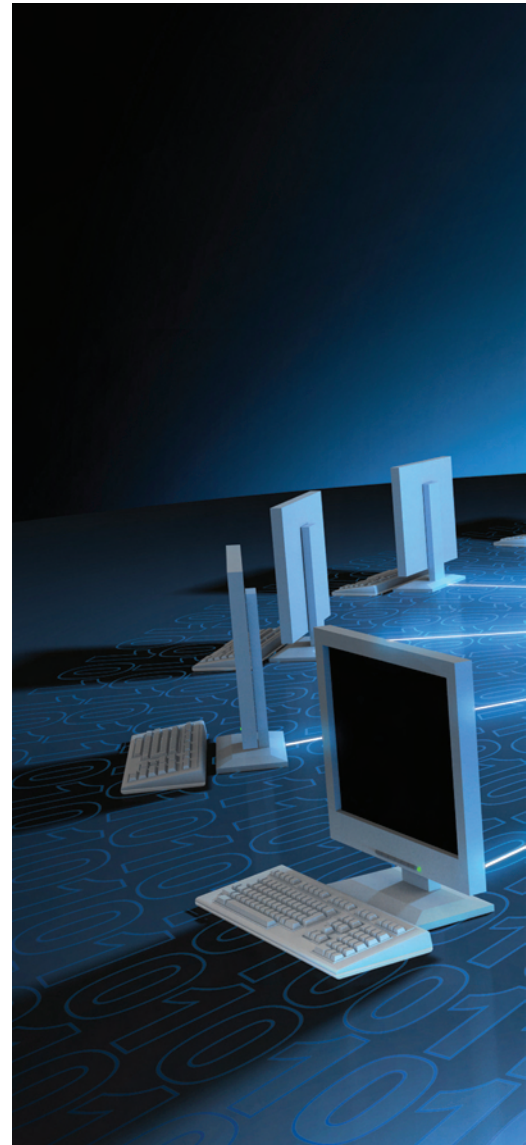
— *Kate, online community participant*

Kate's perspective on teacher leadership before engaging in this online community is not that unusual. As a 5th-grade teacher, she's focused on trying to do what is best for her students. However, she often sees her influence ending inside her classroom as she grapples daily with the intense complexity of teaching and the need to respond to external pressures from district, state, and national mandates.

What may be unique about Kate is that she is teaching inside an urban Professional Development School, where she also takes on the role of clinical teacher, men-

toring teacher candidates from the University of Colorado Denver's teacher preparation program. A Professional Development School (PDS) is an in-depth school-university partnership designed to bring about the simultaneous renewal of schools and teacher education programs as an educational reform approach to increasing teacher quality (Goodlad, 1994; Holmes Group, 1986).

Carrying the PDS approach into the 21st century, Kate and other clinical teachers formed an innovative online community intended to not only increase clinical teachers' mentoring skills, but to also provide them with a pathway to seeing themselves as teacher leaders.



We were challenged to develop innovative ways that online learning communities could foster collaboration, support, and learning, especially for novice teachers, in order to break the isolationist nature of the profession.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Often, teacher leadership is a natural outgrowth of PDSs as new roles and opportunities for collaboration emerge for educators at all levels. Our university has been engaged in PDS work for more than 15 years, and in many of our sites, we have witnessed phenomenal teacher leadership development, with teacher candidates being hired in the school after completion of their year-long internship program, later becoming clinical teachers mentoring the next generation of teacher candidates in the building, and then moving on to even more formal roles of leadership such as instructional coaches, principals, and district-level positions. We have wondered why this seems to happen for some educators involved in these schools and not for others. We are not

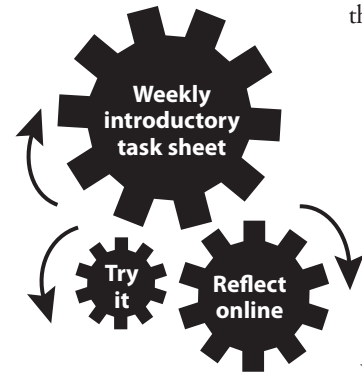
just interested in the progression of individuals into formal roles of teacher leadership but also in the potential for continuous renewal when educators come to believe in themselves as teacher leaders. Research indicates that one of the clearest effects of teacher leadership is growth and learning among teacher leaders themselves (Barth, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1988; Ovando, 1996).

A few years ago, we began to consider how to foster more intentional teacher leadership development among all clinical teachers who mentor teacher candidates in our Professional Development Schools. For years, we have faced challenges of time, money, capacity, and contractual issues in providing high-quality systemic professional learning for clinical teachers. Growth is our latest challenge as we have increased the size of

our network to 30 schools across six urban districts in a large metropolitan region, working with more than 350 clinical teachers every year. These are certainly parallel challenges to what districts face when they are thinking about large-scale professional development.

An opportunity came about when we were selected by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future to become a model project site for their Teachers Learning in Networked Communities initiative. We were challenged to develop innovative ways that online learning communities could foster collaboration, support, and learning, especially for novice teachers, in order to break the isolationist nature of the profession.

York-Barr & Duke (2004) assert that the emergence of teacher leadership is best fostered in the context of a learning community. Thus, we saw the initiative as a way to develop an online learning community for our clinical teachers in a way that could help us transcend our past challenges of providing professional development. Clinical teachers would not need to leave their classrooms to drive an hour across the city; money was not an issue because we could use a free open-source web-based platform; and the online approach would allow clinical teachers to collaborate across time and distance in meaningful ways, while providing convenience and flexibility.



3-step weekly learning cycle of the online learning project

DEVELOPING THE ONLINE CLINICAL TEACHER COMMUNITY

Content

Unlike what we experience with popular social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, online communities for teachers must have a clear purpose and link directly to the work they are already doing in order for teachers to see them as useful (Fulton, 2007). We knew we had to develop content that was closely related to not only their immediate needs to become better mentors and coaches for their teacher candidates, but also help them begin to consider their role as teacher leaders as it related to their daily practice. Killion & Harrison's (2006) role-based framework for teacher leadership was a natural fit and provided a clear frame to apply the roles to the work of clinical teachers and guide the development of the content for the online clinical teacher community (see table on p. 45).

Process

We began by bringing clinical teachers together face-to-face for the first meeting. This not only enabled us to help clinical teachers understand the teacher leader-

ship framework we were using, but also gave us time to introduce them to the online platform. We used Tapped In (www.tappedin.org), an online community for educators worldwide. We were able to establish our own group room where we could organize and share documents and web links, as well as engage in threaded discussions.

After the first face-to-face meeting, clinical teachers engaged in the 15-week community completely online as they explored a particular role of the framework on a weekly basis while they were mentoring their teacher candidate throughout the semester. The structure for engaging in learning about a role each week was a three-step process (see diagram at left). Early in the week, clinical teachers engaged in learning about a particular role through a weekly introductory task sheet that provided initial background and context regarding the role being explored. Typically, clinical teachers also engaged in reading an accompanying journal article or viewing a professional teaching video clip they could access through a web link. Then the clinical teacher applied this newly emerging knowledge with his or her teacher candidate throughout the week by engaging in conversation and trying strategies with the teacher candidate. For example, during the week clinical teachers were exploring the role of classroom supporter, the task sheet provided background knowledge and context on approaches to co-teaching. The clinical teacher and teacher candidate then watched a 25-minute video clip together, followed by brainstorming possible ways they were going to co-teach in the coming weeks. The final step in the weekly learning cycle was for clinical teachers to reflect and share new understandings, ongoing experiences with teacher candidates, and connections of their role to broader aspects of teacher leadership through the online discussion board. This weekly rhythm provided a predictable learning cycle and essential conditions to support engagement and interaction of all clinical teachers week after week in an online environment.

CATALYST FOR CHANGE PROJECT

The culminating learning experience for clinical teachers was to develop a Catalyst for Change Project, identifying and carrying out some type of change that they had been wanting to make that would ultimately impact student learning in their classroom or school. This job-embedded opportunity gave clinical teachers time to engage in implementing change they had identified for themselves.

A clinical teacher at the elementary level describes one change project. "I am part of a group of teachers in my district called Global Learners. Our charge is to bring

A FRAMEWORK FOR CLINICAL TEACHERS AS TEACHER LEADERS

Roles of teacher leadership (Killion & Harrison, 2006)	Essential questions for engaging in this role as a clinical teacher
MENTOR	How do clinical teachers build an effective professional working relationship with a teacher candidate?
RESOURCE PROVIDER	How do clinical teachers collaborate with others to recommend and share resources reflective of research and best practice with a teacher candidate?
LEARNING FACILITATOR	How do clinical teachers facilitate the development of a teacher candidate through effective modeling and coaching?
CLASSROOM SUPPORTER	How do clinical teachers use co-teaching strategies to not only help teacher candidates take on gradual responsibility for teaching, but also strategically impact student learning?
CURRICULUM SPECIALIST	How do clinical teachers help teacher candidates understand and analyze district curriculum in order to effectively organize instruction?
INSTRUCTIONAL SPECIALIST	How do clinical teachers model quality instructional practices to help teacher candidates understand how and why clinical teachers select and implement the practices they do? How do clinical teachers learn from the new practices they see teacher candidates implementing based on what is learned at the university?
DATA COACH	How do clinical teachers help teacher candidates collect, understand, and analyze data about students in order to inform instructional decision making?
LEARNER	How do clinical teachers engage in and model reflective practice as well as open themselves up to learning from their experiences with their teacher candidate?
SCHOOL LEADER AND CATALYST FOR CHANGE	How do clinical teachers carry out their commitment to continual improvement in order to keep trying to hone and craft their practice and act with the intention of making a positive difference towards the vision of their school?

Source: *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-Based Coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2006.

more technology into the classroom, help our students be 21st-century learners, and share what we are learning with our colleagues. My plan is that I will add a significant technology piece to this unit and share it with my colleagues. This is part of a continual effort for me to integrate technology in a meaningful way into my day-to-day teaching. This project impacts student achievement because it helps students to begin to look outside the classroom for answers to their questions.”

A second example shared by a clinical teacher at the high school level demonstrates this teacher’s desire to impact the learning of students beyond her individual classroom. “The change that I am working on is tran-

sitioning from being a classroom English teacher to being an instructional coach for our building. We have not had a coach at our school before, so this will be a big change not only for me, but for our community at large. I agreed to take this position because I believe that I can help improve the instruction of students. Participating in this community has increased my sense that there are many teachers out there who want to try new things, experiment with what might work better, but need the support.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Linda Darling-Hammond and colleagues’ (2009)

recent study about the status of professional development supports what we learned about effective professional learning, only in this case, designed and carried out in an online environment. By the end of the project, clinical teachers' conversations across the discussion

boards revealed that they were blending their own critical examination of teaching and learning, supported by new concepts gleaned from articles and other content and implementing new ideas into their own practice, both in the context of their own classroom and the broader work of the school as well as in their role as clinical teachers. From the report and through listening to teachers, we learned that:

1. Sustained and intensive professional development for teachers is related to student achievement gains.

In the online learning community, teachers engaged in ongoing professional development for 15 weeks. They were able to apply their learning in an authentic way in their own classrooms.

A teacher's view: "It is great to use your teacher candidate as the practical application. You got to take everything that you read and learned about early in the week and then got to go talk about it with your teacher candidate. [These] conversations were meaningful for both of us and broadened both of our understandings."

2. Collaborative approaches to professional learning can promote school change that extends beyond individual classrooms. We found that teachers who had not previously identified themselves as teacher leaders shifted their thinking. Throughout the online experience, their confidence in their ability as instructional leaders increased.

A teacher's view: "The role of the clinical teacher can be a part of what it takes to be a teacher leader. A leader implies a larger commitment to the school operation outside of one's own classroom. A clinical teacher, because of the reflective nature of this position, can expand that classroom view outward to the working of the school. Completing this community has helped me see that I can have an impact on the developing programs in the school and I enjoy sharing my concepts with others."

3. Effective professional development is intensive,

ongoing and connected to practice, focused on teaching and learning of specific academic content, connected to other school initiatives, and built on strong working relationships among teachers. Through focused, weekly online professional learning, rich discussions, and support and feedback from one another in the online learning community, teachers' real-time needs as clinical teachers were met. Their efficacy as mentors for their teacher candidates increased, as did their belief in themselves as teacher leaders. Professional development is not just one more thing in this school; it becomes part of the overall culture and a strategic resource to improve teacher quality.

A teacher's view: "I keep on looking at my data from my 1st graders' reading scores, and I am just not getting the results that I was hoping for. I have been thinking aloud to my teacher candidate about this and how I can modify instruction to fill in the gaps and give my kids what they need. I showed her my data and how I was coming to the conclusions that I shared with her. Afterward I met with my literacy coach, and later my vice principal (my literacy coach from previous years) and had a coaching conversation with them both. Later in the day, I shared what we talked about with my teacher candidate, and what I decided to do to address the problem, based on the questions and insights that my vice principal provided. She now gets to help me implement new instructional practices, and she had the experience of seeing me reflect, then act."

THE LEARNING CONTINUES

Our commitment to the Professional Development School model continues to spawn new questions we want to explore related to the development of teacher leadership in PDSs (see questions at left). However, we know that a clinical teacher's role can be one of tremendous potential for personal and professional learning and growth, an opportunity to take steps into a new world of teacher leadership. Inevitably, the teacher's own quality of teaching can be enhanced if the right learning opportunities exist to support his or her development as part of today's school reform efforts that require "immensely skillful teaching — and schools that are organized to support teachers' continuous learning" (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 7).

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Questions to explore

- **What** factors of school culture contribute to, as well as threaten, teacher leadership development in Professional Development Schools?
- **How** do school administrators create the type of culture that supports teacher leadership development?
- **How** might administrators and instructional coaches apply Killion & Harrison's (2006) framework as a way to guide the strategic development of building-level professional learning for classroom teachers?
- **Would** such professional learning support the development of a school culture characterized by teachers who embrace an inquiry and teacher leadership stance?

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