

Developing, Embedding and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities: What Have We Learned?

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This article is based on a presentation made at the National School Reform Faculty Research Forum, January 12, 2006 by Debra Smith & Hallie Tamez. Debra is Director of the Collaborative Inquiry & Development Group at the University of Southern Maine which coordinates the documentation of the Lucent Learning Communities Initiatives. Hallie is Senior Program Officer at The Philanthropic Initiative, which manages these initiatives on behalf of the Lucent Technologies Foundation. The Peer Collaboration Initiative Documentation Team included Betty Lou Whitford (Principal Investigator), Diane Wood, Diane Yendol-Hoppey, Ann Lieberman, Jon Snyder, Heidi Fisher and Debra Smith. An article by Diane Wood will soon appear in Teachers College Record, and a book about the Peer Collaboration Initiative is being co-edited by Drs. Whitford and Wood for publication by SUNY Press. The New Jersey team includes Debra Smith, Bruce Wilson and Dick Corbett. Holly Houston and Ken Bedder also participated in the research. The late Richard Curcio, Vice-President of the Lucent Technologies Foundation, was an enthusiastic champion of this work and is much missed.

Over the past six years, The Lucent Technologies Foundation has provided support to several school districts participating in two initiatives designed to help transform their professional cultures through systematic peer critique and support. The Peer Collaboration Initiative (1999-2002) facilitated the creation of “Lucent Learning Communities” (LLCs) in each of about 20 schools in four districts: Albuquerque, NM;

Seattle, WA; Lancaster, PA and Broward County, FL. Based on the lessons learned through documentation of the work in these districts, three New Jersey districts: Edison, Plainfield and Trenton, are currently involved in the Lucent Collaborative Learning Communities Initiative. In this article, we will briefly describe the design, common themes and lessons of the Peer Collaboration Initiative, the New Jersey initiative's design growing out of these, and what we are learning as the work unfolds in New Jersey districts.

The Peer Collaboration Initiative

“Lucent Learning Communities” (LLCs) were the cornerstone of the Peer Collaboration Initiative. These small volunteer groups of colleagues met for 2-3 hours monthly to reflect on their own educational practices and their students' learning using structured processes or protocols for dialogue. Co-constructed by members of the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) and staff of The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI), TPI provided oversight of the initiative, and NSRF trained LLC coaches and sent “external coaches” from its own ranks to support the work in each site. Documentation of the work as it unfolded in the districts was conducted by a team of researchers based first at Teachers College and subsequently at the University of Southern Maine.

NSRF provided training and support for LLC coaches through national convenings of educators from all four districts, and on-site support by an “external coach” who visited each district at least monthly. Located within K-12 pathways in each district, the initiative was designed to steadily expand within the 20 participating schools over the three years as successive cohorts of teachers and administrators were prepared as coaches. Designers anticipated that by the third year, the benefits of LLC work would be

so compelling that an entire school faculty would be engaged in systematic examination of practice in self-directed groups of peers.

Participation grew each year in all four districts and overall, teachers were enthusiastic about their experiences in LLCs. They valued the opportunity to discuss with colleagues dilemmas that they encountered in their own teaching practice, to examine student work and to explore curriculum and instructional strategies. Many groups found that the protocols used in LLCs were helpful in focusing discussion, though some groups abandoned their use and others, failing to establish a sense of purpose, focused on “doing the protocols well” as an end in itself. Some LLCs spent a lot of time “building trust” before they felt they could address issues of teaching and learning. Voluntary LLC members had more positive experiences than those whose participation was mandated. Many LLCs encountered issues with scheduling and were impacted by the inherent variability among contexts, including the degree of understanding and support of building and district leadership. Rising state and national accountability pressures increasingly affected the LLCs over time. These issues aside, teachers valued the opportunities that LLCs afforded to work with colleagues on strengthening teaching and learning.

Moving to New Jersey

When the Lucent Technologies Foundation decided to support a second cohort of districts in its home state of New Jersey, TPI convened a working advisory group consisting of NSRF external coaches and members of the documentation team to consider what we were learning in the Peer Collaboration sites and draft a broad-brush plan for NJ districts based on those lessons and recommendations. Based on some key ideas

generated from Diane Wood's and Betty Lou Whitford's research, the documentation team encouraged the group to consider:

- ways to make the counter-cultural aspects of LCs explicit;
- viewing LCs as an innovation that can help to integrate other reforms and thus avoid fragmented “project thinking”;
- more deliberate participation of school leaders so that they understand and can support LCs;
- redesigning training to:
 - help coaches understand obstacles inherent in school change;
 - focus on inquiry processes with protocols as one of many vehicles for promoting inquiry;
 - encourage LCs to seek outside expertise when needed;
 - pay deliberate attention to issues of equity and diversity; and
 - de-emphasize the centrality of building community as pre-requisite to examining work and practice

Expansion and redesign

The training and support provided by NSRF coaches continued to be a central element of the New Jersey Collaborative Learning Communities (CLC) Initiative design. It was also intended that CLCs would meet for 2 _ hours per month during the school day. Additional elements included:

- a planning year;

- an emphasis on districts planning for embedding CLCs within their unique district contexts rather than focusing only on expansion year to year;
- explicit emphasis on inquiry around dilemmas of student learning;
- development of processes for CLCs documentation of and reflection on their groups' learning;
- creation of a web-based environment to support reflection and collaboration within and across districts;
- cross-district seminars and other means of creating a professional learning network across the districts; and
- supporting capacity building for sustainability through engaging school and district leaders and “apprentice facilitators.”

Recognizing that the collision of conventional school norms and the practices of collaboration require a foundational understanding of purpose, the New Jersey design incorporated a planning year built around the development of a Leadership Design Team (LDT) in each district, made up of approximately a dozen cross-role members. Following an intensive summer institute bringing the LDTs together, each district team would continue their experience as a developing learning community in monthly sessions with an NSRF coach. The intent was for this diverse group from each district to develop the knowledge, skills and shared experience to scaffold their understanding of how learning communities might support the work and mission of their districts and become integrated within their unique district contexts.

Having each district participate in a planning year allowed the focus on district context to become a cornerstone for the grant proposal redesign. Rather than perpetuate an expectation of another “new/additional initiative” requiring the creation of structures not already existing in districts, the design was built on a *scaffolding plan* and an *expansion plan*. The scaffolding plan required districts to articulate a design that focused on existing opportunities for collaborative dialogue (e.g. grade level meetings, teacher networks, instructional leadership meetings, whole school reform structures) without the support of external funding. In their expansion plan, districts defined how they would use Lucent Foundation support and funding to go beyond what they identified in the scaffolding plan to deepen their approach to impact practice through collaborative dialogue about student learning. The intent was that if built on a foundation of district context, an expansion plan would more likely have a legacy when funding was depleted.

Explicit emphasis on inquiry around dilemmas of student learning and issues of equity became part of the redesign in response to evidence from the earlier initiative that many groups stalled in group development and lacked clarity of purpose in relation to student learning. Bringing student work and data about student learning to the table seemed essential if the CLCs were to enhance student learning and create more equitable educational experiences. Development of processes for CLCs’ documentation of and reflection on their groups’ learning provided both an avenue for group members to deliberate about reflective dialogue and action planning, and for getting a closer look at the development of individual CLCs.

Perhaps the most significant shift grew from concerns that without more attention to leadership and systems organization, the potential for sustainable change would be

limited. The fact that this initiative was designed around New Jersey districts in close proximity to one another presented opportunities to build a collaborative network of support within and across districts. The goal was to create conditions that bring cross-district leadership together in various ways to engage in dialogue and sharing that supports the challenging work they each face in their districts. Some of these conditions created by external support systems afforded by the grant are:

- Cross-district seminars;
- Mid-year assessments attended by teams from each district;
- Participation of Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents in learning community approaches and meetings;
- Cross-district proposal review;
- Regular meetings of leadership teams to address issues of systemic change; and
- The development of the role of “Apprentice Facilitator”, two educators from each district who work with the external coaches in building capacity for continuing to support CLC coaches beyond the grant.

The work unfolds

Four New Jersey districts were originally selected for this initiative: two urban “Abbott” districts, and two suburban districts. (Abbott districts educate New Jersey’s most economically disadvantaged children and receive state financial assistance under a NJ Supreme Court order.) One district’s new superintendent decided to withdraw from the initiative after the first year, disagreeing that teachers should meet during the school day. Each of the other district plans has been designed to build upon existing

opportunities for collaboration within district and school contexts, and there has been, as expected, variability in the ways that the work has unfolded across and within each districts. CLCs have been: established within and across schools; embedded within grade-level and subject area teams; and formed by administrators, resource teachers, teacher networks and even a group of support staff. They are voluntary and mandated; and meet during existing planning time, release time and after school. The processes used for structured dialogue within CLCs have been exported to classrooms and meetings, and various other settings in and beyond schools.

As the work evolved in the NJ districts, adjustments have been made to strengthen the initiative. Many CLCs had yet to focus on student work by the end of the second year. Despite having arrived at a common question or focus, they needed support to think about how to move forward. In response, cross-district seminar design was shifted to bring student work and emphasis on inquiry processes into more central focus. With an emphasis on student learning and focused inquiry came the opportunity to collect evidence, share learning, and document the impact of adult learning on student learning. Tools and strategies for cycles of collecting, recording, reflecting, sharing and asking questions have become an expected element of the work with the intent of developing habits of practice. Use of the CLC web site has developed slowly, with a small number of active users.

Acknowledging wide variation in context and focus, evidence suggests that:

- CLCs can provide a container for educators to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, knowledge and practices;

- CLCs support the development of socially distributed knowledge among colleagues;
- CLC norms and processes can support repatterning of professional communication and build conditions for effective teams;
- This interpersonal capacity building can “spill over” and contribute to building organizational capacity;
- Purposeful examination of student work can help establish clear purpose, with protocols as a vehicle for serving that purpose;
- Affecting the quality of student learning and the equitability of educational experiences and outcomes in a school requires a collective, sustained focus; and
- The sustainability of CLCs as part of the regular professional work of educators requires that they be embedded in schools that are (becoming) organizational learning communities.

Planning for sustainability

As the districts turn their attention to planning for the fourth year and beyond, discussions were recently held with district leaders, coaches and apprentice facilitators. All seemed to agree that the focus on creating 2.5 hours for CLC groups was perhaps undermining the more important opportunities to impact learning and practice. A greater focus on establishing the common skills, language, understanding and knowledge to have the kind of dialogue necessary to move practice should be a vital focus in the coming year. For this to become a "habit of practice" across all groups and networks in districts, the following goals were identified:

1. Increase the quality and depth of dialogue about learning and the associated teaching practices across your district -- look to existing structures for dialogue opportunities and address voids in the structure for those without existing time;
2. Strengthen district independence in supporting, expanding and sustaining #1;
3. Scaffold continued support for coaches;
4. Strengthen and expand distributed leadership;
5. Formalize communication and sharing mechanisms within and across districts;
6. Increase emphasis on sharing the work of collaboration by strengthening internal documentation (data, evidence and visible impact);
7. Include and articulate connections to work across stakeholder groups (school boards, unions, community, etc.);
8. Make connections to dialogue about learning and instructional practices, and resulting work with students visible; and
9. Make understanding learning, student work and achievement central to dialogue focus.

The first three years of this initiative have focused on supporting districts' development of capacity to institutionalize habits of meaningful dialogue and reflection on learning. From year one, they were encouraged to build on existing structures for dialogue, reflect on purpose and process defining those structures, and strengthen the impact on student learning through changes in teacher practice. Parallel attention to the organizational leadership, culture and structures that support or impede positive outcomes

in these areas is critical if districts are to be able to navigate and sustain the efforts necessary to create schools that are learning communities for children and adults. For more information contact Hallie Tamez at htamez@tpi.org or Debra Smith at dsmith@usm.maine.edu.