Communities of supportive professionals: Creating a teacher learning community through professional development

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Although the current literature in general teacher education emphasizes the importance of creating a collaborative learning community, there has been little documentation as to how such a community is actually created. Within the area of foreign language teacher education in particular, there has been little published on the subject other than "Communities of Supportive Professionals" (Murphey & Sato, 2005). In this book, Murphey and Sato have documented that participation in such collaborative communities generates many opportunities for professional development, which in turn increases student learning. Six authors from the book organized a forum for those interested in how to form and develop teacher learning communities (TLCs) within and outside of school. In essence, these authors, who belong to different kinds of communities, tell stories of their struggles and achievements working together with other teachers. Furthermore, they highlight several strategies to cultivate more collaborative communities.

　教師教育に関する最近の先行研究において、教師が協力的に学び合うコミュニティを形成する大切さが強調されているが、そのようなコミュニティが実際どのように形成されたのかは、ほとんど研究されていない。特に、外国語の教師教育の研究分野においては、Murphey & Sato (2005)の"Communities of Supportive Professionals"が唯一の先行研究になっている。Murphey & Sato (2005)によれば、教師は協力的に学び合うコミュニティに参加することによって専門性を向上させ、その結果、生徒の学習成果が上がることが明らかになった。今回、この研究書から6名の著者が参加し、学校内外においてこのようなコミュニティを形成したいと願っている教師を対象にフォーラムを開催した。以下、様々な協力的なコミュニティがどのように形成されたのか、どのようなストラタジーが有効だったのか、またどのような困難や成果があったのか、具体的に述べる。

Although the current literature in general teacher education emphasizes the importance of creating a collaborative learning community, there has been little documentation as to how such a community is actually created. Within the area of foreign language teacher education in particular, there has been little published on the subject other than "Communities of Supportive Professionals" (Murphey & Sato, 2005). In this book, Murphey and Sato have documented that participation in such collaborative communities generates many opportunities for professional development, which in turn increases student learning.

Studies on teacher learning emphasize the importance of building a collaborative learning community. Research on effective schools and teaching cultures has identified two general types of schools: *learning-enriched* and *learning-impoverished* (Kleinsasser, 1993; Little, 1982; McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). For example, Rosenholtz examined 1,213 teachers in 78 elementary schools in the United States and found only 13 to be learning-enriched. In these 13 schools, teachers consistently collaborated with one another, set goals with principals, and challenged students' diverse learning needs. In contrast, in the learning-impoverished schools, teachers were uncertain about their practices, were isolated from colleagues, and reinforced routine practices (see also, Lortie, 1975).

McLaughlin and Talbert's (2001) longitudinal study in 16 U.S. high schools identified two types of teacher communities: weak and strong. In strong teacher communities, they found that teachers collaborated to reinvent practice, whereas in traditional communities teachers enforced traditions. They go on to say that:

> what distinguishes teacher-learning communities from other school settings is their collective stance on learning in the context of shared work and responsibilities. In such communities, teachers together address the challenges of their student body and explore ways of improving practice to advance learning. This collective inquiry generates knowledge *of* practice, while a teacher's individual learning in strong traditional communities draws upon knowledge *for* practice, derived from

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research and theory outside the teaching setting. (p. 63, italics original)

Knowledge *of* practice is understanding daily practice, and this helps teachers comprehend and improve what they do. Knowledge *for* practice is generally imported from the outside and often lacks situational ecology. Moreover, McLaughlin and Talbert found that teacher collaboration led to better student outcomes.

Although some TLCs are found within schools, many others exist outside as well. Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) suggested that networks built outside of schools attract more teachers than conventional in-service groups, which typically aim at knowledge transmission. Networks focus on specific activities, establish a climate of trust and support, offer intellectual and emotional stimulation, and provide leadership opportunities. Nevertheless, the power of networks has been underestimated (Lieberman & Miller, 1994), and "little is known about how such networks are formed, what they focus on, and how they are sustained" (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1999, p.292).

Six authors from the book mentioned above organized a forum for those interested in learning how to form and develop TLCs within and outside of school. These authors, who belong to different kinds of communities, tell stories of their struggles and achievements in setting up their respective collaborative communities. Those stories include:

1) The surprise of collaboration in curriculum innovation (Heigham & Kiyokawa)

2) Building a collaborative school culture through curriculum development (Cholewinski)

3) Keeping a grassroots teacher development group growing (Takaki)

4) Co-Constructing a community of qualitative researchers (Cornwell)

Furthermore, the authors highlight several strategies to cultivate more collaborative communities.

The audience was invited to participate in a discussion so that they could better understand why creating collaborative communities can be one of the greatest motivating factors for professional development. We hope this forum encouraged other teachers to form and participate in similar teacher-learning communities.

The surprise of collaboration in curriculum innovation
Description

The Sugiyama Jogakuen University Communicative English Program (CEP) is a program designed to provide developmental English opportunities for students within the School of Cross-Cultural Studies, and specifically, the Department of Foreign Studies. The program serves about 300 students, mostly English majors, with a small percentage who have elected to join the CEP as non-English majors. The CEP is a 3-year program, which is integrated both vertically within each year and horizontally from year to year, and it employs 17 teachers: a director, three full-time teachers, and 13 part-time teachers. These teachers have worked together to build and maintain the curriculum, and through our work together, a thriving professional community has developed.

This supportive community has allowed us to create a program that truly meets the needs of our students and consequently, fosters their learning.

Steps

Involving all the teachers in discussion

During the 2000-2001 academic year, the Sugiyama Jogakuen University Department of Foreign Studies decided to establish a 3-year developmental English program to replace the 1-year Freshman English Program. Once this decision was made, the director invited all participating teachers to join in the creation of the new program. All the teachers accepted the invitation, most with enthusiasm.

Developing a course

The first steps taken by the teachers were to consider the needs and interests of the students and then decide what courses the program should offer to meet them. To the extent possible, after the courses were decided, specific courses were assigned to specific days of the week so that teachers teaching on the same day would teach the same classes; this was done to allow teachers to collaborate more easily. From here, groups of teachers began building the curricula.

Integrating the curricula

Some of the teachers in the program taught on more than one day, so from the early stages they were able to carry ideas from one course to another to help integrate the curricula. This information sharing was so successful that more teachers were invited to teach on additional days to further promote integration. Once the individual course curriculum was set, the director encouraged the teachers to share their plans with teachers teaching other courses so that further connections could be made. Consequently, we have tightly coordinated curricula to which everyone has contributed. This, along with the ongoing maintenance of the program, has allowed us to develop a strong sense of community.

Conclusion

Prior to collaborating on this program, many of the teachers, most of which are part-timers, had primarily worked in isolated environments. They had typically worked in contexts where they had had sole responsibility for their course, which was not connected to any other course, or where they had been given explicit directives from an organizing body of which they were not a part. Thus, the opportunity to participate in a program in which everyone is encouraged to collaborate has been rewarding. Being part of a community in which exchanging ideas is promoted and valued has proven to be an excellent opportunity for professional growth.

We are now in the 5th year of the program, and although we have had struggles, things are going well. Our community is surprisingly strong and dynamic. However, working in a coordinated program requires teachers to contribute more than they might otherwise, and that level of participation is not for everyone. Since the program began, we have lost several teachers to contexts better suited to them. Additionally, when teachers are truly working together, the voice of the majority must prevail, and thus compromises

have to be made. People who are not good at making them may, at the end of the day, find themselves superfluous.

Within the Sugiyama Jogakuen University CEP, the classroom and staff room are vibrant; and as evidenced by teachers' continued contributions, it is fair to say that nearly everyone involved feels the work is worthwhile. This is because we have built a community in which it is safe to experiment with new ideas, learn from mistakes, and challenge ourselves and our students. From the beginning, we built the program goals together, and as time passes we continue to refine those goals as well as the means by which we are striving to achieve them. The road is not always smooth, but the bumps along the way help us improve the program for the students and for ourselves.

Building a collaborative school culture through curriculum development

Description

Our curriculum reform started in 2000, and over the past 5 years we have worked on curriculum development. We went through ups and downs like a roller coaster, but we are certain that we are better off now than when we began. We have learned that involving teachers in continuous curriculum development leads to a more collaborative school culture in which teachers talk about teaching on a daily basis, share materials and ideas, and discuss teaching issues.

Our English Team was responsible for a 2-year coordinated program, which included 520 freshman and sophomore students. The program's main goal as stated in the syllabus was "to enable students to confidently participate in successful communication (both productively and receptively) with other speakers of English in a wide variety of real-life situations." The six weekly coordinated classes were taught by 8 full-time and 21 part-time teachers. In truth, however, the coordinated aspect of our curriculum existed largely on paper and received only feigned support from a number of teachers. For example, not only was an outdated version of the textbook being used for three of six classes, but the teachers of these classes were simply assigned to cover different units—with no corresponding follow-up at any level. Additionally, we essentially had no assessment criteria beyond the university guidelines of what the numeric equivalent of a letter grade was. What's more, because of the difficulty of getting unanimous English Team approval, the two freshman and sophomore coordinators (English Team volunteers) were essentially powerless to change or enforce any aspects of the curriculum. Put simply, we were in an isolated school culture in which teachers communicated little with other teachers but believed they had freedom in their own classrooms.

Steps

Begin with the student in mind

Our formal proposal for a comprehensive student evaluation produced several heated English Team meetings. Opponents were generally against students evaluating instructors, but there were also concerns about how the results would be used. Some teachers worried that the results might affect their jobs or that negative feedback might spread outside of our team. We eventually decided that the individual class data would be aggregated so that only the overall results

of the six different courses would be visible. We realized that compromise was essential if we expected to make any progress, and it therefore became a mainstay of all our development efforts. We conducted initial student evaluation at the end of the first semester in 2000. Students completed a Japanese version of an online feedback form in one of their computer classes, and after the summer break (in late September) the results were discussed in a regular English Team meeting.

Change materials and clarify goals

After lengthy English Team negotiations, we eventually decided to choose new textbooks for all the courses, with a view to introducing more current and challenging topics. We also agreed on the need to clarify the goals of each course in the program and revise the program syllabus.

Conduct follow-up feedback

In July 2002, we administered a second student evaluation, hoping to confirm our positive program changes. In a September meeting, we provided the results of this second evaluation. The entire team was very pleased with the substantial increase in student satisfaction. Particularly satisfying was that many freshmen were very happy with the content and activities in the newly coordinated classes.

Encourage administrative and teacher collaboration

Without prior warning, the university announced that it would replace the current business school with a new one beginning in the 2004 school year. In light of the top-down political decision to restructure, we revived the coordinator issue by proposing that two full-time teachers be assigned as coordinators for each of the four courses of the new program. This time around, the English Team head (as administrative spokesperson) actively supported the proposal, though several teachers were once again clearly against it. Most likely because of the administrative pressure and direct support by the English Team head, the team teachers decided to coordinate the four courses of the new program (Oral Communication Strategies, Discussion and Debate, Writing and Presentation, and Reading for Understanding) with two teachers per course.

Involve part-time teachers in discussions

Each course coordinator called for meetings to involve part-time teachers before the orientation meetings. Many part-timers who wanted to know more about the new program participated in these meetings. Coordinators were happy that these teachers were interested in the program and actively engaged in the discussion. Some of the ideas from part-time teachers were incorporated into the final course syllabi.

Conclusion

Our experience with collaborative curriculum development indicates that building a supportive professional community entails ongoing communication; discussion about teaching issues; evaluation of the program; and coherent curriculum development by participants who likely have very different ideas, backgrounds, and levels of commitment to the

task. We used to think that we were *in the middle* of our curriculum development, but now we are more comfortable knowing that this journey has no real end. Looking back on these past 5 years, one theme emerged above others: When we worked together we made real progress. We hope this kind of curriculum development will give us more opportunities to expand our supportive professional community.

Keeping a grassroots teacher development group growing

Description

Inspired by my interactions with novice in-service EFL teachers, I started a grassroots teacher development group in 1993 in Kumamoto, Japan called PIGATE, whimsically denoting a group of learner-teachers (piglets) working together at the gate leading to the world of professional teachers of EFL. Since its foundation, PIGATE has held 5-hour long monthly sessions on every second Saturday as well as all-day summer special sessions in which classroom practitioners, graduate/undergraduate students, teacher educators, and ALTs work together collaboratively for their development.

PIGATE, supported by the belief that teacher learning should be ongoing, day-to-day based, voluntary, experiential, reflective, developmental, and self-educating, has four main aims:

1) to raise the awareness of EFL practitioners

2) to make their implicit theories explicit

3) to develop and improve their practical skills in TEFL

4) to brush up their communicative competence in EFL

For these aims, PIGATE has made the most of grassroots activism by being free from government controls and restrictions. Members seek locally relevant, down-to-earth achievements rather than top-down, superficial, and one-shot solutions. PIGATE has been managed by self-governed volunteerism financed only by membership fees. As of September 2006, we have about 110 members in and outside Kumamoto, Japan.

Steps

Provide continuity: Tenacity and leadership are the key

It may not be difficult at all to start a grassroots program, but it requires tenacity and strong leadership to keep one going for an extended time. In fact, about 15 self-help EFL teacher learning groups existed in Kumamoto Prefecture between 1984-1999, and none of them lasted long. It seems they became isolated and ended up "licking each other's wounds."

Two is far better than one: Start with what you already have

One does not have to have a large membership, and PIGATE, in fact, only gradually spread to other teachers by word of mouth. One of PIGATE's policies is that we never force anyone to join or leave, though we keep people

informed about us. One is reminded of the Chinese proverb, "When you want to achieve something big, always start with what you already have."

Let every member pay yearly dues: money talks…in a way

As one Japanese proverb goes, you never get something for nothing. As a matter of fact, people of will are usually happy to pay dues. We have six different types of membership dues according to members' positions. In fact, without dues it would not be easy to get people united and help a grassroots group survive.

Organize a steering committee: Invite active participant involvement

The Steering Committee members who work behind and in front of the curtain have various jobs, and they have most significantly contributed to PIGATE's survival and success. They are representatives (three from in-service teachers and four from pre-service teachers), general affairs managers, publicity managers, treasurers, and auditors. In addition to a session chief volunteer from the committee members who chair each session, we have video technicians, photographers, journal keepers, and refreshment managers. Other participants usually contribute to the community by helping with tasks such as cleaning up the site and making copies.

Collaboratively negotiate the focus topics: Get a syllabus ready for all to share

It is a lot of work and indispensable at the same time to ask every member to let us know what they want to learn in PIGATE through the mailing list and questionnaires before we draft a new PIGATE syllabus to be approved at the general meeting. Every 2 years a new syllabus emerges through collaborative effort.

Structure routines of collaborative reflection: Nothing gained without reflection

We hold a Steering Committee meeting right after each monthly session for an immediate reflection on the month's session and to prepare for the next session. The next month's chief is then responsible for reminding the members of the discussion topic and calling for proposals while providing preparation hints and tasks on the mailing list to which about 80% of us are connected. We can freely discuss each session on the list.

Verbalize activities and practice: Publish newsletters and journals regularly

PIGATE's most important achievement is that the participants have learned to verbalize their worries, concerns, and problems in public. This is done through monthly activities, newsletters, and journals that explore their experiences and learning as teachers and as people. Four members take turns editing each newsletter. Each month's editor-in-chief of a 40-page PIGATE Newsletter

informs the members of the deadlines for columns, feature articles, essays, reports, and other pages; and recruits volunteers to gather news and information. The importance of a newsletter in a community like PIGATE should never be underestimated. On a voluntary basis, PIGATE members are also expected to contribute to the annual *PIGATE Journal*.

Get TEFL specialists and students involved: Make the most of local universities

We learned that many members would not come to PIGATE if specialists' feedback was not available. Thus, university teacher educators' involvement has been very helpful in successfully managing PIGATE, not just in terms of the content, but also in reserving venues and getting AV aids and materials ready for each session.

Conclusion

What we have learned through PIGATE is that teachers learn far better in a collaborative community than in isolation, and they do not necessarily learn through prescribed workshops. We have also learned that teachers must not wait for the government, the board of education, or other formal institutions to undertake in-service teacher education reform. Teachers themselves can develop grassroots organizations like PIGATE, hopefully getting university EFL specialists, students, and other people involved in various teacher learning activities.

No teacher should be an island. It is PIGATE's aim to integrate pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators into a network of grassroots organizations.

Lastly, one of the latest findings in PIGATE is that mere TEFL theory-practice interactions will not enhance participants' professional development unless everyday routines are discussed. Thus, PIGATE is planning to incorporate a focus on life histories of teachers in future activities.

Co-Constructing a community of qualitative researchers

Description

> As we sat in the Japanese garden outside the guesthouse on the Doshisha University campus in Kyoto in May 2001, we realized what an idyllic setting it was to discuss qualitative research with friends and colleagues. It was a safe place to share our work. We were a self-selected group that had studied and presented together, and some of us had even written together. This moment was a peak in our professional and academic community building…As we sat in the shade on that pleasant May afternoon, we felt proud of what we had created in just a few years. (Cornwell & McLaughlin, 2005, p. 127)

This paper describes how from 1999 to 2003 the support group mentioned above, consisting of both experienced and new researchers, developed and began a period of sharing, supporting, and collaborating while learning about qualitative research and each other. Beginning with graduate students in a qualitative research class at Temple University Japan (TUJ), the group expanded to include graduate

students from outside TUJ and even skilled researchers (for example, Yasuko Kanno, one of this year's plenary speakers, shared her experiences with us at a workshop/retreat in Nagoya). We all shared an interest in interpretive and critical qualitative research "which explicitly took into account and investigated the socio-cultural contexts in which second language learners and users operate in Japan" (p. 128). In addition, many of us were also inspired by and interested in applying the Communities of Practice (CoP) framework (Wenger, 1998) to our research.

Steps

Communities of Practice (CoP) refers to a social theory of learning that re-conceptualizes learning as an event that is quintessentially social. It looks at the social practice by which newcomers can become full members of a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Wenger states that there are three dimensions that need to be present in a community of practice: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). All of these were present in the support group or CoP that developed around our work. We have identified several aspects that enabled and sustained our community.

Using information technology to enhance communication

We set up several electronic mailing lists. One was called the Q-Book and was used among other things to comment on drafts and discuss conceptual frameworks.

Developing a core of collaborators

Different core members served in different ways setting up the email list mentioned earlier, submitting proposals for joint presentations at conferences, etc.

Finding a balance of ways of participation

We acknowledged that we all are not equally available given busy schedules. Thus, it was okay for some members to participate fully, while others did so more sporadically.

Accepting that changes in membership are inevitable

The group has always been in flux, as some members left Japan while others' research foci or personal situations changed, prompting them to leave the group or become *inactive*.

Seizing and creating opportunities for professional development

Members edited working papers and special issues of journals related to our research interests. Also, as alluded to earlier, members presented together in a wide range of venues (JALT meetings, the JALT conference, the American Association of Applied Linguistics, the International Applied Linguistics Association).

Allowing the community to evolve and change

As old members departed and new ones joined, the group changed and evolved. Communities of Practice do not

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remain intact forever. Over time they transform and sometimes even become inactive or dissolve.

Developing a support group like the one described in this paper is not without problems. (For a detailed look at some of the issues and constraints we faced and how we dealt with them, see Maeda, Churchill, & Cornwell, 2006). Although language choice was never discussed, and perhaps because our multilingual members were very proficient in English, our e-lists' language was English, which privileged L1 speakers of English and made some L2 users of English hesitant to post. In addition, if someone responded frequently, it could seem that they were monopolizing the list. There sometimes seemed to be different opinions as to whether postings should be finished works or works in progress. Another source of tension was in the area of participation. Some members felt that if they did not take a leadership role or do certain tasks, the tasks would not be done and opportunities would fall through the cracks. This happened at times when preparing proposals or responding to calls for papers.

Conclusion

We found four elements that were important in the development of our community and which might help readers as they develop their own communities. We benefited from:

1. a defined focus such as ours on qualitative research in education and TESOL

2. specific purposes or goals within that focus

3. concrete projects on which to collaborate

4. institutional resources such as access to the faculty and facilities (Cornwell & McLaughlin, 2005, p. 134)

Participating in this community has been a positive experience that has left us seeing the possibilities that come from collaborating to develop an understanding of a research area. The *work* of participating in and building a community becomes a joy when everyone is not only furthering their interests but also helping others and a whole community (perhaps our discipline as well) along the way (Cornwell & McLaughlin, 2005, p. 135).

Summary

Wenger (1998) contends that "learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon" (p. 3). The four stories above describe how these teachers have been socially engaged in creating TLCs in and out of schools. Heigham, a language program director, initiated a curriculum reform in her department, involving both full and part-time teachers. Some part-time teachers such as Kiyokawa played a significant role in developing a professional learning community. Cholewinski described a similar effort to renew an old curriculum through student evaluation, goal setting, communication, and collaboration, which are all necessary ingredients for changing school culture. On the other hand, Takaki and Cornwell told stories about how they created TLCs outside of school. Takaki detailed the development of a volunteer teachers' group. Starting with his university graduates who became junior high school teachers, Takaki

helped them take more leadership roles through newsletters, action research, email lists, and yearly publications. Cornwell highlighted a group of graduate students in Japan who formed a qualitative research group and described how such a self-initiated group developed into a collaborative learning community.

We have learned that TLCs can take many forms and that participating in them can significantly promote teacher learning. While creating and sustaining TLCs takes time and effort, they can provide an essential foundation for teacher learning, a foundation grounded in day-to-day practices. In order to make a more powerful and coherent base for TLCs, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) call for "partnership of government and professional initiatives" (p. 136).

> Teacher learning communities constitute the best context for professional growth and change. Reformers of various stripes conclude that effective professional development has a strong site-based component, enables teachers to consider their practice in light of evidence and research, and is grounded not only in knowledge of teaching, but in relation to specific students and specific subject matter. If these principles become the basis for serious reform in professional development programs supported by states and districts throughout the country, they could significantly enhance both teacher learning and opportunities for learning communities to grow (p. 135).

Thus promoting community should be an ongoing mission for educators at every level. We believe creating teacher learning communities enables and encourages teachers to be lifelong learners, and teachers who are also learners are best equipped to provide a dynamic classroom for their students.

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