

A Situated Account of Teacher Agency and Learning: Critical Reflections on Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract

We propose a practice-based focus for professional learning communities in schools. We start with a brief historical review of the approaches that have deemed peer collaboration as crucial for school improvement and explore how teachers' practices have been characterised in past reform initiatives. Second, we highlight the importance of *teacher agency* within professional learning communities. Third, we point out how a theory of situated cognition provides a robust epistemological framework for professional learning communities. Finally, we argue that a *situated* account of teachers' agency and professional learning will improve our understanding of peer collaboration initiatives and educational reform in general.

Keywords: Professional learning communities, teacher learning, situated learning, teacher agency, peer collaboration, educational reform

Résumé

Nous proposons une réflexion basée sur la pratique pour les communautés d'apprentissage professionnel dans les écoles. Nous commencerons par un bref historique des approches qui considèrent la collaboration entre pairs comme cruciale pour l'amélioration de l'école et explorerons comment les pratiques des enseignants ont été caractérisées au travers de propositions de réforme antérieures. Ensuite, nous soulignerons l'importance de l'implication des enseignants au sein des communautés d'apprentissage professionnel. De plus, nous montrerons comment une théorie sur la cognition située fournit un cadre épistémologique consistant pour les communautés d'apprentissage professionnel. Enfin, nous soutiendrons qu'un compte-rendu contextuel du rôle des enseignants au sein de l'apprentissage professionnel permettrait d'améliorer notre compréhension des initiatives de collaboration entre les pairs et des réformes éducatives en général.

Mots-clés: Communautés d'apprentissage professionnel, apprentissage des enseignants, apprentissage situé, implications des enseignants, collaboration entre les pairs, réforme de l'éducation

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Introduction

The idea of school-based professional collaboration as a means to school improvement has become commonplace in the discourses on educational reform. In this paper, we propose a practice-based focus for professional learning communities. Much of what has been emphasized in current approaches to professional learning communities is the shift from isolated or individual approaches to teaching to collaborative or community-oriented approaches. While we view this as a positive shift in orientation to teaching, the understandings of the change in teaching practices implied by these shifts are not well-described by current professional learning communities literature. We propose a situated account of professional learning communities that promises to bring some focus to the nature of teaching practices in professional learning communities. Without a significant understanding of teaching practices within professional learning communities, current initiatives are likely to fall short due to trivialized notions of teaching practices.

The underlying assumption in professional learning communities is that peer collaboration has the potential of transforming teaching practices in ways that will bring about higher rates of student achievement. For example, an influential document (Alberta Commission on Learning, 2003) in defining the school reform policy in Alberta, Canada, has characterized the main objective of professional learning communities as “the continuous improvement of student’s results. Teachers and administrators continuously seek and share information and act on what they have learned. And all of their efforts are concentrated on improving their practice so that students can achieve the best possible results” (p. 64).

One of the points usually stressed in the literature on professional learning communities is that teacher practice or teacher practices are something that is/are to be improved through the strategic application of a collaborative decision-making model. The collaborative model is well-developed, and the purpose of professional learning communities is clear—improved student learning (or at least improved results). Much less developed is the description of what improved teacher practice looks like. It is assumed that the collaborative approach will result in improved practice, which, in turn, leads to improved results. In this sense, professional learning communities have the tendency to trivialize the notion of teacher practice. Teacher practice is likely the most significant element of the professional learning communities model, and because it is theoretically under-developed, the usefulness of the professional learning communities model is severely limited. It is our hope that a situated account of teacher practice can provide a better explanatory account of teacher practice within professional learning communities.

We believe that professional learning communities have the potential of making a difference in the landscape of school reform if priority is given to teachers’ agency and teachers’ learning. We argue that a *situated* account of teachers in schools can provide a robust theoretical framework for understanding professional learning in schools. In this paper, we examine the idea of professional learning communities in light of a theoretical framework that characterizes learning and human agency as being situated in a context

(Putnam & Borko, 2000). Based on this situated account of agency and learning, we conclude that school-based peer collaboration is one among many possible ways in which teachers can learn about their profession, exercise their agency in the school settings, and therefore contribute to the educational success of their students.

Background

The professional learning communities approach to school improvement is arguably the most ubiquitous strategy currently used in Canada. Every Ministry of education in Canada has referenced this concept in their policy documents, and most schools, school jurisdictions, and teacher associations refer to this concept in policies, newsletters, mission and vision statements, strategic plans, and websites.

In the province of Alberta, the 2003 Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) put forth a recommendation that would “require every school to operate as a professional learning community dedicated to continuous improvement in students’ achievement” (ACOL, p. 8, 2003). In Saskatchewan, professional learning communities are one of the principal indicators for success in curriculum actualization, as stated in the document, *A Time for Significant Leadership: A Strategy for Implementing First Nations and Métis Education Goals* (2008). Additionally, in Saskatchewan, professional learning communities are represented as a central adaptive leadership best practice (*cf.* Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d., 2007; Walker, Chomos, & Burgess, 2009;). In Ontario, documents are unequivocal with respect to the efficacy of professional learning communities as a mechanism for school improvement. “With such strong research support, Ontario educators are compelled to investigate what makes professional learning communities so effective, and how wider implementation might be achieved in schools and districts across the province” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 1). A central marker of school division success in British Columbia is the degree to which a division has invested in building learning communities. Reviews of school divisions prepared for the British Columbia Ministry of Education in recent years assess the efforts in this domain as one of four key areas of examination: setting directions, organizing for improvement, building learning communities, and achieving results (*cf.* Chambers, 2008; Rubadeau, 2007; among many others). The Department of Education in Newfoundland and Labrador (2008) has produced a guide titled *Building Learning Communities: A Handbook for School Councils*, now in its second edition. In New Brunswick, the Ministry cites reports from Ministries in Prince Edward Island, Alberta, and Quebec, all of which highlight the development of learning communities for the purpose of continuous improvement in schools (MacKay, 2007, *see* Appendix H). Clearly, at least in the Canadian context, the concept of PLCs is central to school improvement and reform initiatives and is, in fact, the primary *de facto operative* educational reform policy.

A Brief History of Teacher Collaboration in Education Reform

The focus on teacher collaboration (as presented in the professional learning communities literature) is not new in the education reform literature. Amidst the current excitement over models like professional learning communities, few authors have looked back to the history of school reform for critical input (Joyce, 2004; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

For instance, Dewey (1916) argued that teachers' reflection upon their practices would bring about benefits to the entire school system. In Dewey's view, reflection is not an isolated activity but the product of practices embedded in community settings. Similar claims can be found in the socio-historical approaches to professional peer collaboration in schools (Newman, Griffin & Cole, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978), and the early exponents of action research (Stenhouse, 1975). Further, Karl Weick (1976; 1979) indicated that the process of sense-making emerges when human beings get organized; in schools, sense-making amounts to learning in socially embedded processes. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (1982) introduced the concept of *peer coaching*, indicating that

Teachers' lack of interpersonal support and close contact with others in the context of teaching is a tragedy. . . . On a practical basis most coaching should be performed by teams of teachers working together to study new approaches to teaching and to polish their existing skills. (p. 7)

Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the notion of 'situated learning' to argue that learning is a process that takes place in the context of specific communities of practice. Furthermore, situated learning has, more recently, been adopted as central to arguments made by proponents of naturalistic coherentism in educational administration as undergirding for leadership-*in-absentia* models for organizational learning and development (Lakowski, 2005), namely, models that view leadership as "an emergent, self-organizing property of complex systems" (p. viii) instead of the action of influential individuals.

Showers and Joyce (1996), Joyce (2004), and Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) listed a number of specific school improvement initiatives that have been put forward under the flag of *teacher collaboration* that resemble the current interest in professional learning communities. For example, during the 1960s, proponents of the team-teaching movement (Schaefer, 1967) argued that teachers should share their expertise teaching the same group of students. However, unsolved questions about who was to lead the teaching team in a time when school was seen as an egalitarian environment and, further, the perceived loss of autonomy of the teachers both contributed to the failure in the implementation (Joyce, 2004). The *middle school movement*, as it would come to be known, promised improvement through the creation of teacher teams that would develop a curriculum oriented to facilitate the transition between elementary and high school. According to Joyce, this initiative faced problems related to the technical knowledge teachers required in order to conduct research in school settings. Other initiatives, like the *Coalition for Essential Schools* and the *Effective Schools Movement*, have demonstrated that the issue of leadership is crucial; that is, whenever the organizational support is fragile, the peer-driven intervention makes no difference. Other examples highlighted by Joyce include the *California School Improvement Initiative*, in which schools were encouraged to create *improvement councils* composed by teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. These councils were tasked with the development of school-tailored improvement initiatives emphasizing collaborative faculty teams. However, as Peterson and David (1984) reported, before the fifth year, funding was halted because no significant differences were attributable to the interventions.

According to Joyce (2004), there are several reasons why these initiatives have failed to bring about the promised improvement. These initiatives did not document their

cases of success and failure appropriately, so more research about the nature of the improvement initiative itself would have been beneficial. Additionally, these school improvement initiatives focused exclusively on *student learning* and there was lack of reflection about *teachers' professional practice*, which generated a lack of understanding about the reasons why the intervention did not accomplish its goals. Finally, Joyce argued that former models of school improvement that have emphasized teacher collaboration have not clearly characterized the type of leadership required to boost collaboration. In his opinion, "It is hard to tell how much is brought about by energetic and artful leadership and how much is the result of the collaborative structures" (p. 82).

Here, then, emerges a question worth asking: in what sense does the *professional learning communities idea* offer a new alternative that overcomes the difficulties that have troubled other collaborative models of school improvement? Arguably, further reflection on the previous failures of peer-collaboration models would enrich the implementation of professional learning communities initiatives.

Stoll et al. (2006) traced the origins of the idea of professional learning communities to the 1980s when researchers were interested in studying the role of schools and departments as "mediating contexts" (p. 224) for teaching practices. The concept of *school community* gained attention, and researchers looked at the effect of inter-personal relations for professional learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Further, Anderson and Riedel (2003), Huffman and Hipp (2003), Louis, Kruse, and Bryk (1995), among others, called attention to the need for establishing meaningful relationships within the school community and, in particular, called for the establishment of mutually supportive relationships within the community of professionals in the school (Huffman, 2003; Louis & Gordon, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

We argue that past initiatives of peer collaboration have overlooked the fact that teachers' capacity for creating meaningful and supportive relationships is an essential component of their professional practices. In the next section we want to highlight the importance of supporting teachers' agency for the development of strong professional learning communities.

Teacher Agency and Professional Collaboration

The concept of professional learning communities relies on the assumption that something ought to be improved in the school and, further, that transformation of practices (and perhaps thinking) is required. However, it is less clear *how* one is meant to arrive at the conclusion that something ought to change. Said another way, the assumption that schools need improvement is not linked to a method for identifying what these areas of improvement ought to be (Leonard & Leonard, 2001). Nonetheless, conventional formulations of the requirements for launching professional learning communities appeal to psychological notions like *commitment* and *willingness* (Tarnoczi, 2006), which suggests that interventions must operate at the level of the teachers' dispositions or attitudes towards *common values* or *shared understandings*. So, for example, in Tarnoczi's view, the change that professional learning communities propose is not necessarily a transformation of the organizational structures, but a change of the way teachers understand their professional practice—a change of the teachers' attitudes towards organizational goals.

Tarnoczi (2006) pointed to the fact that schools operate under a legislated mandate, so the call for constructing *shared understanding and values* is superfluous. He argued that such call for constructing shared understanding and values has nothing to do with promoting teachers' involvement in the definition of the school's goals, but merely refers to the ways to attain teachers' compliance with these goals. In Tarnoczi's view, there seemed to be a contradiction between the apparent democratic involvement of teachers in constructing a shared understanding of the school's goals and the fact that the goals are set by educational legislators. However, Tarnoczi noted that this contradiction disappears once we see the teachers as the subjects of change. In this sense, the change sought consists in the transformation of the teachers' attitudes towards reform, instead of a transformation of the current educational practices.

What is the role of agency within this model? We argue that current formulations of professional learning communities need a more robust explanatory framework regarding the role of teachers' agency in school practices and school dynamics. This lack of scrutiny about teachers' agency may undermine the idea of schools as centres for democratic practice. Furthermore, undermining the idea of democratic dialogue and debate would lead to a negation of (or aversion to) conflict.

Ball (1987), and more recently Achinstein (2002), indicated that conflict, contestation, and negotiation are factors that influence the collective understanding of teachers' professional practices and the school's organizational situation. Failure to recognize the reality of conflict within the school implies that whoever disagrees with the institutionalized discourse will fall outside the boundaries of the institutional dynamics, unperceived as an actor at all. In order to avoid this grim picture of schools, we suggest that a community of professionals engaged in learning processes must be seen as situated, and their knowledge must be seen as embedded in the situation. We propose that a richer notion of professional agency and learning might be achieved through a model that portrays human learning as situated. This implies a recasting of the notion of teacher agency and learning.

Further recognition of the importance of teacher agency in the professional learning communities model would require a revision of the assumptions with respect to resistance and conflict within the model. Teacher resistance as an exercise of teacher agency is a fundamental challenge to current formulations of professional learning communities and would represent a significant addition to our understandings of teacher practice within professional learning communities.

In the particular case of professional learning communities, we call attention to the fact that organizational change must go beyond the simplistic idea that subjects can be influenced to commit to change. A more appropriate characterization of the school's dynamics must include other crucial processes that contribute to the characterization of schools, such as political deliberation and agency (Howe, 2009b).

The focus on the causal interactions within the school and the emphasis on the modification of teachers' attitudes is evidence of a particular naïve conception of knowledge and a trivial understanding of teacher practice. In this respect, we want to emphasise that the implementation of a professional learning community must take into account key variables like the political climate and the agents' perceptions of their social reality. A professional learning community's interaction with the social environment is mediated by an institutionalized discourse about what are the accepted practices within the community, and if we see schools as arenas for political deliberation, then challenges

to this discourse can be expected. Subsequently, the challenge for professional learning communities is to achieve their goals within a democratic environment acknowledging stakeholders' agency.

Regarding the concept of agency, it should be noted that one of the objectives in the professional learning communities discourse is to promote the involvement of teachers, *qua* individuals, in collaborative groups that will bring about better professional knowledge and therefore, school improvement. But, how does agency operate in the context of professional learning communities? We believe that a coherent conception of agency for professional learning communities must acknowledge the situated character of human beings in their context of practice. Indeed, if professional learning communities are to promote the collaborative co-creation of knowledge then the conception of agency must be coherent with the fact that teachers participate in shared contexts of practice.

Situating Professional Knowledge in Educational Organizations

In this section, we want to suggest a conceptual framework to substantiate the claim that professional learning happens in the context of professional communities. Our thesis is that professional learning in schools is situated in the context of educational practices and our attempts to characterize professional learning must acknowledge the contextual, dynamic, and relational nature of teaching practices. Furthermore, we claim that any implementation of professional learning communities must take into account the way teachers enact teaching practices and learn about their profession in context-bounded school environments.

Recent developments in cognitive science give us an image of agency, and cognition in particular, as situated. That is, cognition that is extended, embodied, or embedded in the environment (Robbins & Aydede, 2009). The concept of situated cognition shifts the study of cognitive processes from the isolated individual to the situation in which the individual acts. Cognitive individualism portrays cognition as a property of the individuals, confined within the minds of the individual subjects. The hypothesis of cognitive individualism applied to organizations suggests that organizational action is just the coordinated work of otherwise isolated subjects. We will contrast cognitive individualism with the concept of situated cognition. We will argue that rejecting cognitive individualism is of primary importance for professional learning communities and we will introduce some suggestions that aim for a more integrated and context-sensitive approach to school improvement.

An alternative conception of cognition that portrays learning and agency as situated in the environment is significant for professional learning communities because it gives a new meaning to the claim that groups of individuals co-create knowledge in the context of schools; namely, that professional knowledge is *enacted* in the teachers' practices and actions.

According to Robbins and Aydede (2009) the situated cognition model portrays "mental activity as dependent on the situation or context in which it occurs" (p. 3). They identify three different perspectives researchers have taken in order to explore this idea: *embodiment*, *embedding*, and *extension*. The embodiment thesis proposes that cognition is not just circumscribed to the brain and that, in fact, cognitive activity depends on the body too. The embedding thesis proposes that cognitive processes naturally take advantage of the social and natural environment. The extension thesis assumes that the

boundaries of cognition extend over the environment beyond the body's limits. What does the discussion about extended cognitive properties tell us about agents in schools? How do we best portray professional learning in the context of educational organizations?

If agents extend their cognitive properties towards the environment, then the Cartesian image of a subject that is metaphysically isolated from the external world turns irrelevant, and a new conception of human beings is needed. Under the situated account, human beings are situated beings that are not easily distinguishable from their environment. In fact, the idea of cognitive extension blurs the distinction between the external and internal world.

Weick used the concept of *enactment* (1979, 2009) to indicate that people in organizations understand the environment by playing an active role in constructing their environment. In his view, the understanding processes within organizations cannot be separated from people's organizational practices. So it is only by enacting the environment that we end up *learning* about the environment. This implies that actions are dependent on environmental constraints and, at the same time, the environment is transformed by people's creative performances.

According to Weick's (1979, 2009) model, an individualistic analysis of human action—that focuses on individual performances and intrinsic psychological states—would be pointless. In Weick's model, people are seen as essentially attached to their environments through action and practices. We are not just subjects or individuals; we are actors and participants because we understand the world as we actively engage in practices to transform it.

According to Weick (1979, 2009), the process of organizing is the process of enacting an environment. Organized groups make sense of their own situation through action and practices. The concept of enactment implies that teachers in schools are situated beings because they make constitutive part of their environment as they actively construct it. Teachers exercise their capacity for understanding the environment by creating contexts for action.

Weick's (1979, 2009) model seems to hold strong anti-Cartesian assumptions by defending the situated character of human beings. It can be said that in his view, the boundaries of the human mind are not defined by the boundaries of the brain or the nervous system. Indeed, complex cognitive processes like understanding depend on the relation between the body, the environment, and the situation in which this relation is held. For example, it can be said that people in schools enact the curriculum as a way to understand it. Indeed, in this model, understanding is a social practice and not the intrinsic cognitive processes of cognitively isolated individuals. A situated account of actors in schools provides a different and richer way to analyze the processes of knowledge production and its relationship with professional practices.

How does Weick's (1979, 2009) image of an *enacted organization* help us characterize schools? He argued that educational organizations are best portrayed as loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976)—an organization in which different groups and participants interact with each other without compromising their identity. In a loosely coupled system, groups have internal coherence but lack rigid ties to other groups: "loose coupling also carries connotations of impermanence, dissolvability, and tacitness all of which are potentially crucial properties of the 'glue' that holds organizations together" (p. 3). A tight coupling implies rigidity, high dependence between groups and low capacity for adaptation. When the organizational links are loosely coupled, groups have more

autonomy to deal with irregularities and unexpected events. Loose coupling enhances the organization's capacity to innovate because groups' high levels of independence produce specialized knowledge about the environment, which at the same time promotes the organization's flexibility and capacity to adapt. According to Weick, loosely coupled organizations are defined by their practices rather than by their structure. Indeed, structure-based discourses in organizational analysis portray organizations as tightly coupled systems that nonetheless deal with complex human interactions. This tension makes them unable to account for human action. A tightly coupled organization is deterministic as interaction is predefined by the structure. In contrast, a loosely coupled organization gives priority to people's practices and actions, capturing the complexity of human interactions focusing on the agents' intentional activity in context (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki-Gitai, 1999).

Conclusion

According to the arguments that we have reviewed, professional learning in schools is better seen as embedded in teachers' practices. We believe that through this conceptualization professional learning communities gain a richer description of professional learning and teachers' agency in schools.

The idea of peer collaboration is not new in the history of school reform, and we suggest that researching the causes of past failures would give us new insights about the scope and impact of collaborative initiatives for school improvement. Our analysis indicates that school improvement initiatives focused on peer collaboration, like professional learning communities, need to engage in deeper reflection about the nature of action and practices in schools, specifically those practices that pertain to professional learning and teacher agency. Indeed, we argue that peer collaboration models like professional learning communities will gain from sustaining their implementation in relevant research about cognition and social dynamics. In this paper, we offer an alternative way to conceptualize key concepts like professional learning and teacher agency in schools. A situated account of learning and agency provides a sound theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of professional practices, allowing the recognition of collaborative forms of professional learning, and enriching the institutionalized discourse that validates professional practices. We argue that professional learning community models could be enhanced if these models incorporate a method for identifying areas of improvement; in other words, professional learning communities are not a goal in and of themselves, they are means for school improvement.

Finally, we draw upon Weick (2003), who defines *enactment* as the process of actively transforming the environment through action. Following Weick's insights, it can be said that enactment is the strategy that organizational actors use to understand their situation in their environment.

Portraying understanding as enactment implies a situated account of cognitive properties that differs from traditional individualistic images of cognition, rendering understanding as situated practice. Widening the scope from individuals to practices requires a different set of analytical tools that highlight the dynamic and interactive character of cognition (Wilson & Clark, 2009).

The concept of enactment also implies a different way of explaining why people's understanding of reform initiatives influences the way reform is implemented. Indeed,

when we say that policies are understood through their enactment, we mean that the enactment of a policy exemplifies the way people in schools understand the policy message. People's understanding of policy messages plays a crucial role in the implementation processes because their understanding is evidenced in their practices and the transformation of practices is one of the objectives of reform.

A situated account of learning and agency in schools, such as the one we have briefly outlined, goes beyond the conception of schools as static organizational structures and portrays schools as dynamic and complex organizations. The notion of enactment implies that our understanding of educational organizations is far from being absolute and universal, and that it is highly contextualized and relative to the practices by which teachers develop their professional knowledge. From a theoretical perspective that portrays learning and agency as situated, we suggest that teachers enact their understanding of professional knowledge in their practices. Following Weick's insights, we argued that teachers, *qua* actors in organizational settings *make sense* of their environment by exercising their capacities for agency. So in addition to an institutional debate over what is school improvement and what should be improved in schools, researchers should work towards a characterization of professional practices.

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