

Collaboration and community

Developing professional learning communities: Messages for learning networks

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What are professional learning communities?

Despite different shades of interpretation in different national contexts, there is broad international consensus that the term ‘professional learning community’ suggests a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, and operating as a collective enterprise. In many ways, this definition could be equally applied to learning networks, although some writers argue that networks engage in activities that can’t be undertaken by one organisation alone. Professional learning communities and learning networks rest on similar assumptions about how staff in schools learn and change their practice: that teaching is complex, so they need to keep learning throughout their career; that a great deal of untapped knowledge exists in schools, that many challenges staff face are local challenges and need to be addressed ‘on the ground’; and that staff improve by analysing, evaluating and experimenting with their practice with peers.

While various characteristics of professional learning communities have been identified, they can broadly be summarised under five headings.

- shared values and vision that focus on improving learning and teaching
- collective responsibility for the learning of all pupils
- reflective professional inquiry to deepen practice
- collaboration and teamwork
- group and collective learning, as well as individual learning

What is their impact?

Professional learning communities are a means to an end: the goal is not to be a professional learning community. The ultimate outcome of professional learning communities has to be experienced by pupils, even though there is an intermediate outcome in terms of the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of the professionals in the school’s community. We are exploring impact on pupils’ progress, but the evidence also shows that being part of a professional learning community can have a positive impact on teachers’ work lives, their learning and improvement in practice, as well as improvement of the school as an organisation .

How do you develop professional learning communities?

Creating and developing professional learning communities appears to depend on a number of ingredients: opportunities provided by a range of learning experiences; important human and social resources; and supportive structural resources.

Providing learning opportunities

In professional learning communities, attention is paid to ensuring that there are opportunities for all staff to get involved in a wide range of formal and informal learning experiences, to be able to develop new ideas that will meet the needs of their pupils, and to try out, tinker with and refine practices both alone and with peers. Everything is considered an opportunity to learn. Promoting 'inquiry-mindedness', a questioning, self-evaluative and evidence-informed orientation to practice, is a key means of learning. Networking with colleagues in other schools provides further access to new ideas. There is also a focus on embedding all the new knowledge created and acquired through these learning opportunities so that they become a regular and comfortable part of people's repertoire of learning and teaching strategies.

Harnessing human and social resources

The human side of bringing about any change or development is extremely important. Engaging in learning can be risky. It's not easy for people to open themselves up to participate in activities such as mutual enquiry, classroom observation and feedback, mentoring partnerships and discussion about pedagogical issues and innovation unless they are confident it is safe to do this. Trust is therefore a key condition and has been found in one study to be considerably the strongest facilitator of professional community. Along with respect, mutual support, celebration of success, and willingness to take risks, trust is one of the norms of a collaborative culture.

Leadership is also important to promote the growth of professional learning communities. This is evidenced in headteachers' commitment as well as distributed leadership throughout the staff through joint action and leadership of smaller professional learning communities within the school. Leadership in professional learning communities is clearly not the domain of one individual or a small 'senior' group. The amount and quality of facilitation and external support for any serious school improvement effort can also be critical to both to support the change processes involved in developing and sustaining professional learning communities.

Ensuring supportive structures

Making use of structural resources can considerably help develop professional learning communities. These are often features within the control of the community's members, even if they may not seem like it. The one mentioned most often is time. Time is critical for any meaningful learning. This does not only mean timetabling and being able to cover teachers who go out of school to attend workshops, meetings or to visit other schools, but how schools plan and organise their timetables such that learning can occur within the school.

To facilitate teacher talk and exchange about professional issues, use of space within schools is also important. Opportunities for professional exchange appear to be facilitated by physical proximity (eg teachers in a department having neighbouring classrooms) and interdependent teaching roles (eg team teaching, joint lesson planning). Co-ordination and planning of professional activities also require sensitive handling so that staff have the necessary autonomy to make decisions about the learning and teaching of their own pupils while sharing collective responsibility for all pupils' learning.

The other structural resources enable better and deeper communication between professional learning communities' members and also enable greater participation in decision making. Use of meetings, staff briefings, newsletters, email communication, informal discussions and other communication mechanisms, therefore, all need careful thought in professional learning communities. Maintaining communication within large schools can be a particular challenge. This is one reason that it is often easier to develop professional learning communities in smaller schools.

Conclusion

Developing professional learning communities is a key component of capacity building. In many ways, learning networks are professional learning communities operating across a broader landscape. They seem to have a great deal in common with school-based professional learning communities and a number of similar goals. Learning networks also have added purposes: to enlarge individual schools' repertoire of choices and to move ideas and good practice around the system helping transform the whole system, not just individual schools, thus improving education for all pupils. This is collective responsibility and moral purpose writ large.

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