The Art and Science of Leadership in Learning Environments: Facilitating a Professional Learning Community across Districts

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A professional learning community (PLC) is one of the most promising strategies for effecting change in educational practices to improve academic achievement and wellbeing for all students. The PLC facilitator's role in developing and leading blended (online and face-to-face) PLCs with members from Ontario's school districts was examined through a qualitative case study. The research involved a document analysis of 36 reflections from 6 facilitators, observations, and a 2-hour, open ended, semi-structured interview with 6 facilitation coaches associated with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Facilitators shared leadership with PLC members to develop collaborative cultures, shared goals and artifacts, and guided them using dialogue and open-ended questioning to promote deep thinking, inquiry, and reflection. They scheduled meetings, set deadlines, monitored progress, and contacted members between meetings to encourage attendance. This research provides insight into the facilitators' strategies for encouraging the production of shared goals and artifacts, and the organizational culture that promotes collaborative work.

Une communauté d'apprentissage professionnelle (CAP) représente une des stratégies les plus prometteuses pour mettre en œuvre des changements dans les pratiques pédagogiques visant l'amélioration du rendement académique et le bienêtre de tous les élèves. Cette étude qualitative de cas a porté sur le rôle de l'animateur des CAPs dans le développement et la direction de CAPs mixtes (en ligne et en face à face) composées de membres de districts scolaires en Ontario. La recherche a impliqué une analyse de documents (36 réflexions de la part de 6 animateurs), des séances d'observation et une entrevue semi-structurée, à questions ouvertes et d'une durée de deux heures auprès de 6 formateurs en facilitation associés à la Fédération des enseignantes et des enseignants de l'élémentaire de l'Ontario. Les animateurs ont partagé le leadership avec les membres des CAPs de sorte à développer des cultures de collaboration, et des objectifs et des artéfacts partagés. De plus, les animateurs ont servi de guides pendant le dialogue et la présentation de questions ouvertes visant la réflexion approfondie et la recherche. Ils ont organisé des rencontres, établi les délais, suivi les progrès accomplis et, pour promouvoir la participation, contacté les membres entre les rencontres. Cette recherche offre des connaissances approfondies sur les stratégies qu'emploient les animateurs pour stimuler la production d'objectifs et d'artéfacts partagés ainsi que le développement d'une culture organisationnelle favorisant la collaboration.

A learning community is considered by some scholars and educators to be one of the most promising strategies for changing educational practices, in order to ultimately improve academic achievement and wellbeing for all students (Earl & Katz, 2007; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). In their meta-analysis, Lomos, Hofman, and Bosker (2011) identified five features of professional learning communities that had the potential to impact learning and teaching practices. Learning communities embraced reflective dialogue characterized by professional conversations regarding educational issues and practices; they deprivatized practice through observation, feedback, and open discussion of teaching practices; their members engaged in collaborative activities, shared purpose or an agreed-upon mission and goals; and they had a collective focus on student learning (Lomos et al., 2011; Louis & Marks, 1998). As such, learning communities hold promise for teachers to build their teaching skills and practices. Learning communities can provide opportunities to create engaging learning environments for educators and students alike, through teachers' reflection on their practice and the development or co-development of new practices with other educators (Earl, Katz, Elgie, Ben Jaafar, & Foster, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Stoll, McMahon, & Thomas, 2006).

Regardless, too often the promise of these groups of people working together to achieve common goals and to build capacity falls short of expectations (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Sackney & Mitchell, 2008). It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at factors impacting learning communities such as leadership and organizational culture to gain insight into this occurrence. Leadership promotes a culture that is supportive of professional learning communities, characterized by the collaborative conversations and inquiry (Earl & Timperley, 2008) required to determine and reach shared goals and purposes (Earl & Katz, 2007). Additionally, it is evident that informal and formal instructional leadership plays an important part in monitoring the group's progress and determining if goals are being reached (Earl & Katz, 2007). Yet, it is less clear to educators and researchers how leadership is harnessed to create the shared goals and purposes, and the products, or artifacts such as lesson plans and teaching strategies that reflect them. Moreover, research in educational reform highlights how organizational culture and structures can affect people's actions (Datnow, Hubbard & Mehan, 2002). The cultural characteristics, such as the beliefs, norms, and traditions that underlie the activity in an organization (see for example Schein, 1995), the working arrangements of the group members, and resources (or lack thereof) such as time, money, and expertise, can either support or hinder the work of the group members, including the leaders (Datnow et al., 2002).

In this study, we sought to discover how learning community leaders guide their community's development of shared goals and purposes, and ultimately, the products that reflect their purposes. Specifically, we asked, *what types of behaviours allow the facilitators to move their group members toward shared goals and purposes, and their finished products?* Also, we inquired, *in what ways does the group's culture influence the facilitator's role, as well as the group's realization of shared goals and purposes, and the finished products?*

Literature Review

Learning communities are currently a strategy for school improvement, and a goal for school boards across the country as well as internationally (Earl, Katz, Elgie, Ben Jaafar, & Foster, 2006; Sackney & Mitchell, 2008; Stoll, McMahon, & Thomas, 2006). A number of studies have demonstrated a link between professional learning communities' (PLC) leadership and positive effects on student achievement (Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011). Because of its key role in

PLCs, some scholars have looked at the leadership practices required to develop a face-to-face or an online professional learning community and to propel the group's work forward.

Leading Learning Communities

Scholars note leaders need to ask questions rather than provide answers, and they need to be comfortable with ambiguity and a certain amount of chaos as teachers experiment and work towards changing their practice (Sackney & Mitchell, 2008). While educators with or without formal authority may assume leadership roles in PLCs (Sackney & Mitchell, 2008), both Earl and Katz (2007) and Rodrigue, Hyland, Grant, Hudon, and Nethery (2012) have identified facilitation as a particular leadership role in learning communities that serves to guide others' activities and to promote the progress of both face-to-face and online PLCs.

In order to define a facilitation role, Hyland, Grant and Rodrigue (2008) adapted a framework developed by Murphy (2004) for online asynchronous collaboration to use with the facilitation of their blended (face-to-face and online) learning community. Based on the framework, facilitation involved six stages:

1. Social presence,

2. Articulating individual perspectives,

3. Accommodating or reflecting others' perspectives,

4. Co-constructing shared perspectives and meanings,

5. Building shared goals and purposes, and

6. Producing shared artifacts (Hyland et al, 2008).

Further, the authors developed indicators, or actions, that represented these distinct stages (Hyland et al., 2008).

Each of these stages was characterized by a series of activities in a blended PLC. Some of the most common actions for establishing a social presence were being visible online, recognizing the group's presence, supporting the esteem of online learners and responding to messages appropriately (Rodrigue et al., 2012). Articulating individual perspectives was mainly achieved by encouraging the contributions of others, and facilitating tasks was the primary way of accommodating or reflecting others' perspectives (Rodrigue et al., 2012). Facilitating the process and sharing information and resources were the common strategies for co-constructing shared perspectives and meanings (Rodrigue et al., 2012). In the final facilitation stages, working together towards common goals was the main way of building shared goals and purposes; additionally, producing a document or other artifact as a result of group members working together was the most frequently reported strategy for producing shared artifacts (Rodrigue et al., 2012).

Acknowledging different possible ways of operationalizing learning communities and the need for more research on PLCs (see for example Lomos et al., 2011)—both face-to-face and online, this study sought to build on the existing foundation by taking a closer look at the processes involved in facilitating a learning community. The study investigated a) the specific ways in which facilitators guide group members' work together in a blended PLC to build shared goals and purposes, and b) how the task of producing shared artifacts is facilitated.

The Role of Organizational Culture

In examining individuals' actions in learning communities, it is necessary to take into consideration the organizational culture. The culture of an organization has been described as

> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 1995, p. 279).

Features of organizational culture include observed patterns of behaviour used when people engage with one another, group norms, espoused values, a formal philosophy for the organization, members' specific skills, members' habits of thinking or the mental models they use, and shared meanings, for example (Schein, 1995). The patterns of beliefs, values, social and political relations, as well as expectations that guide behavior and practices (Gilley, 2000; Steiner, 2002) distinguish one organizational culture from another.

In their work, Datnow and colleagues (2002) demonstrated the importance of culture and structure in reform efforts. Yet, culture may be of greater influence than structures such as organizational arrangements and policies where learning communities are concerned. Watkins (2005) alluded to the primary importance of culture when he noted that "resources—such as trust and respect, teachers having knowledge and skills, supportive leadership and socialization—are more critical to the development of professional community than structural conditions" (p. 191). In their examination of school reform, Datnow and associates (2002) discussed concepts that can be applied to learning communities: the importance of authenticity, flexibility, ideological commitment, and ownership in creating sustainable reforms. These cultural features are necessary for a thriving learning community, as is an understanding of how those involved can affect organizational culture (see Mitchell & Sackney, 2006).

The importance of school norms, practices and systems on organizational and individual teacher learning is highlighted in the literature (Katz & Earl, 2010; Opfer, Pedder, & Lavicza, 2011). Just as principals influence the maintenance and transmission of a culture that is reflected in teachers' activities and goals (Donaldson, 2006; Leonard, 1999) through their support—or lack thereof—for those goals and activities in schools (Muncey & McQuillan, 1996), it is likely that facilitators similarly impact PLCs. Robbins (2004) noted, for example, "Peer coaching programs thrive in those contexts where time has been taken to cultivate shared values, beliefs, trust, norms, activities, and traditions that celebrate collaborative work" (2004, p. 167). Rodrigue and associates' (2012) facilitation stages, such as articulating individual perspectives, accommodating or reflecting the perspectives of others, co-constructing shared perspectives and meanings as well as building shared goals and purposes, can be seen to be integrally connected with culture development. Research is needed to specifically examine the connection between the learning community culture and facilitator tasks—namely, the building of shared goals and purposes and the development of shared artifacts.

Research Methods

In this study, we sought to better understand the facilitator actions that lead to the development of shared goals and purposes as well as the production of shared artifacts. We wanted to gain a

better understanding of facilitators' perceptions of their task of guiding a professional learning community and the issues they encountered that helped or challenged their work. Noting the importance of interpersonal relationships and context on learning communities, and the need for deeper understanding of participants' experiences of PLCs, the research questions were exploratory and descriptive, and consequently, a qualitative mode of inquiry was used for the research (see Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Rothe, 2000). Case study methodology was utilized because it enables the exploration of situations and contemporary events in which the intervention being evaluated (i.e. the facilitators' understanding of their group members' needs and the process of facilitation, their interpretation of their groups' needs, the activities they employ to guide their group members, and the impact of group culture) has no single set of outcomes (Yin, 1994). The intent of this case study was to explore in depth a learning community as a bounded system (see Creswell, 2012).

Participants

As with most qualitative studies, the sample selection was non-random, purposeful, and small (Merriam, 1998). This investigation focused on a blended (online and face-to-face) learning community, through the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) women's leadership institute. This learning community was of interest for several reasons. The facilitation strategies were research-based. Also, the learning community was ongoing—in its ninth year at the time of the study—with a demonstrated capacity for promoting professional learning as evidenced by the projects teacher-participants produced each year.

The learning community was made up of educators operating in several capacities. It included facilitators, coaches[1], and teacher-participant members with diverse levels of experience and training in their roles as elementary educators from public school boards across Ontario, Canada. The members self-selected to participate in the community with the intention of developing an action research project based on their learning needs, with a goal of enhancing their teaching practice. They were grouped into smaller learning communities, and engaged in online chats and face-to-face meetings led by facilitators throughout the year. In their separate learning communities, members worked on their own unique action research projects under the guidance of the facilitators, with the intent of having artifacts, or finished products, to share with their learning communities. The facilitators had previous experience as members (teacher-participants), developing their own action research projects. The facilitators also had support from coaches with experience as learning community facilitators and as members themselves, as well as from ETFO's Professional Services executive staff. Although the study had a larger scope than what is described here, the focus is on the facilitators' actions for the purposes of this paper. In total, six learning community facilitators and six coaches participated in the research.

Data Collection

Multiple sources of data, including documents and an interview, were collected to establish construct validity through the triangulation of the data (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Rothe, 2000; Yin, 1994). These sources included archival data, such as facilitators' written reflections on their work, facilitator training agendas and presentation materials, PowerPoint presentations with facilitator training information, compilations of action research projects completed by PLC members, as well as publications on the larger PLC and the facilitation process. A focus group

interview was also conducted with coaches to contextualize the PLCs, the facilitators' work, and the support provided to them.

Facilitators met with their learning communities approximately once a month. Facilitators and PLC members participated in two kinds of meetings: a) face-to-face sessions in August, October, and April, and b) monthly on-line chats between October and April as well as during May. Reflections were collected from facilitators for each group session held during the 2012-2013 school year (October, November, January, February, March, April, and May). The facilitators' reflections focused on key actions in their monthly meetings with their learning community. More specifically, they concentrated on a) activities that contributed to their group's progress with building shared goals and purposes as well as shared artifacts, b) how the learning community culture impacted the progress of the group, and c) how the facilitators addressed the group dynamics. Reflection topics included

- Assessing PLC progress with building shared goals and purposes;

- Evaluating PLC improvement with shared artifacts using a scale beginning with "haven't started," and ending with "goals are clear and well articulated;"

- Identifying key facilitator actions that contributed to PLC progress;

- Detecting group characteristics that impacted PLC progress and their effects;

- Describing facilitator actions to address group characteristics affecting PLC progress; and

- Charting future courses of action for PLC growth.

In total, the facilitators submitted 36 reflections.

In addition to the written reflections from the facilitators, an interview was conducted with the coaches who assisted the facilitators to build their skills. A semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol was used, with the interview being approximately two hours in length. In addition to demographic questions, the researchers asked the coaches about issues such as coaching challenges, the coach's role and specific actions, how the coach assists the facilitators in managing their groups and developing necessary skills, the level of the facilitators' engagement, as well as the differences in the facilitators' skills and PLC progress observed over time. Following the interview, field notes were taken, and the audio recordings and notes were reviewed.

Data Analyses

The research team conducted a document analysis of the completed facilitator reflections, field notes, and coaches' interview notes. The collected data were analyzed based on the concepts delineated in the literature review (Merriam, 1998), which was treated as an initial starting point for inquiry. After reading through the data, the data were manually coded in terms of text that specifically addressed the research questions. The spontaneous categories that emerged from the data and the content of what the participants said, such as opinions, observations, and views were coded to enable the researchers to extract themes.

The constant comparative method was used in which the data from each participant and event were continuously examined throughout the data collection period and incidents were compared across the data (Creswell, 2012; Rothe, 2000). In this way, new categories and themes were developed and existing ones were evaluated and modified (Merriam, 1998). After the data

were coded, they were sorted according to the codes, using Microsoft Word. Complete quotes from the participants' reflections and interview were included and were referenced to the participants. In this way, the researchers could compare specific participants' views in each category or theme.

In developing the themes, the researchers kept several study limitations in mind. It is noted that the researchers did not receive all of the reflections from the participants. As a result, the analysis and findings were not based on full participation. Furthermore, some reflections contained limited content and therefore the themes and trends were based on their interpretation of the information provided, and may not apply to the entire group's understanding of facilitation. The researchers attempted to mitigate these limitations by providing a summary research report to all PLC members, then conducting an overview of the research process, findings, and interpretations. At that time, participants were encouraged to provide feedback. All participants were women, which also posed a limitation to the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of elementary teachers. Despite the limitations to research listed above, the findings provide valuable insight into facilitation.

Findings and Discussion

The professional learning community was established by the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario to provide an opportunity for teachers from different boards across Ontario to examine their practice and to enhance their teaching and student learning through action research. Members were committed to addressing an issue related to teaching and learning that for them had significance and carried with it some sense of urgency to address. To do this work, they were divided into small groups, beginning the process of becoming learning communities. The facilitators contributed their perceptions of their activities in monthly written reflections as they guided their participants through their action research projects. When the reflections were analyzed, facilitator actions were grouped into three types: administrating learning communities, leading relationship-building and collaborative work, and championing and cheerleading. Furthermore, contextual issues such as group dynamics, and responsive actions were discussed in the reflections. These elements were grouped into themes as indicative of group culture.

The facilitators' activities and their impact are depicted in Figure 1, and explained in the discussion that follows.

Facilitators as Administrators

Facilitator actions that were essential to the managing and directing of both individual and group work—specifically work that contributed to progress towards shared goals and purposes, and shared artifacts—were categorized together as "administrative duties." Numerous facilitator actions reported in the reflections were concerned with keeping order in the processes of building shared purpose and goals, and shared artifacts, but also keeping order in the sessions themselves. These managerial responsibilities for the group and its progress (Blanchard, 1996) included planning, organizing and staffing, and problem solving (Kotter, 1995).

In face-to-face meetings and on-line chats, administrative tasks included setting appropriate times for tasks, monitoring progress, answering group members' questions, and providing technical support. How and in what ways tasks were accomplished were likely influenced by the
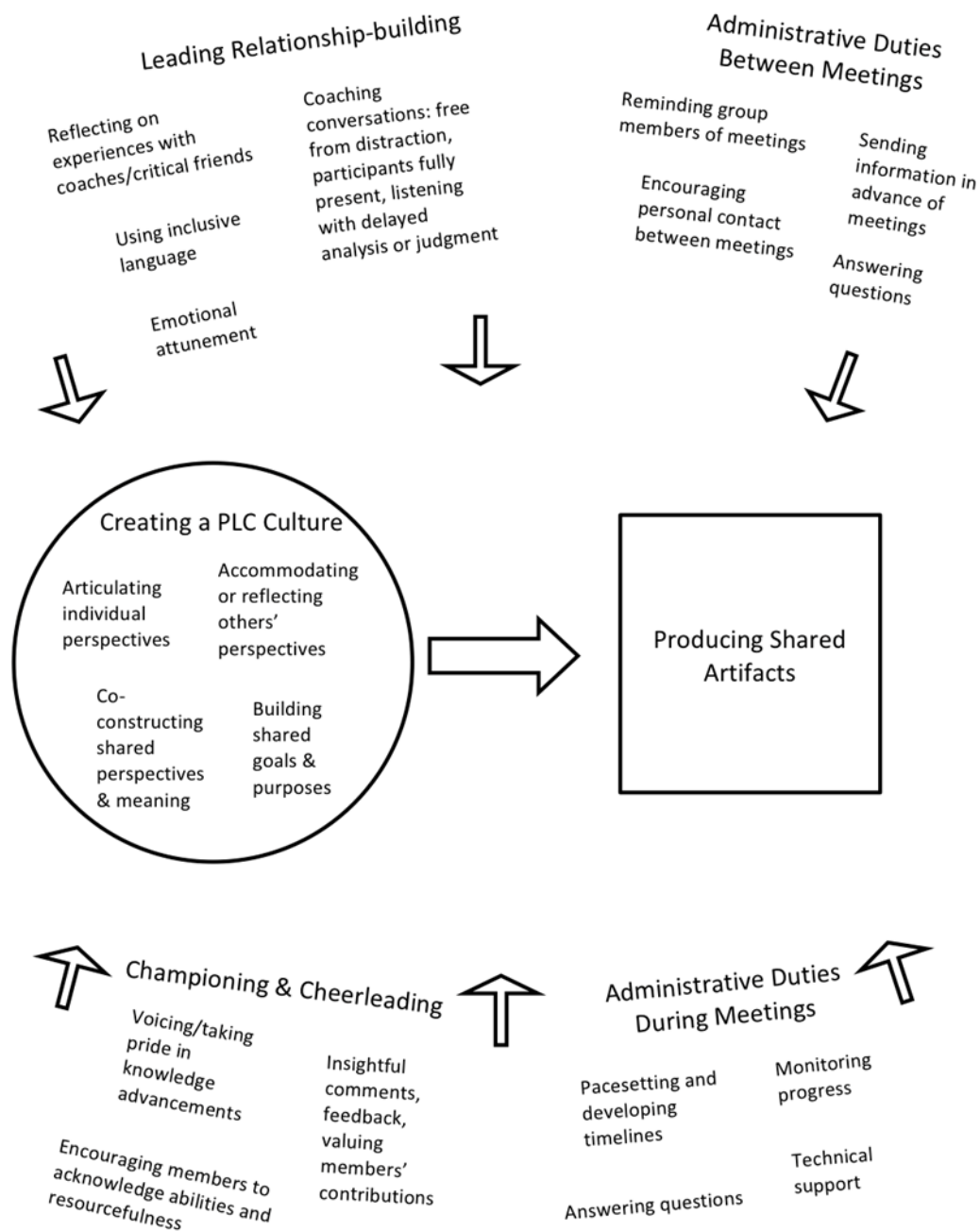
Leading Relationship-building

Reflecting on experiences with coaches/critical friends

Coaching conversations: free from distraction, participants fully present, listening with delayed analysis or judgment

Using inclusive language

Emotional attunement

Administrative Duties Between Meetings

Reminding group members of meetings

Sending information in advance of meetings

Encouraging personal contact between meetings

Answering questions

Creating a PLC Culture

Articulating individual perspectives

Accommodating or reflecting others' perspectives

Co-constructing shared perspectives & meaning

Building shared goals & purposes

Producing Shared Artifacts

Championing & Cheerleading

Voicing/taking pride in knowledge advancements

Insightful comments, feedback, valuing members' contributions

Encouraging members to acknowledge abilities and resourcefulness

Administrative Duties During Meetings

Pacesetting and developing timelines

Monitoring progress

Technical support

Answering questions

Figure 1. Facilitator's actions for guiding their learning communities

group's characteristics, or culture. For example, several facilitators stated that giving everyone a chance to speak was important to the group's progress. Therefore, setting appropriate times for tasks took longer for larger groups with more members contributing to the conversation. Goal setting and the tasks developed to reach goals might also take longer for the groups, depending on the complexity of members' projects. Additionally, the members' characteristics played a role. One facilitator noted, "My group is very task-oriented and has been right from the

beginning; they want to get it done and get the job done now." Consequently, the facilitators needed to set times for tasks that were reasonable, but in accordance with the members' needs. This related to monitoring and reflecting on the groups' progress, which is identified in the coaching literature as an essential stage to promote participants' progress (McNeil & Klink, 2004). Facilitators reported that they monitored progress and the group dynamics throughout the year from October until May, when the projects were to be concluded. These logistic-type activities were essential, enabling participants to develop their action plans, stay focused on their work throughout the duration of the projects, and to finish their action research studies.

Many administrative duties were performed outside of the group meeting times, including reminding group members of upcoming sessions, scheduling monthly meetings with their groups, sending information in advance, and answering group members' questions. These tasks included making individual contact, in order to touch base with group members who were absent from monthly on-line chats, and to further support members' research. As one facilitator observed, "Keeping in touch with group members between chats is crucial. Texting or e-mailing or phoning is a good way to get a feel for the wellbeing of the participants, and to provide individualized support." This was a way for the facilitators to take responsibility for, and to monitor the learning community development and the members' progress (see Earl & Katz, 2007).

Facilitators addressed challenges to PLC culture development. Consistent with existing literature (Johnson, 2001; Rodrigue et al., 2012; Tarmezi, de Vreede & Zigurs, 2007), participation challenges were apparent in the reflections; in particular, attendance for online sessions, and the participation of all group members in discussions were issues. For instance, the six facilitators noted poor attendance at various times in their groups' meetings. This was a concern, as it could impact the group dynamics. In the words of one facilitator,

> Currently, we have one group member who is not attending any of the online sessions. This does not appear to be impacting the group, but I wonder two things. 1) How will she fit in when she does join, as we have been establishing norms of how our online chats run and developing an online rapport with each other. 2) If she continues not to join, how will the other group members react to her not participating in the requirements of the program?

Without member participation, the development of a collaborative, agreed-upon culture was at risk. An isolationist culture impedes coaching (Robbins, 2004), and limits opportunities to discuss individual perspectives and appreciate others' viewpoints (facilitation stages 3 and 4), that enable the development of shared perspectives and meanings (see Gilley, 2000; Schein, 1995; Steiner, 2002), and agreed-upon goals and purposes (Earl & Katz, 2007; Earl et al., 2006; Schein, 1995). An increase in reporting personal contact was noted over the course of the study and the groups' work together. Talking between sessions and reminding group members of upcoming sessions often (but not always) resulted in group members' improved attendance.

As Leaders, Facilitators Hone Their Relational Abilities

As Blanchard (1996) notes, "The implementation job of leaders is to help people win by supporting them and removing barriers so that they can accomplish the goals that will make the vision a reality" (p. 85). Facilitators adopted this leadership task while working with group members. In discussing the role of the facilitator, one coach had this to say:

> Just like any good coach would, or any good leader would, you need to know a) what motivates people, b) their social-emotional situation at the time, and then read that and then be able to communicate that and move them along the continuum using whatever leadership skill or whatever you need to do that. And that's really the art of leadership, right, is how you are going to look at people, and how you're going to move them along, based on where they are at that time.

As leaders, facilitators motivated members of their groups and addressed any changes in group dynamics, context, and personal circumstances impacting the groups' work (Kotter, 1995). Self-reflection—or "reflecting on the journey," as one facilitator termed it—was an invaluable strategy for promoting facilitators' professionalism in this way. There were many references to self-reflection as a way to improve facilitation and to respond to challenges with appropriate facilitator actions.

The facilitators developed community and individual learning through their interpersonal skills. These skills were based on an emotional awareness of, or attunement to others' circumstances and the actions that facilitators took to improve group dynamics, in order to keep conversations moving forward during group sessions, to prompt deeper thinking, and to ultimately create shared goals and purposes as well as shared artifacts. The coaches observed that the facilitators had very competent interpersonal skills; nevertheless, they and the facilitators focused some of their discussions around emotional intelligence, different communication styles, and strategies to support the members and their needs at various stages of their action research. This is consistent with calls in the literature for training in facilitation, listening, and reflective skills to promote effective coaching (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Robbins, 2004).

Facilitators promoted inclusion to create PLC cultures and to address challenges. Scholars consider group socialization as a way to promote community and individual learning (Hughes, Ventura & Dando, 2007; Jones, 2005). One facilitator observed,

> The interesting thing about the participants is that they are coming from incredibly diverse teaching situations and communities, and we're not used to that because, you know, you teach in your school and your board…, your community,… and there's more similarities than differences.

With no previous experience with one another, the facilitators and group members developed their PLC cultures from the beginning stages.

Group socialization was encouraged through each learning community's co-construction of group norms that were posted on their site and acknowledged regularly during meetings. For example, a willingness to listen to one another was a norm cultivated by each group early on in their work together: "The group believes that all members have something to contribute to the collective knowledge," according to one facilitator. Facilitators encouraged the sharing of responsibilities in this area. One facilitator noted that "We take responsibility for our actions—one member says she needs to start asking probing questions during the chat." As leaders, the facilitators guided the process of setting a direction for the groups, and focused on aligning people (Kotter, 1995). These activities promoted a group culture conducive to the development of shared goals and purposes as well as artifacts (see Earl & Katz, 2007; Rodrigue et al., 2012).

The importance of dialogue was highlighted in the development of a PLC culture and the challenges the facilitators experienced during culture development. Several facilitators noted that differences in personalities made it difficult to have everyone participate in an equitable

way. One stated that "two members are quite reserved, and need to be drawn out. Two group members are quite extroverted and appear to be very self-confident." This can pose problems if facilitators are not able to provide space for more reserved group members to participate. In the words of one facilitator,

> One of my group members felt excluded and ignored by her group members and did not feel comfortable sharing within the group, something I attributed to shyness or insecurity … If I had structured chats where everyone had so many minutes to talk like other coaches do in their chats, then maybe this problem could have been avoided.

These issues were reported early in the groups' work together, but seemed not to be problematic later in the year.

In other cases, group members' diverse professional backgrounds and the group make-up impacted their participation. The diversity of these groups added to the challenge of facilitation. For example, the use of grade- or subject- specific language affected participants' understanding, and potentially influenced their contributions to their group. One facilitator observed, "because three out of four participants are primary/junior teachers and not [intermediate] teachers, … the one member who teaches [an] intermediate[-level language] has sometimes had to ask for clarification during our chats." As a result, five of the facilitators noted using language and terms that were understood by all members during discussions throughout their work together, while one indicated that this was not always the case. In the words of that facilitator,

> In October, I realized that one member was not privy to specific primary language, so I am making sure that in our chats, all vocabulary is clarified and that the conversation is not only primary/junior-centred, but inclusive for all members.

The six facilitators reported monitoring the group culture and its dynamics as one of the greatest challenges of facilitating; regardless, they engaged in this coaching activity (see McNeil & Klink, 2004) throughout their work with their groups.

These challenges highlight the importance of ensuring that all participants had opportunities to share their ideas in a non-evaluative environment (see Joyce & Showers, 2002). Space needed to be created for a coaching conversation that was free of distraction, and allowed facilitator and group members to be fully present in the conversation (ETFO, 2011). Using non-judgmental responses and open-ended questioning techniques, facilitators encouraged each member's ability to think critically and to self-reflect (Joyce & Showers, 2002) on their circumstances, promoting clients' insight development and learning (ETFO, 2011). These processes enabled all members to articulate their perspectives to group members (facilitation stage 2), as well as accommodate or reflect others' perspectives (facilitation stage 3), with the intent to co-construct shared perspectives and meanings for the group (facilitation stage 4) and ultimately, shared goals and purposes (facilitation stage 5). These stages are the essence of organizational culture: shared assumptions around articulated beliefs and values, patterns of behavior, habits of thinking and meanings, as well as norms and traditions that are evident as members of the organization engage in their work (Schein, 1995).

Further, the collective development of shared perspectives and meanings as a way of developing shared goals and purposes as well as artifacts demonstrates the importance of the

group culture in the learning communities' work (see Earl & Katz, 2007; Rodrigue et al., 2012). The use of inclusive language, and open-ended questions that encouraged group members to build on existing knowledge as well as to synthesize and reflect on their experiences, enabled the deep thinking needed to move group members toward project completion and to overcome obstacles to group members' work. Moreover, these interpersonal skills were used to monitor group dynamics and encourage positive interactions as a way to build a collaborative culture and to optimize the results of the group sessions.

Facilitators Support and Encourage Group Members

Championing and cheerleading was the final theme identified in the facilitators' reports of their activities. As some scholars have noted in their work, group members' emotional states need to be considered (Hughes et al., 2007) for community and individual learning, and leaders encourage and motivate others (Earl & Katz, 2007). Facilitators championed their group members by providing insightful observations of the values and strengths being reflected in the members' actions or learning processes and by encouraging the members to acknowledge their abilities and resourcefulness (ETFO, 2011).

As facilitators monitored their groups' progress they gave members feedback. This was consistent with a coaching cycle, for it allowed facilitators and group members to evaluate, monitor and reflect on their actions and progress with their goals (McNeil & Klink, 2004). In this study, facilitators emphasized that encouraging members was key in their success because it gave members more confidence as they progressed with their work. In particular, one facilitator observed that "using praise and championing are great ways to move the group along to the next stage of action research." Encouraging actions included taking pride in knowledge advances, encouraging members to acknowledge their abilities, and valuing the contributions of members.

For one facilitator, championing and cheerleading were not only facilitator activities; the group fostered an atmosphere where all participants actively listened to each other, and provided honest, positive feedback. The facilitator observed that "This group continues to be very strong at providing specific feedback, and challenging each other to think deeply about the choices they are making with their research." While identifying one out of six learning communities with encouraging feedback as a group norm, this element of the group's culture holds promise for PLC development. It may further enhance participants' work beyond what is possible with only the facilitator championing and cheerleading.

Insights and Inferences

Coaching and the development of a culture conducive to building shared goals and purposes and ultimately, producing artifacts that can be shared among group members, are intertwined. A number of scholars note the critical role that organizational culture plays in coaching relationships (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Robbins, 2004). Robbins (2004) observed that "[more] peer coaching efforts have failed than thrived. Why? Those that failed were initiated in cultures with strong norms of isolation and little trust among colleagues. No groundwork to prepare staff had been done" (p. 173). Other scholars would agree. Group norms (Opfer, Pedder, & Lavicza, 2011), trust and respect, and supportive leadership are essential for the type of culture needed to effectively develop learning communities (Katz & Earl, 2010; Sackney & Mitchell, 2008; Watkins, 2005).

Creating Learning Communities through Facilitation

The nature of coaching, or facilitation in this research, sheds light on why culture plays such an important role. Coaching—at least in an educational context—relies on three critical practices: the use of dialogue, inquiry, and reflection (Lambert, 2003). Senge and colleagues (2000) described how these practices are enacted:

> During the dialogue process, people learn how to think together—not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together. (p. 75)

The facilitator activities in this research were a way of creating this type of learning community. Facilitators established opportunities for participants to articulate their perspectives and acknowledge others' points of view, to co-create shared perspectives and meanings, and to build shared purposes and goals. These features form the foundation of a cohesive, organizational culture (see Gilley, 2000; Schein, 1995; Steiner, 2002), with the last feature being the driving force behind learning communities and shaping the professional learning to take place (Earl & Katz, 2007; Earl et al., 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006).

In order to develop this type of culture, ongoing dialogue was important to ensure the learning communities were meeting the needs of the participants. Opportunities to make contact formally and informally throughout the year as the group members worked in their learning communities helped not only to build trust, but also a learning community with a supportive culture. Additionally, this contact assisted in keeping participants focused, buffering them from competing interests or initiatives that threatened their ability to complete their work (Earl & Katz, 2007). Interestingly, there did not seem to be an order to the facilitation stages for the most part. Strategies attributed to facilitation stages 2 to 4 were used simultaneously to build shared purposes and goals (facilitation stage 5; Hyland et al., 2008; Murphy, 2004), it seemed. This suggests that facilitation stages were not strictly linear, nor discrete stages through which the facilitators passed with their learning communities. This might reflect the organic nature of learning community culture development.

On the other hand, limited communication interfered with PLC culture development. Group dynamics appeared to be the greatest challenge for facilitators, along with inclusion. Facilitators found that coaching was a difficult task if participants did not attend sessions, as the group members were challenged to clarify their own and others' perspectives (facilitation stages 2 and 3; Hyland et al., 2008; Murphy, 2004), and to co-construct shared perspectives and meanings (facilitation stage 4). Group identity may not be possible, or at the very least, it may be contrived, under these circumstances.

Facilitation to Support Participants' Projects and their Finished Products

This research highlighted the different roles adopted by facilitators in promoting the PLCs' work. Facilitation itself was a combination of management and leadership tasks. The administration of the learning communities, including scheduling meetings, setting deadlines, monitoring progress, and answering questions, fell under the management category of activities (see Kotter, 1995). These activities enabled learning community development and provided the

supports needed for participants to produce artifacts from their action research projects. As such, monitoring or identifying participants' and groups' needs, and attending to the logistics of getting the group together, for example, were important aspects of facilitation. This builds on current understandings around facilitation practice, as they were not part of the facilitation stages or activities identified in the literature as strategies for promoting learning communities (see Hyland et al., 2008). It may be useful to include them in strategies for the development of learning communities and the production of artifacts (i.e., the current facilitation stages).

Facilitators' leadership activities included emotional attunement to others, the promotion of deep thinking and reflection through open-ended questioning, and inclusion. Facilitators also provided encouragement through championing and cheerleading. Interestingly, leadership was shared in some learning communities, and participants as well as facilitators took on these roles. Additional research on this phenomenon and its potential effects would be informative. For the facilitators, observing (or monitoring the learning communities) and reflecting on their progress as well as applying the range of strategies (see Figure 1), seemed to be overarching facilitation activities regardless of the learning community's stage of development or participants' progress with their projects. These could be seen to be terminal activities in the coaching cycle (McNeil & Klink, 2004), employed throughout community culture-building and participants' work.

In order for facilitators to successfully lead their groups in building a culture and producing artifacts, they needed opportunities to build their skills and reflect on their actions. The coaches offered opportunities for the facilitators to discuss the facilitation process and their learning communities' progress, and they provided knowledgeable, honest feedback from their unique perspectives outside the learning communities. Toward that end, the coaches functioned as critical friends (Costa & Kallick, 2003). From the literature, it is clear that a lack of trust challenges collaborative work (Sergiovanni, 2005), and that the presence of trust is essential for developing interpersonal relationships such as partnerships among school personnel and community members (Hands, 2009) and professional interactions among teachers and principals (Macmillan, Meyer & Northfield, 2004). It seems likely that trust underpins the development of learning communities in every aspect, from the interactions among participants and facilitators that yield the co-creation of shared perspectives and meanings, goals and purposes, to the interactions between facilitators and the coaches. A closer examination of the role of trust—how it is cultivated, and the levels of trust that are needed to develop learning communities—would be beneficial in contributing to the conversation around effective learning communities.

Conclusion

In sum, learning communities are held up as a panacea for lagging student academic achievement and wellbeing (Earl & Katz, 2007; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006), yet they often fail to address the situation, and in many cases, they do not become a reality at all (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Sackney & Mitchell, 2008). This research is part of an on-going effort to understand the process of leading impactful learning communities (see for example Earl & Katz, 2007; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). It has shed some light on the specific management and leadership strategies used by facilitators of learning communities to develop a collaborative organization of individuals who share goals and purposes, and who are deeply engaged in their work together. The research demonstrates that the development of learning communities is contingent on organizational culture. Characteristics such as group dynamics and norms, beliefs and ways of

working together all impact learning community development and functioning. Moreover, this study has highlighted the activities that enable community members to think deeply, to analyze their practice, and to devise ways to transform their practice in order to enhance student achievement and wellbeing. Ultimately, students' academic, social and emotional needs are the driving force behind learning communities (Earl & Katz, 2007; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006), but without educators' engagement, learning communities are an untapped potential.

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Note

1 The coaches are called level 2 facilitators in this learning community. In order to avoid confusion between the facilitators of the small learning communities, and the facilitators for the facilitators, the term "coach" is used for the level 2 facilitators.

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