

Cultivating a Community of Practice Among Student Teachers and Cooperating Teachers

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Abstract: This study examined the experience of four student teachers and their supervising teachers who participated in a Community of Practice (CoP) during their internship semester. Their experience can be separated into the four key components of a Community of Practice: (a) structure, (b) processes, (c) content, and (d) conditions.

On July 2009, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced a \$4.35 billion dollar fund to support the Race to the Top initiative. These competitive funds are geared to reform American schools. States are competing for these funds. The 19 states that have received these funds have created reform efforts to improve teaching and learning (White House, 2013). With the Race to the Top reform, the focus of education has fallen on four key efforts: (a) accountability, (b) individual quality, (c) technology, and (d) fragmented strategies (Fullan, 2011). According to Fullan (2011), these are the wrong drivers. “A ‘wrong driver’ is a deliberate policy force that has little chance of achieving the desired result, while a ‘right driver’ is one that ends up achieving better measurable results for students” (Fullan, 2011, p. 3). The right drivers focus on: (a) capacity building, (b) group quality, (c) pedagogy, and (d) systematic strategies. In summary, the right drivers work directly on “changing the culture of school systems” (Fullan, 2011, p. 5). Changing the culture involves building social capital. Social capital consists of a network of relationships where trust and norms are key (Coleman, 1988). Everyone in the group benefits from its structure and their participation (Coleman, 1988). In the world of education, social capital has to do with the relationships among teachers and administrators.

Communities of Practice (CoP) help cultivate social capital. “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006, para. 3). People are the most important resource of an organization. Communities of Practice provide people an opportunity to share their wisdom and learn from one another. The focus of Communities of Practice in education is student learning (DuFour, 2004; Kruse, Louis, & Byrk, 1994). Research indicates that teacher involvement in communities of practice is positively correlated with student achievement (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

The concept of Communities of Practice was originally used to describe the relationship between a novice and the more advanced apprentices (Wenger, 2006). Pre-service teachers as novices in education can gain a great deal from becoming members of a Community of Practice. In this study, a group of pre-service teachers participated in a Community of Practice during their internship semester. Their cooperating teachers were also members of the Community of Practice.

Purpose of Study and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experience of four student teachers and their supervising teachers who participated in a Community of Practice during the internship semester. The research question was: What do student teachers and their cooperating teachers draw from their experience in a Community of Practice?

Conceptual Framework

Communities of practice (also referred to as professional learning communities) are everywhere (DuFour, 2004; Wenger, 2006). They exist within and across organizations. In the field of education, Communities of Practice have been referred to as Professional Learning Communities, Critical Friend Groups, Curriculum Learning Communities, and many more. CoPs have three crucial characteristics: (a) domain, (b) community, and (c) practice. Domain is the shared interest of the group. Community refers to the interactions and relationship built among the members. Practice refers to the shared practice of the members. In other words, the members are bound by what they do together. A Community of Practices is cultivated when all three elements are developed.

A Community of Practice has several stages (Wenger, 1998). The first stage is potential. In this stage people face similar challenges. Sumsion & Patterson (2004) observed the emergence of a community in a preservice teacher education program. The initial bond was instigated by the challenges the group faced in a course. The second stage of a CoP is coalescing. In this stage, the members get together and start to see the potential in bonding. The 3rd stage of a CoP is when the group is actively engaged in sharing their practice and wisdom. This is the peak stage of a CoP. The final two stages, dispersed and memorable, occur when the members no longer meet regularly but still remain in contact, yet remember all the lessons learned.

During the active stage, there are five critical elements of a CoP: (a) reflective dialogue, (b) de-privatization of practice, (c) focus on student learning, (d) collaboration, and (e) shared norms and values (Kruse, Louis, & Byrk, 1994). Reflective dialogue is carried out through the use of protocols. A protocol is a structured guidelines for conversations that help the members of the group discuss issues collaboratively (National School Reform Faculty [NSRF]). De-privatization of practice refers to making the teaching practice public. Teachers tend to work in isolation rather than share their practice. Working in isolation is sometimes perceived by teachers as safer and preferable to working together (DuFour, 2004). The third critical element, student learning, needs to be the key of communities of practice and part of the group's shared vision (DuFour, 2004; Kruse, Louis, & Byrk, 1994). Teachers need to work collaboratively and build trust and respect among each other. Conditions of trust and respect are created through shared norms and values. Community agreements help set the norms of the group. They may include being open to outcomes and surfacing assumptions. CoPs make explicit the agreements, in order to create the conditions needed to freely share wisdom and learn from each other.

Communities of Practice provide an alternative to the "sit and get" professional development model. Through ongoing, collaborative meetings, the members of the group share their wisdom and learn from each other. They "uncover" content that is relevant to the group. There is no leader, rather a facilitator. Facilitators guide interaction, instead of directing learning. Listening is key in facilitation. The goal of the facilitator is to nurture community and to create a safe space of its members to learn from each other (Killion & Simmons, 1992).

Method

Participants

The participants for this qualitative study were four student teachers from the Pro-Teach program and their four cooperating teachers from the UF Graduate Program.

Student teachers. The four interns were students from the University of Florida's ProTeach program. This 5-year program includes earning a Master's degree at the end of the 5th year. During the final semester, the students decided to do their internship in Miami, a more diverse school system (over 300 miles away from campus or the "brick and mortar" they attended).

Cooperating teachers. Three of the four cooperating teachers are involved in the University of Florida's Teacher Leadership for School Improvement (TLSI) graduate program. Through online and some face-to-face courses, the cooperating teachers have grown in the program's three goals: Master Teacher, Teacher Leader, and Teacher Researcher. The fourth cooperating teacher has been an active member of the UF Professional Development opportunities offered in her county. All four cooperating teachers are active members of an inquiry program called Teacher Fellows. All four cooperating teachers have worked closely with the two researchers throughout their program.

Professor in residence. The two researchers are Professors in Residence in Miami. The role of the Professor in Residence is to support and pressure their students (Poekert et al., 2011). Although they are UF faculty, they work with 47 partner schools in their respective county to help support the graduate program and the other support services. The Principal Investigator was also the supervising teacher for the four interns.

Data Collection

Data was collected over the course of semester. Data sources included:

Meeting Artifacts

Meeting agendas, notes, documents, and other related materials collected from biweekly meetings.

Participant Observations of Collaborative PD Sessions

Teachers were engaged in biweekly meetings designed to develop learning communities and promote collaboration around improving student achievement, teaching practice, and school culture. Field notes were collected at these meetings to document the nature of the activities conducted in these groups, examine interactions among teachers, and provide examples of what job-embedded professional development looks like in action.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30-60 minutes were conducted to gain insight on teacher/prospective teacher learning and growth. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Gains Survey

A Gains survey was administered at the end of the semester to capture the participant's overall experience.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by a team of researchers consisting of university faculty and Lastinger Center for Learning personnel who are all engaged in the work with the schools and have established relationships with the teachers and principals in each school. Data was not analyzed until the completion of the student teachers' internship (after grades have been posted). The data was inductively analyzed using a priori codes. The codes used to analyze the experience of a CoP were based on the key components of a Community of Practice (structure, process, content, and condition). Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and any reference to students or

their work was deleted to protect student confidentiality. IRB was obtained from the University of Florida.

Discussion

The experience of the student teacher can be separated into the four key components of a Community of Practice: (a) structure, (b) processes, (c) content, and (d) conditions (see Figure 1)

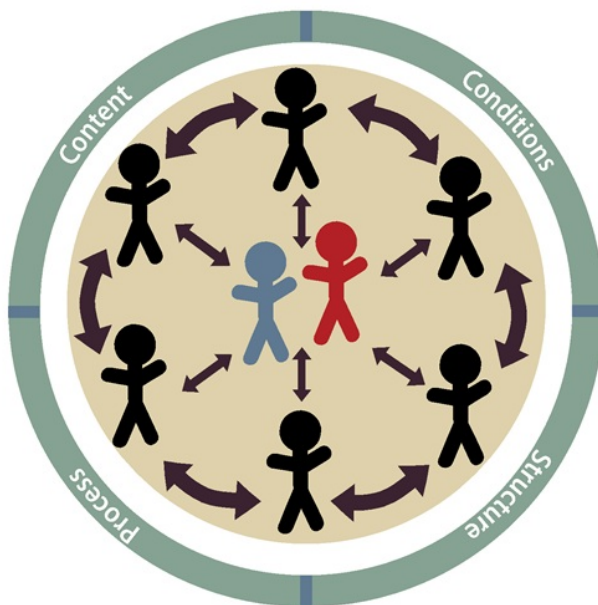


Figure 1. The four components of a Community of Practice: structure, process, content, and condition.

Structure

The structure of a CoP consists of the space, time, and frequency in which the group meets. The student teachers met every other Monday after school during the internship semester for a total of five meetings. The meetings were held in one of the cooperating teacher's classroom. The meetings lasted up to two hours. The cooperating teachers and the second researcher attended three meetings.

The student teachers enjoyed having the cooperating teacher with them. "It was nice to have her (my cooperating teacher) there because we never stop to discuss our teaching during the day. Setting aside time to discuss success/challenges was great."

Another member mentioned the following:

When my cooperating teacher came to the seminars, it helped me because we were both able to explain our issues and we were both able to listen to new strategies. It helped us because we were both able to vent and to come up with ideas from the comments provided in the meeting.

Processes

National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) protocols were used to support and sustain the collaborative work among the members of the group. As mentioned earlier, protocols are structured ways to have reflective dialogue. Through the use of protocols, time is used efficiently and all members are given equitable time to participate. Team building protocols, text-based protocols, and looking at student work protocols were used.

Team building protocols. Every session began with a team building protocol. For example, the first session began with a protocol called Life's Little Suitcase. Each member in the group found three items in their purse (suitcase) that were meaningful to them.

Text based protocols. Text based protocols were used to help uncover the meaning of the readings that were used. During one session, the participants read an article on Communities of Practice and then did a Three Levels of Text. During the Three Levels of Text protocol, the group is divided into triads. Each member of the group selects a passage of the text that resonates with him/her. Then they explain why they selected the text and what implications it has for their practice (NSRF).

Looking at Student/Teacher Work Protocols. The final kind of protocol involved looking at their practice. A Collaborative Assessment Conference protocol was used to examine a student's work. Through careful observation and probing, the CAC protocol provides the presenter an opportunity to take a deeper look at his/her student's work.

Members of the group tended to see the benefits of protocols. "I loved the collaborative assessment conference protocol! It was so helpful and I really liked that we all had different perspectives, opinions, and experiences to share. I really hope we helped them (the presenting teachers)! I love all these protocols!!!"

Another member stated, "I liked the brag protocol! Sometimes it is important/valuable to look at what you are doing right, when at the end of the day, you feel like you are doing a lot wrong. Very motivational seminar!"

Content

The content of the meetings varied. Initially, the content was on introducing the key components of a Community of Practice. As the group evolved, the content was adapted to meet their needs and concerns. Some topics included: the lesson plan, the observation process, parental involvement, motivating students. The group defined the content (Killion & Simmons, 1992).

Content was shared through text, but also through the use of protocols where teachers shared their wisdom:

I am taking away new ways to deal with a student who is not engaged in the classroom. I liked the idea of keeping a motivational log with the student where he/she receives a personal reward for staying on task. This way the student is motivated and the student also realizes that you care for him.

Members appreciated learning from each other:

PLC (Professional Learning Communities) are effective even though confusing at times. They serve as a learning tool. I liked this new approach at collaborating together and learning from each other. It is no longer the supervising teacher and teacher observing, but all of us learning from each other as a group.

Even the cooperating teachers gained content through their participation in the Community of Practice. "I learned that years of teaching doesn't mean you know it all. I've learned that interns come in with good ideas and I've learned to be open."

Conditions

Cultivating the conditions of trust and safety are necessary in order to have a successful Community of Practice. Through the use of norms and team building activities, the group created a bond where they felt safe to discuss their dilemmas. One of the norms created by the group was "Vegas Rules": in other words, confidentiality was maintained. Every member of the

group felt safe to discuss issues about their practice and felt comfortable to share their wisdom. Members of the group shared successes and challenges. Collaboration is key.

One teacher wrote, “The most important thing I learned (this semester) is to know that you can confide in others in order to vent and gain new perspectives in finding a solution to a problem.”

Another teacher stated the following:

I think a CoP is a good way for teachers to collaborate and provide one another with support and feedback. Teaching is a career that really benefits from communicating and working with fellow colleagues. Having a CoP in a school gives teachers support and an opportunity to also share what they’ve learned.

Implications

Implications based on the study revealed two things: (a) the importance of setting conditions for teachers to feel comfortable in making their practice public and (b) the importance of having a skilled facilitator who helps cultivate the necessary conditions.

Power of Setting Conditions

“A group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust” (Coleman, 1988, p. 101). Without a sense of trust and safety, the members of the CoP would not feel safe to use the structure and processes to gain content. Social and human resources such as openness, trust and respect are more important than structural conditions (Kruse, Louis, Byrk, 1994). A supportive environment helps teachers feel comfortable to share their concerns and to share their wisdom:

Because it (the environment) wasn’t competitive you are more willing to take risks in what you ask and what you share. You know something embarrassing like the feeling that you failed at a lesson; sharing that helps me grow because I hate to admit it. And then the fact that they (members of the CoP) were able to help me without criticizing or without judging. Yeah, that was helpful to have that supportive environment.

The Role of the Facilitator in Setting Conditions

The role of the facilitator is key in creating the conditions of trust and safety needed to have an effective Community of Practice. The facilitator in this research was also the Professor in Residence. Professors in Residence (PiR) are university faculty who work directly within the district and schools. PiRs serve as a liaison between the university and school in order to make the university goals job embedded (Poekert et al., 2011). The PiR already had a relationship with the four cooperating teachers, since all four cooperating teachers have participated in university support services, either the graduate program and/or professional development opportunities. The goal of the facilitator is provide nurturance and guide interactions (Killion & Simmons, 1992). A major objective of the facilitator was to create a safe space for the participants to feel comfortable in order to share their experiences freely. The facilitator intentionally planned the structure and processes to help the group build the conditions needed in order to function in a Community of Practice. The facilitator made sure to meet in one of the cooperating teacher classrooms and provided food and snacks in order for the members to feel comfortable.

The facilitator (name omitted) would come with drinks and food and that was nice of her. The whole thing felt like a conversations. We were sitting at a round table. There wasn’t any struggle with power. You know what I mean? It was very

comfortable. It didn't feel like a class. It was structured in a way to make it more effective.

Conclusion

At the end of the semester, the participants of the Community of Practice were asked for one word to describe their experience. Responses include: *support, enlightenment, competence, successful, hopeful, and community*. Collaboration in a Community of Practice helps create the "right drivers" (Fullan, 2011, p. 3) needed for school reform to take place. In the race to the top, teachers need to realize the value in doing it as a community.

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