

Professional learning communities

EDUCATORS WORK TOGETHER TOWARD A SHARED PURPOSE —
IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING

BY SHIRLEY M. HORD

We can all agree that the purpose of schools is *student learning*, and that the most significant factor in whether students learn well is *teaching quality*. Further, teaching quality is improved through *continuous professional learning*. The context most supportive of the learning of professionals is the professional learning community (Hord & Hirsh, 2008). Here I define what happens in the professional learning community and what makes such communities possible.

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THE LEARNING

First, what is the community learning? "It is vital that ... staff members understand the linkage between learning with students in the classroom and learning with colleagues" (Lambert, 2003, p. 21). Members of the community thoughtfully study multiple sources of student data to discover where students are performing well, and thus where staff members can celebrate.

Importantly, the areas that receive the staff's most meticulous attention are the areas where students do not perform successfully. The staff members prioritize these student learning needs, and define one area to which they give immediate attention. The staff collectively takes responsibility to learn new content, strategies, or approaches to increase its effectiveness in teaching to these problem areas. Learning is not an add-on to the role of the professional. It is a habitual

activity where the group learns how to learn together continuously.

Here is a small example: In my first fieldwork assignment in 1986 for the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, I supported the school improvement efforts of an 18-member faculty of a small rural school. As we studied and interpreted item analysis data, the young science teacher leaped to his feet and loudly proclaimed, "They didn't get it." After a long pause, he added, "Next time, I will have to learn how to teach that differently." This young teacher got it! And he got it through examining data in concert with his peers.

THE COMMUNITY

There is a second aspect in working to define a community of professional learners: the community itself. "The term 'community' has almost come to mean any gathering of people in a social setting. But real communi-

ties ask more of us. ... They assume a focus on a shared purpose, mutual regard and caring, and an insistence on integrity and truthfulness. To elevate our work in schools to the level required by a true community, then we must direct our energies and attention toward something greater than ourselves” (Lambert, 2003, p. 4).

The most common teaching/learning pattern for adults and children today emphasizes individual learner work flowing from an instructor’s lecture. This teacher-centered style, where the teacher pontificates about a topic or skill, is followed by directions from the teacher for the adult learner’s assigned application tasks. Changing this teaching/learning process from instructor-centered to learner-centered (whether for children or adults) constitutes a fundamental change.

The professional learning community models the self-initiating learner working in concert with peers. This is a constructivist approach. Our system is in need of change toward more constructivist views of the learning process (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). As Lambert notes, “Professional development designs that attend to both teacher and student learning might use what I refer to as the ‘reciprocal processes of constructivist learning.’ By this, I mean learning that is mutual and interactive, thereby investing in the growth of all participants” (2003, p. 22). Constructivism recognizes learning as the process of making sense of information and experiences. Learning constructively requires an environment in which learners work collegially and is situated in authentic activities and contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, learning is most productive in a social context.

Burns, Menchaca, and Dimock (2001) identified six principles as important to constructivist learning theory:

1. Learners bring unique prior

knowledge, experience, and beliefs to a learning situation.

2. Knowledge is constructed uniquely and individually, in multiple ways, through a variety of authentic tools, resources, experiences, and contexts.
3. Learning is both an active and reflective process.
4. Learning is a developmental process of accommodation, assimilation, or rejection to construct new conceptual structures, meaningful representations, or new mental models.

• **Professionals:** Those individuals who are responsible and accountable for delivering an effective instructional program to students so that they each learn well. Professionals show up with a passionate commitment to their own learning and that of students, and share responsibility to this purpose.

• **Learning:** The activity in which professionals engage in order to enhance their knowledge and skills.

• **Community:** Individuals coming together in a group in order to interact in meaningful activities to



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5. Social interaction introduces multiple perspectives through reflection, collaboration, negotiation, and shared meaning.
6. Learning is internally controlled and mediated by the learner.

These six principles of constructivism are closely connected to the concepts and dimensions of the professional learning community.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY’S RELATIONSHIP TO CONSTRUCTIVISM

The professional learning community is *defined* by what the words state:

learn deeply with colleagues about an identified topic, to develop shared meaning, and identify shared purposes related to the topic.

The professional learning community encourages constructivism by providing the setting and the working relationships demanded of constructivist learning. Six research-based dimensions of professional learning communities are:

- Shared beliefs, values, and a vision of what the school should be;
- Shared and supportive leadership

where power, authority, and decision-making are distributed across the community;

- Supportive structural conditions, such as time, place, and resources;
- Supportive relational conditions that include respect and caring among the community, with trust as an imperative;
- Collective learning, intentionally determined, to address student needs and the increased effectiveness of the professionals; and
- Peers sharing their practice to gain feedback, and thus individual and organizational improvement.

The professional learning community, whose purpose is the learning of the community's members, models constructivist learning. When the community operates according to the research base on professional community learning, this learner-centered environment for educators results in important outcomes for teachers and administrators and significant achievement for their students.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

What does a community of professionals need to implement constructivist learning?

Community membership. First, consider the community members. Two ways to organize the professional community's work are of particular interest. One is the regular weekly (or more frequent) meetings of the grade-

level or academic subject-matter teams. In these small groups, members focus on their students' needs, their curriculum, and instructional practices that appropriately address their students. The team's learning focuses directly on these students. A parallel structure is the whole staff meeting at least monthly, more often if possible, to study school data,

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define goals, and determine what learning they need to achieve these goals. They must also decide how to go about their learning. They share and discuss their team-group learning. This structure provides common purpose for the school.

Leadership. The principal's role is important in launching the communities' meetings. Defining purpose for these gatherings is vital, and the principal's leadership in supporting and leading collaborative dialogue about students' needs and how staff's learning can contribute to student learning is key to the effort.

Time for learning. Also important is the principal's role in soliciting teachers' cooperation in finding or creating time for meetings. In one possible model, the district office creates a schedule where all schools' instructional day would be extended by 15 to 20 minutes four days a week and adjourned after lunch one day a week. With this model, the district maintains student instructional time and average daily attendance, dismisses students early on one day, and the staff is free of any obligations other than to meet and learn together.

Schools and districts have found other ways to access time. However, advice from the book *Eat, Pray, Love* playfully but accurately suggests that "time — when pursued like a bandit — will behave like one" (Gilbert, 2006). Helping parents and other members of the school community understand the need to adjust the school schedule to enable educator learning is another task for the principal and teachers.

Space for learning. Principals must identify space that can accommodate the entire faculty. One principal rotated the meetings around to every teacher's classroom. Not only did this provide space, but teachers of all grade levels and subjects gained insight into their fellow teachers' work. The visitors noted evidence of their colleagues' teaching practices and artifacts of student learning.

Data use support. Reviewing, studying, and interpreting data is the foundation of professional learning communities. Someone must be responsible for organizing the various sources of data in formats that are user-friendly. This can be a formidable job for smaller districts and schools with limited personnel.

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Eventually, all teachers should learn how to do this task so that they have ready access to current data.

Distributed leadership. Of equal importance to guiding a professional learning community is the principal's willingness to share power and authority. As the staff learns to use appropriate conversation modes, select the best decision-making model for their needs, and engage in conflict resolution, the principal removes himself or herself as the "sage on stage" to become the "guide on the side," working in democratic participation with the staff.

THE VISION BECOMES REALITY

Staff members, with their school leaders, are using data to make decisions about what to learn, how to learn it, how to transfer and apply it

to their classrooms, and how to assess its effectiveness. In so doing, professional learning community members operate as constructivist learners, making collegial decisions and planning self-generated learning. In addition to acting constructively in their learning, they demonstrate professional behavior — consistently increasing their effectiveness through continuous learning.

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