

Reflections on Learning Communities

Cristy Lambert-Smith

EDUL 6017

University of Georgia

November 2nd, 2006

As a member of a learning community, professional development is an ongoing process that allows us to explore new ideas and improve our effectiveness as educators. It enables us to sample research-based practices in a variety of ways that will stimulate growth in our abilities; as a result, we are able to then stimulate growth in our students. As educators we have the obligation to learn in a variety of settings; as leaders we have the responsibility of cultivating our own learning and opportunities for growth while supporting the growth of our fellow colleagues. Because the duties of a leader call for us to model our commitment to learning, we must make time for improvement in ourselves and embrace collaborative learning opportunities as a testament to our commitment to learning as a lifelong endeavor. Ongoing Professional Development should be collaborative, job-embedded and school-based to the greatest extent possible (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). The process of learning about learning that we have experienced through this course has embodied those ideas by providing collaborative opportunities for growth through online discussion and group seminars while encouraging tasks such as teacher observation, which are part of our day-to-day job experience. We have had to pace ourselves to complete our requirements, take responsibility for our learning through exploration of websites and traditional print and apply what we have learned by critiquing our school system and its professional development program in an effort to learn how to transform our system to one that is a community of learners. Being a leader means being able to fulfill your expected duties while still keeping your commitment to learning for the sake of improving yourself and the community around you.

During this course I've had the opportunity to explore the philosophy behind the learning community and observe the related characteristics within my own school system. According to Senge (Infed, 2001), in order to survive, a corporation must change itself into a learning organization that sees growth as an opportunity to overcome threats to its stability as an organization. The principles he describes as a necessary part of this process personal mastery, mental models, team learning, building shared vision, and systems thinking are necessary for people to learn from one another and improve productivity and effectiveness. These same principles are essential to the growth and reform of schools as learning communities. When I thought of these principles in the context of a learning community, I realized that while my school system creates a noteworthy variety of learning opportunities through our staff development department, very little of the professional learning that takes place in our system occurs within individual schools. Senge (Infed, 2001) states that part of building a learning organization requires time to collaborate and readily available information that can be accessed by school personnel. At one particular high school with which I am familiar, department meetings take place on a bi-monthly schedule for about 30-45 minutes per session. Short of one department, individual planning times for teachers at this high school do not seem to be scheduled with departmental or collaborative planning in mind. I see this lack of planning time as a direct barrier to this school's ability to become a learning organization. Many of the elementary schools I have visited, especially the one I worked in previous to my current position, appear to have planning times scheduled by grade-level so that the teachers can discuss their needs collaboratively and assist each other in providing a well-rounded education for their entire grade level of students. At

this school, it's not uncommon to see the entire grade level sitting in the student desks of one teacher's classroom with their planning books open, student books and other materials spread about and occasionally, a member of another grade-level joining in to assist with the needs of their fellow colleagues. With these two schools in mind, I recognize that different styles of leadership are likely part of the reason that one school is able to provide additional collaborative planning time for its teachers. The principal of the elementary school is known to instruct staff development courses within her school and at the system level while the principal of the high school appears to be quite absent due to "county-level meetings" and is unaware of the scheduling needs within his building. At the high school, scheduling is considered to be a "counseling" issue and on more than one occasion, I have been instructed to speak to either a secretary or counselor when I've requested assistance of the principal in working out a scheduling issue that involves one of the teachers that I provide consultation to within his school. At the elementary school, the principal is known to recognize faculty members at school-wide meetings for their learning accomplishments and other community endeavors. It appears that the elementary principal places greater emphasis on learning than the principal of the high school. In all fairness, I feel it's important to point out that high school students are earning Carnegie units and their schedules are not to be second priority. This being said, it should be the responsibility of the principal to create other opportunities for learning for his faculty and staff.

At the system level, the county in which I am employed offers a state of the art training facility for classes that take place after school hours. During the day, the building doubles as an open campus high school and classroom space for Head-Start

learning programs. The department puts out a catalog of learning opportunities three times yearly, and has a very convenient online process for registration. Classes are organized by content area and stipends are given in several areas for teachers to use when re-delivering the material they learned to other faculty within their home school. Re-delivery of information is strongly supported and often recommended in the course outline given at the beginning of each course. Courses are planned a semester in advance and anyone employee by the school system, under the leadership of an administrator, can apply to teach a course or suggest a course to be taught by another individual. Critically speaking, the advanced planning that is required by the school system makes it hard to take the changing needs of the school staff and student population into account; if a staff development opportunity is planned in January to begin the following August, it is possible that the teaching staff may be entirely different or may find that they have different needs based on new school or system-wide initiatives. This observation is widely supported by our text (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003) as the authors explain the movement towards school-based professional development and the importance of school input on becoming a learning community and changing with the growing needs of the student body.

The observation of my school system's staff development program, coupled with my readings from our text and electronic reading suggestions, I have gained a significant amount of insight into the process of professional learning. Among these insights are the need for collaboration among teachers within a learning community, the importance of effective communication as a condition for successful learning organizations, and the importance of a professional portfolio as a means of developing and examining our own

growth and needs as educators. Each of these insights has facilitated my understanding of how a professional learning community is cultivated.

As a special educator, I understand the value of collaboration for the sake of my student's learning. Prior to my reading of the text, I thought of collaboration as model for student learning but had never considered it as a means for professional development. Mentoring, for example enhances the learning community by providing strong support systems for new teachers who may need assistance in the areas of classroom management or instructional techniques (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). This reduces the feeling of isolation that new teachers experience when they are new to the profession or new to a particular school. In addition, collaborative assessment is discussed in our text as a new means of providing collaborative learning experiences as part of professional development. While I've never engaged in collaborative assessment, I find that it would be extremely helpful for teachers who are examining student work to develop new and innovative instructional practices to use when instructing the students within their classroom.

Communication is an essential part of my job but more recently I've begun to observe the importance it has in building professional learning communities. As a new administrator joins a school, or as an old one decides to make change, the process of building trust is essential to the outcome of the administrator's agenda. As I am gearing up to implement a classroom walk for several of the new teachers to my department, I realize that effectively communicating the purpose of the classroom walk as well as my commitment to providing all kinds of support for these new teachers is essential to their "buy-in" of the development activities that I arrange. I also recognize that encouraging communication between seasoned and new teachers within our department is essential to

building good relationships and will serve as a form of collaborative learning for all of the teachers involved.

Lastly, after examining both the text for this course and the initiative of the electronic portfolios we are creating as part of this program, I am beginning to recognize the importance of teacher portfolios as a means for measuring growth and helping teachers begin to develop their own philosophy of learning and instructional style. By examining where we began, our experiences along the way, and our reflections of those experiences, we are able to fully develop our philosophies as they related to educating students and see how our actions support those philosophies. Additionally, these portfolios serve as an excellent way for teachers to share experiences with other teachers and encourage collaborative growth.

In closing, I find that there are still some questions that remain about how to effectively provide learning opportunities for school personnel. Primarily, I find that there are significant barriers, mostly in the form of scheduling, to providing collaborative opportunities for educators to observe the teaching of other educators who instruct students of similar demographics at other schools. As someone who supervises an entire program area of special education, I feel it's important for my teachers to see the instructional practices of other educators who have overcome the roadblocks of teaching students with similar disabilities but it uncommon for more than one classroom to exist within a school that provides support for our students. Because of the cost of substitute teachers and the lack of experience needed to work with our students, I find it difficult to arrange opportunities for teachers to observe other classrooms during instructional time. I hope to look into videotaping the instruction of successful teachers within my program

area a means for providing job-related training for new and struggling teachers within our program area. I also hope to explore other school systems that are providing more dynamic forms of professional learning in hopes of incorporating them into the learning opportunities I provide for the teachers within my instructional area. Other questions that I hope to explore through survey of my colleagues include whether our current system of staff development could be improved through additional departmental trainings or if school wide training is found to be more helpful and whether or not a mentor system of training is desired for new teachers within the program I supervise. I feel the answers to these survey questions, coupled with the knowledge I've learned from our text and other readings will put me one step closer to developing a better community of professional learners within our department.

References

- Infed. (2001, June). *Peter Senge and the Learning Organization*. Retrieved October 29th, 2006, from: <https://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.html>.
- Roberts, S.M., & Pruitt, E.Z. (2003). *Schools as Professional Learning Communities: Collaborative Activities and Strategies for Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.