

“A PLC as a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning oriented, growth-promoting way, the key purpose of which is to enhance teacher effectiveness as professionals, for students’ ultimate benefit (Watson, 2012, 19). Let us examine our experiences within our communities to see if this has occurred.

Engaging with professional learning communities can be invigorating and has the potential to create change in professional practice and engaging our pupils. Through the use of in person and online PLCs, benefits have been shown, but it appears that more evidence leans to the effectiveness of traditional PLCs. Owen believes, “professional learning communities provide a non-confrontational avenue to receive feedback wherein teachers can compare their strategies with others and learn via modelling (Owen, 2014, 58). Therefore, by examining your outputs to Shelley Moore’s blog and reviewing your journal reflections, we can better recognize the similarities and differences in both our professional communities and the curricular complexities.

As I began my review of your output for your professional community, I was immediately excited about the opportunity. I have been a keen follower of Shelley Moore’s work and have enjoyed her workshops for years. Admittedly disappointed, I was not able to observe your initial output specifically directed towards the blog based on her Literacy Unity Plan that was initially stated in your dialectical journal. However, I did have the opportunity to read the email sent to Shelley based on scaffolding and the UDL planning template. Additionally, I read through your post in your Microsoft Teams thread sent to your staff and

colleagues. This displayed the strong attempt to engage with your PLC and utilize that learning and apply it to your professional context of practice.

As mentioned, I was extremely interested in learning more of your dialogue about literacy planning and universal designs for learning with Shelley Moore. In my current context, we are lucky enough to be communicating with Shelley of late. We have engaged in inquiry based on our school non-negotiables (i.e., kindness, empathetic, uniqueness, etc.). In addition to this, we have developed house teams where we have influential Canadians representing each of these non-negotiables. Shelley Moore, with her permission, is one who represents one of these key teams. Some of the major components to this inquiry allow us to focus on these each month following a series of engaging lessons, identifying these non-negotiables each morning during announcements and highlighting student learning through assemblies each month where classes are able to celebrate and share their learning through differentiated activities. As well, we are co-planning and even co-assessing throughout the journey. Universal Designs for Learning is at the forefront of these experiences. As you mention to your staff, Shelley Moore's blog provides a template for UDL. She also highlights, on her blog, some exciting resources based on UDL called *Learning in Safe Schools* authored by Faye Brownlie and Judith King, and *It's All About the Thinking* written by Leyton Schnellert, Linda Watson and Nicole Widdess. Both of the resources offer templates to UDL and how to implement into schools. These professional resources also demonstrate how to include support staff (LST and IST) and administration in this process. One of Shelley's metaphors that I was take into consideration while planning is targeting the outside bowling pins (the 7-10 split). If we treat

the classroom and our learners in this manner, we can reach these outside learners. In doing so, all students will benefit from the universal strategies.

As I examine your dialectical journal, your posts and your PLC, I see many similarities to my own. As mentioned in my own journal, I engaged with the community entitled YouCubed. This community offers many opportunities for differentiated instruction, quality assessment, professional resources, social emotional learning (Growth Mindset), and even seminars. As I viewed both of our communities at length, I recognize they share similarities in a student-centered learning design. For instance, you mentioned your PLC has an accepting mindset. This resonated with me as one of the key areas within my chosen community is directed at growth mindset and accepting of a variety of learners. Additionally, you identify scaffolding and interest in UDL and how to develop this in your own planning. This also stood out to me as my PLC focuses greatly on differentiated instruction strategies and a focus on quality assessment, not necessarily a content driven design model. I see much mentioned in my own community about the issues that have been plaguing numeracy instruction and the guiding principles that can improve in this area. While inspecting Shelley Moore's blog, I also see a recognition of societal issues on inequity of learning. One could identify this could be linked to a social problem design focus. Either way, both PLC experiences even offer video tutorials to enhance practice.

Furthermore, some of the experiences I observed within your PLCs are quite similar to mine. I, too, had to email to register and received a somewhat delayed confirmation response. I did not receive responses directly to my outputs by Jo Boaler, YouCubed's creator and author. As well, one thing I recognized in your discussion was the fact you felt somewhat reluctant to

post. I believe we all felt this way initially, but it became obvious quite quickly the individuals accessing these forums are there to improve their own learning. Similar to you, I also made posts to Twitter to broaden my community and attract individuals who may be interested in my prompts based on open-ended instruction and student engagement. One piece that may have supported both our journals would have been including each output to the community.

Reflectively, I did not post all of my outputs and observing all of our peers' discussions, and I feel it would benefit our peers to see this. As well, I found that we both displayed excitement sharing our learning with our colleagues. As mentioned by Owen, sharing and collaborating using PLCs "nurture the teacher learning culture towards improving skills for the innovation context and build the momentum towards sustaining the transformative educational context" (Owen, 2014, 64). Your sharing through TEAMS was a great way for your teams at school to develop possible goals for student learning. This was visibly observed and admired by your administration. I have similarly found TEAMS quite a useful portal to pass along newly acquired resources and curriculum design. I have been passing on various lesson sequences based on numeracy developed with the support of the YouCubed website for quite some time now. Through these identified similarities, I believe we both were able to observe the focus of equity of education, curricular design focusing on student and society design learning, not necessarily subject centered, and the key ways we can reach a range of learners and engage in valuable dialogue with our peers.

With many similarities, we did have some obvious differences in our communities as well as our experiences. One of the major pieces within your community was the focus more on curricular design. There are obvious links to backwards design, IEP planning, objective planning

and learning maps. The primary examples and templates provided in this blog also focus more on language arts and sciences. For my community, there was much more of an emphasis on numeracy and instructional strategies and assessment. However, these are all greatly related. One obvious difference within our communities was the use of social media. Youcubed, for instance, had three social media platforms where educators engaged in dialogue based on resources, instructional strategies and beliefs about the progression of education.

A key difference in our experiences related more to the prompting of discussion. For example, I communicated through the Youcubed Facebook group, Instagram profile and even Twitter threads. However, within your community, you were interested in engaging more through on the blog and email, and then eventually taking away your learnings and engaging your staff through Teams. One experience I would have enjoyed was reading your outputs to the community. I was only able to read the single email provided by Shelley Moore, but I was eager to see your prompting about curriculum and the feedback from the community. Further, both of our communities identified valuable resources for teachers. However, the most visible difference was the promotion of resources on YouCubed for purchase. This was not as obvious through the Shelley Moore Blog. I must commend you for sharing more information about your PLC with your colleagues, as I left out these contributions. One interesting difference that jumps out to me was the communication with your administration. This may not have occurred within your specific online learning community, but it certainly shows your enthusiasm for sharing with your colleagues and the intention to shape your own professional practice. According to Hayes, “[teachers and school administration] are attracted to accounts of schooling that detail techniques for enhancing school and teacher effects (Hayes, 2003, 226). I

wonder where this will take your administration, peers, and learners. This could be an excellent opportunity for collaborative inquiry.

As it is clear that professional learning communities have boundaries, I see this more as examples of limitations. For instance, the online learning community may have improved flexibility to contribute. Blitz states, “flexibility is presented as the strongest advantage of online PLCs over the traditional face-to-face environment in facilitating teachers’ learning” (Blitz, 2013). However, it has become more apparent there is less accountability when collaborative teams have not been specifically formed for a shared vision. Therefore, professional contributions are less frequent. Blitz notes, “Across the studies reviewed there were multiple indications that teachers’ motivation to engage with their peers and contribute regularly to the group was lower online than face to face” (Blitz, 2014). Unfortunately, there was extremely low discussion in my PLC. As I read through your electronic journal, most of the dialogue was from Shelley Moore herself and your school team. As well, you mentioned you received likes on Twitter, but not necessarily substantial contributions to shape practice or learning. This experience could display the benefits or drawbacks of the use of online PLCs. One such benefit that has been made clear through this task is the enhanced opportunity to reflect. Through the use of a dialectical journal, you reflected each day to enhance your professional learning. Blitz mentions, “the online environment is also consistently found to be better at promoting self-reflection on learning and instructional practices than is the face-to-face environment” (Blitz, 2014). Though, it is clear that there are limitations to online PLCs, and there are missing ingredients for effective PLCs. Trust would really contribute to the quality of this engagement. Watson clarifies, “The emphasis on trust, support and openness perhaps reflects the desire to

counter the traditional understanding of teaching as a strangely solitary activity, taking place behind closed doors (Watson, 2012, 21).

Ultimately, there are many curricular complexities within our community contexts. Your community was much more linked to that of curricular design and guiding educators in the development of unit planning and considering equity for learners. We could see this by the differentiated templates and inclusion of IEP goals. My community was much more based on instructional strategies and assessment. It was quite visible the YouCubed community was not one to support in designing units but more providing options to better engage learners, make learning relevant and distance us from the traditional learning environment of the past. It is obvious that both communities emphasize a student-centered design, but with a broad to narrow focus of planning. Additionally, we see your community as one that is welcoming, and the use of passing along of resources acquired from this PLC displays just that. And it appears to be quite well received. For my community, I appreciated the plethora of strategies provided, and the gentle nudge to begin more instructional leadership and guide fellow colleagues in the progression of reaching those “outside pins”. The use of social media appears to be a complexity that I have found not overly supportive. In both of our experiences, we did not receive anything of great substance from this realm. In fact, the most feedback I received in these forums was really the promotion for selling new resources. Nonetheless, I feel this was an interesting experience that truly shows how complex professional learning communities can be. Traditional communities may provide better opportunity for true educator engagement where trust is developed, practice is improved, and the feelings of satisfaction occur. Perhaps online

PLCs have improved flexibility and reflection, but I am not convinced the contributions are of better value than those provided in person experiences.

Thank you for such an engaging experience. I truly enjoyed reading about your experiences, learning more about Shelley Moore's blog, and comparing our communities.

References:

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