

Professional learning
communities what
they mean to
teachers education
essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been described as structures within which professionals-particularly teachers-can refine their skills, renew their spirits, and expand the scope of their knowledge (Fogarty & Pete, 2006, p. 49). Even though the benefits are clear, there are numerous challenges involved in creating and managing PLCs. Such challenges have typically been broken down into concerns about: (1) finding time and otherwise overcoming logistical challenges to coaching; (2) designing appropriate coaching interventions; and (3) maximizing coaching effectiveness. This literature review will address each of these concepts by examining specific research directions taken by current theorists in the field of professional development, with the purpose of illustrating the spectrum of activity along which coaching can succeed or fail. After doing so, the literature review will also discuss broader theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of coaching, including analyses of the roles of: (1) race and other socioeconomic factors; (2) theories of motivation and (3) theories of organizational development.

Defining and Contextualizing PLCs

Rigorous definitions of the PLC, and evidence-based guidelines for its functioning, began to appear in the late nineteenth century. In the U. S., the entire project of teacher development took a huge step forward with the appearance of a number of periodicals dedicated to the subject, including *The National Teacher*, which debuted in 1870. It is highly likely that the professionalization of teaching in the U. S. had a great deal to do with the emergence of a standard method of teacher development, including the

creation of formal PLCs. In the third volume of *The National Teacher*, published in 1873, the following passage appeared:

First, then, the prospective teacher should be trained in the handling of illustrative material, apparatus, charts, maps, diagrams, objects, etc.... his practice in them should be such as will enable him to bring before the eye what can be very imperfectly addressed to the ear. This should be done, in the first instance, privately, or in the presence of the members of a teaching class, subject to their kind but searching criticism...(Mitchell, 1873, p. 367)

This passage is one of the first allusions, at least in American sources, to the notion of a professional learning community.

It is worth situating the emergence of the PLC into the broader stream of professionalization and scientific reordering of vocations in post-Civil War America. Ellis and Hartley (2004) argued that the Civil War, which had mobilized the nation's resources in service of total warfare, had exposed glaring weaknesses in the organization and practice of many professions, starting with the army and extending to nursing, teaching, and manufacturing. According to Ellis and Hartley, nursing was one of the first professions to be thoroughly professionalized in the aftermath of the Civil War, but other professions soon followed (p. 133).

It is natural to draw the likely connection between the professionalization of nursing and the professionalization of teaching, both of which were historically feminine practices that, in the wake of the Civil War, were re-aligned with male perceptions of the scientific method and the

professionalization of work. The emergence of the learning community can
<https://assignbuster.com/professional-learning-communities-what-they-mean-to-teachers-education-essay/>

certainly be placed into this context of masculinization. Mitchell (1873) himself made a comparison between (largely female) teaching and (largely male) medicine, to the detriment of teaching (p. 362). In Mitchell's opinion, one of the variables that made medicine more scientific than teaching was the fact that medical practitioners constantly mentored, critiqued, assisted, and otherwise engaged with one another, whereas American teaching had not benefited from this kind of inter-vocational interchange.

At first, American pedagogical theorists did not suggest that a PLC ought to exist separately from a teaching college. Rather, these theorists thought of the professional learning community as a kind of epiphenomenon of the teaching college. For example, an anonymous writer identified only by a city of origin (New Haven, CT) to the U. S. Bureau of Education in 1885 had the following to say about a professional learning community:

A few points, enforced each week and perhaps illustrated with a class, will bring up the teaching powers of those who have not had a professional training, and they will not be wearied out by trying to apply a crude mass of theories....The attendance at such meetings should be voluntary. There should be such a tone of interest and enthusiasm in a community as will inspire teachers with an honest and eager desire to know how to work...(p. 274)

At this point in American pedagogy, instruction was still meted out by superintendents (or pedagogues) to teachers, but there was a recognition that the input of the peer community of teachers was just as important to teacher development as any model of top-down instruction or

professionalization. The PLC was at this point defined not as a separate set of development activities, but as a kind of grassroots camaraderie between teachers in formal development settings. Soon, however, the modern definition of the PLC would emerge.

It is impossible to state with certainty when the shift from the early, voluntary PLC led by the superintendent began to give way to the more formal, school-managed PLC. It appears that the shift took place over the 1930s and began to cement itself by the 1940s. Otto (1944) offered an explanation of the changing role of the principal, and how it lent itself to closer, school-level management of the PLC. According to Otto (1944), American secondary schools continued to grow in size and complexity until the superintendent was no longer able to manage or own all of the processes for which the role had previously been responsible; thus, for example, “ The growing need for more and better supervision of classroom instruction suggested the desirability of planning the administrative organization so that this need could be met” (p. 197). There were two stages in the hand-off of PLCs from the superintendent to principals; firstly, in the 1930s and early 1940s, office staff associated with the superintendent appear to have taken over responsibility for all aspects of vocational teacher development (Otto, 1944, p. 197); however, when Otto (1944) was writing, there was already another hand-off underway from central bureaucrats to the principal. After the Second World War, the principal emerged as the figure most responsible for defining, managing, and otherwise supporting the professional learning community in American schools.

Just as the Civil War had introduced ideas of industrial organization to various vocations, the Second World War created manpower and resource shortages that prompted a faster transition from centralized control over teacher development to a more communal, school-level management of the process (Troyer, Allen, and Young, 1946, p. 241). These forces remain very much in effect today.

Instructional Coaching and The Four Types of Coaching

According to Wilson and Gislason (2009), there are four types of coaching: internal coaching, peer coaching, manager-performed coaching, and external coaching (p. 56). As their names suggest, peer coaching is about coaching that is delivered by colleagues to each other; manager-based coaching is delivered by managers (or, in the educational context, principals, superintendents, and/or other administrators) to teachers; external coaching is typically performed by consultants; and internal coaching, by contrast, includes all the kinds of coaching that are provided in-house.

All four kinds of coaching have been employed in the instructional coaching context. Knight (2005) documented a wave of hiring of outside instructional coaches by U. S. public schools in the 1990s and first half of the 2005, driven by the urgency of achieving basic reading and mathematics competency skills tied to federal funding and the perception that schools themselves did not contain the proper instructional resources to achieve this task. According to Clarkson and Taylor (2005, p. 4), one of the problems created by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative was a push to define instructional coaching as the rote memorization of standards rather than an

internalization of the pedagogical principles needed to teach up to those standards. Thus, it can be argued that external coaching becomes more popular in times of external stress on teachers to perform to a particular standard, whereas, in ordinary times, genuinely pedagogical (rather than instrumentalist) internal coaching is the more common form of instructional coaching (Matsumara, Sartoris, Bickel, & Garnier 2009).

In modern theory, peer coaching is praised for its egalitarian values, but theorists are also concerned that teachers lack the specific pedagogical background and expertise to make other teachers better. For example, Buly, Coskie, Robinson, and Egawa (2006) have argued that the external coach is focused on getting teachers to ask why in a structured fashion, whereas teachers are themselves often concerned with teaching other practical and specific strategies.

Barriers in PLCs and Instructional Coaching: Logistics

One of the major challenges in creating coaching interventions for PLCs is simply finding the time and opportunity to bring together busy professionals for dedicated learning and training. This challenge is a particularly pressing one in the current economic environment, in which so many working professionals are being called upon to do less with more. Thus, as Fogarty and Pete (p. 49) pointed out, an excellent place to begin a discussion of professional learning communities is in the realm of logistics, i. e. how to create the time and space for such communities, which is as much of a problem today as it was when Troyer, Allen, and Young (1946) wrote about the logistical challenges of organizing and managing the PLC in wartime.

<https://assignbuster.com/professional-learning-communities-what-they-mean-to-teachers-education-essay/>

Abdal-Haqq (1996) argued that, within school settings particularly, PLCs scheduling ought to be built directly into both the workday and the job descriptions of teachers (although this advice applies equally well to other communities of practice). Abdal-Haqq (1996) concludes that “ the greatest challenge to implementing effective professional development is lack of time” (p. 1), so great responsibility falls on the shoulders of leaders and managers who must accommodate PLCs in terms of schedules and job design.

Fernandez (2002) made the point that making time and space for PLCs to thrive is itself partly dependent on cultural approaches. She discussed the case of the Japanese educational system, in which a great deal of emphasis is placed on lesson study, in which teachers are given the time and opportunity to reflect on both their practice and that of others (p. 393). There is more pressure on individual professionals to take advantage of existing resources, and to take the lead in overcoming logistical barriers to embed themselves within PLCs. While there is extensive lip service paid to the value of PLCs, professional development is often subject to self-regulation rather than proper top-down guidance, argued Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, and Beckingham (2004). Having surveyed the history of PLC development, it becomes clear that the absence of top-down guidance is itself part of the steady downward transfer of administrative power tracked by Otto (1944). While Japan appears to have retained a centralized and top-down structure for managing and supporting PLCs and other forms of teacher development, in the U. S. such responsibility has devolved down to the principal.

For many theorists, the logistics of PLCs are inseparable from school system support for teachers. For example, Lappan (1997) offered the following insight: “ The local capacity to support change is central to implementing reforms. Teachers, and those who support teachers, need time-time to learn...” (p. 207). Of course, in this context, it should be pointed out time is a valuable commodity. There is a powerful tension between the time and resources needed for supporting the local logistics needed for nurturing professional learning communities and the time and resources needed by principals, administrators, and other supporters of development for other tasks. Unfortunately, as Abdal-Haqq (1996, p. 1) also suggests, schools are faced with a zero sum environment, in which to support the PLC is to remove support from some other organizational goal. It is in this context that the logistical difficulties of PLC support should be understood. Moreover, until schools enjoy increased funding, it is not clear that the logistical problems noted as early as Troyer, Allen, and Young (1946) will simply evaporate.

Of course, one way in which the problem could be solved is by employing PLCs themselves to ease the logistical problems faced by schools. To the extent that teachers could train and develop other teachers without extensive time and resource commitments, PLCs could be of great economic benefit; as in the Second World War, the teacher-training-teacher paradigm could yield economic benefits rather than sucking up resources. For PLCs to actually operate in this fashion requires close attention to the variable of coaching design.

Barriers in PLCs and Instructional Coaching: Change Management

From at least the 1870s onwards, there has been a rich debate on how to best deploy teachers to train and develop other teachers. In the first stage of this debate, from Mitchell (1873) to Arnold (1898), it was assumed that merely talking about pedagogy and other teaching-related issues in a voluntary, informal meeting would assist junior teachers in their development. Over the decades, voluntary meetings gave way to more formal in-school development programs, particularly when the Second World War forced schools to consider more resource-efficient ways to engage in teacher training.

In this context, the promise of coaching design is that, if there is a sound system under which to transfer teacher knowledge from senior to junior colleagues, the PLC can save school systems time, money, and administrative commitment. On the other hand, if coaching design is itself weak or unmotivated, then teachers will resist it and the PLC will fail to fulfill its promise. These issues are at the heart of the modern debate on coaching design.

In contemporary times, there is much more urgency around the subject of coaching design thanks to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, which has directly tied student performance to federal funding and accreditation. Killion (2005) is one of many theorists who has pointed out that one response to NCLB is the implementation of instructional coaching to improve instruction and student achievement.

Instructional coaching is a relatively new phenomenon, at the core of which is a conviction that professional learning improves teaching practices and

teaching practices improve student achievement (Knight, 2007; Killion & Harrison, 2006; Knowal & Steiner, 2007). Instructional design is not easy to implement because, as Knight (2007) has pointed out, teachers are not innately resistant to change will tend to resist poorly-designed agendas of change. As such, it is of the utmost importance to arrive at an understanding of the best practices of coaching design.

In an organizational context, instructional coaching provides motivation to mentees, which in turn is intended to improve the productivity and morale of mentees. When instructional coaches work with students, their sole purpose is to demonstrate and model best teaching practices to teachers in order to improve student teaching (Knight, 2007). Motivation is the key to understanding the role that good coaching should play within a professional learning community (Bransford, 2000).

Coaching design principles vary widely depending on the specific kind of professional development that is being pursued. Fortunately, however, there appears to be some consensus on best practices for coaching design.

Bransford's (2000) seminal book, *How People Learn*, argued that coaching design should have four centrism; i. e., it should be learner-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered (p. 188).

There are many different interpretations of how these four foci can be best captured in a PLC. For example, Beyerbach, Weber, Swift, and Gooding (1996) emphasized that the knowledge focus of PLC design ought to have a practical component, so that members of the community understand the

practical applications of what they are being taught (pp. 101-102). For teachers, this practical component can be satisfied by understanding why, in the context of real-world problem solving, it is necessary for them to develop a new skill or refine an existing one.

Another recent emphasis in coaching design for community-centered learning is the utilization of collaborative software, particularly blogs and wikis, which have the potential to span each of Bransford's focus areas for coaching design. Higdon and Topaz (2009) stated that blogs and wikis had an important role in creating a more centered learning environment,

There is wide consensus in the academic literature about the usefulness of instructional coaching within professional learning communities. Within a professional learning community, the qualities of good teaching for students should also be evident in professional learning for teachers (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Bransford, 2000). However, there are also a number of obstacles to the implementation or the success of instructional coaching, including logistical factors (such as potential coaches' lack of time), institutional factors (such as a lack of managerial support for coaching), and professional factors (such as coaches' lack of relevant skills).

Leaving aside these barriers, good coaching design may not be so much a matter of pedagogical design as it is a matter of change management. Bransford (2000) and other researchers have already explained the evidence for best practices in specific aspects of coaching design; the issue is not so much the content of coaching design as it is the necessity of convincing teachers to go along with coaching. In this regard, there are some helpful

<https://assignbuster.com/professional-learning-communities-what-they-mean-to-teachers-education-essay/>

theoretical contributions from business literature, which has long struggled with the question of optimal change management in organizations. Jensen and Kerr (1994, p. 408), based on a case study of change at Pepsi, argued that the following five questions had to be satisfactorily answered before constituents bought into a change agenda:

Why must we change, and why is this change important?

What do you want me to do?

What are the measures/consequences of change/no change?

What tools and support are available to me?

What's in it for me?

These questions of change management emerge at the point of implementation: i. e., as soon as it becomes necessary to transition from a theory of the professional learning community to an actual implementation, requiring intellectual and emotional buy-in from teachers. But change management is an issue that is better tackled not by coaching designers, whose responsibility is to transfer principles such as those of Bransford (2000) to local pedagogical contexts, but at the level of what can be called effectiveness maximization of the PLC.

Effectiveness Maximization and Theoretical Approaches

There is wide-ranging agreement on the importance of PLCs, and even on the operational and conceptual details that PLC must satisfy in terms of

coaching design. The crux of the problem lies not necessarily in those details but more in the question of how to maximize the effectiveness of PLCs. First, there is the logistical question. If there is little institutional time, resources, and guidance put into PLC program creation and management, then coaching programs are unlikely to be effective. However, even organizations that have hurdled over the logistical challenge and implemented some form of PLC must still solve the question of how to maximize their coaching program's effectiveness, including the considerations of change management as highlighted by Jensen and Kerr (1994).

There are some convincing arguments that PLCs resist straightforward methods of evaluation and improvement, which creates a fundamental challenge at the level of effectiveness maximization. Revans (1979), the pioneer of the action research concept, saw the creation and functioning of a PLC as a holistic process, one that cannot be dissected and improved on a part-by-part level. To Revans (1979), a functional PLC is something that both managers and participants can recognize only by taking part in it. This dynamic has something of a chicken-and-egg quality to it, as an effective PLC requires planning, but the proper inputs of planning may only become apparent after a PLC has been launched.

Even with this limitation in mind, it is still possible to both measure and improve the effectiveness of a coaching component of a PLC by surveying participants about how they are benefiting from the specific coaching program, and employing these insights to structure the back-end processes that feed into the PLC. Borko (2004) argued that it is certainly possible to measure factors such as teacher (or, for that matter, any other form of <https://assignbuster.com/professional-learning-communities-what-they-mean-to-teachers-education-essay/>

professional) learning and satisfaction; moreover, teacher performance in classrooms can also be measured by such standards as student evaluations and standardized test scores. The point is that, when a PLC is working properly, its results will show themselves in a number of domains. It is incumbent on managers or others who oversee these programs to collect baseline data in order to measure the program's achievements, and also to identify the areas that need renewed attention and resources. Maximizing the effectiveness of PLCs thus comes down to both measurement and targeted action (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004; Saphier & West, 2010; and Knight 2009), whose basis can be the experience of mentees.

It is necessary, at this point, to consult some theories of motivation and organizational development in order to consider how to best maximize the effectiveness of PLCs. Much of the literature on PLCs takes it for granted that teachers are motivated to buy into the program; however, it need not be the case that teachers are motivated, or that PLCs are constituted so as to maximize the strengths of the organization. Fortunately, theoretical literature has made it easier to understand the overlap between PLCs, motivation, and organizational development.

Herzberg (1966) argued that: " someone who is motivated is truly a sight to behold, as they put all of their heart and soul into an activity. Love of work is certainly the strongest motivator of people" (p. 141). Coaches exist partly to instill mentees with love of work, via a number of mechanisms, including that of instrumentality, or making sure that people have the tools that they need to accomplish a work task. Note that instrumentality was also part of Jensen and Kerr's (1994) framework for appropriate change management. If people

<https://assignbuster.com/professional-learning-communities-what-they-mean-to-teachers-education-essay/>

lack the tools to achieve what is asked for them, they will not only resist change but also lose motivation. As such, administrators should bear in mind that every tool (including time) put in the hands of PLC members effects the motivation of individual members, and therefore the overall success of the PLC.

According to the theoretical foundation provided by organizational psychologists such as Herzberg, Vroom (1964), and Maslow (1993), instructional coaching should have a salutary effect on mentees in so far as coaching instills mentees with instrumentality and motivation. One part of this dissertation's purpose is to measure the impact of good coaching, as reported by mentees, and also to assess the impact of bad or nonexistent coaching. Doing so is an exercise in the measurement of organizational motivation and morale as conceptualized by a number of influential theorists in the field. For example, Bandura's (1997) social learning theory is sometimes cited in the coaching literature and explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. The central aspect of Bandura's (1977) theory is the claim that humans learn by watching others model behavior. Thus, psychological theory now provides firm support for the idea of coaching as a transfer of desirable behavior from senior to junior members of a community.

Clearly, then, theory has a great deal to tell us about the scientific basis for PLCs, and also about how best to maximize their effectiveness. Some of the theories surveyed in this section, for example, have emphasized the importance of motivation and instrumentality in the PLC.

One final theory that ought to be considered is that of so-called toxic mentorship. It will be recalled that, as early as Arnold (1898), there is an assumption that, when teachers come together for purposes of development, mutual reinforcement and learning will inevitably take place. It is taken for granted, both by Arnold (1898) and by Mitchell (1873), that senior teachers have the best interests of the profession, and of their junior colleagues, in mind. This assumption, however, might be naïve. There is now a great deal of research on dimensions of coaching and mentorship that fail due to the attitudes of senior teachers. Webb and Shakespeare (2008), Atkin and Wilmington (2007), and Grossman (2007) have all discussed so-called toxic mentorship as one of the ways in which coaching goes wrong, for example when coaches are burned out, unhelpful, scornful of their own profession, unethical, or not involved enough or knowledgeable to provide adequate feedback. The aforementioned researchers have called attention to toxic mentorship in the nursing field, in which there has been more of an attempt of late to critique bad coaching. However, educational literature in general has not yet grappled as extensively with the concept of the toxic mentor, which is another reason why it is timely and relevant to ask mentees about this concept, as part of a more general data-gathering project on the measurable impact of mentorship on productivity and morale.

Conclusion

This literature review has covered a great deal of ground in attempting to illuminate the concept of the professional learning community, all the way from the seventeenth century to the present day. The conclusion is reserved

for discussing an important lacuna in the research, and employing this lacuna to lend context to the research carried out by this dissertation.

It will be noted that, for all of its history, teacher development in general and the PLC in particular have been defined by people other than the constituents. At first, superintendents had the greatest input into the process; later, principals took on this mantle. Throughout the process, senior teachers exercised a great deal of influence, as they had the prized knowledge that was to be passed on and passed down to junior colleagues. In the century of literature surveyed here, it is interesting to note that very few, if any, researchers have focused on the ability of mentees to provide important feedback about the nature of coaching within the PLC. It is almost invariably assumed that some outside authority, whether the superintendent or principal, is the owner of the process, while senior teachers are the drivers of the process.

This attitude may be about to change because, in PLCs as in business communities, there is a move to recognize the centrality of the so-called customer. In this case, the customer of coaching is the mentee, the recipient of coaching. In both private business and public policy contexts, the customer has increasingly become both the owner and the driver of certain processes. Businesses conduct surveys of customers in order to determine what to produce. Public sector organizations, similarly, turn to the citizen-stakeholder as the ultimate owner of a process, and try to orient processes accordingly.

It may be that, in coaching, the focus is about to shift from the top of the pyramid to the base: That is, from the traditional owners of coaching to its customers, namely teachers. It is possible that teachers will, in future, play an enhanced role in guiding the direction of coaching, specifically by providing input as to what kind of coaching works and what kind does not. Of course, this kind of input does not constitute the sum total of what is needed to create an effective PLC, but it is also unthinkable that learning communities can long thrive or survive without being driven by the interests and predilections of their own customers.

It should also be noted collegiality has been a foundational value of the PLC. Indeed, the functioning of PLCs from the nineteenth century onwards has required a spirit of collegiality in that members of such communities must be open to critique, generous with help of others, and committed to coexistence and mutual advancement.