MAKING SPACE FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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AS INSTRUCTORS IN A GRADUATE PROGRAM FOR PRACTICING TEACHERS, WE are blessed to work with teachers at the height of their energy and creativity. Tentative at first, after a few days in the intensive face-to-face environment of a three-week summer residency, students are engaged in deep conversation about their identities as teachers, the effectiveness of their professional development experiences, the challenges of appropriate assessment, the many needs of their students, and the nature of effective leadership and effective schools.

If only this thoughtful ferment could be maintained once these graduate students have returned to the nitty gritty of their daily teaching lives! Lamented one of our students recently, "It is sad to spend a summer pumping up on deep thoughts and exciting ideas, only to arrive at school and find the most challenging dialogue focused on the supervision schedule." He is not alone in this sentiment; it has been echoed by many of his cohort peers.

School improvement and staff professional development is, it seems, ultimately about possibilities. Critical reflection, energized by dialogue, has brought about in our work a potential renaissance of place and self. Once possibilities are seen, it is difficult to dwell on dead-ends. These possibilities, nurtured by the conversations of teachers who share a community of memory, are the seeds of school leadership. Once they have been sown in the hearts and minds of inquiring teachers and administrators, these educators are hungry for more of what they need to grow, and driven to improve their schools and their own practices.

Our experiences with these students suggest that in collaborative professional development models, it is not enough to "focus on student learning".[1] Teachers need to have conversations about the meanings behind what they do. The opportunity to explore and sometimes to debate the philosophies behind our actions generates the sort of creativity and momentum that is critical to sustaining school improvement efforts. When we marginalize this process or foreclose on it entirely by focusing collaboration solely on technical work, our

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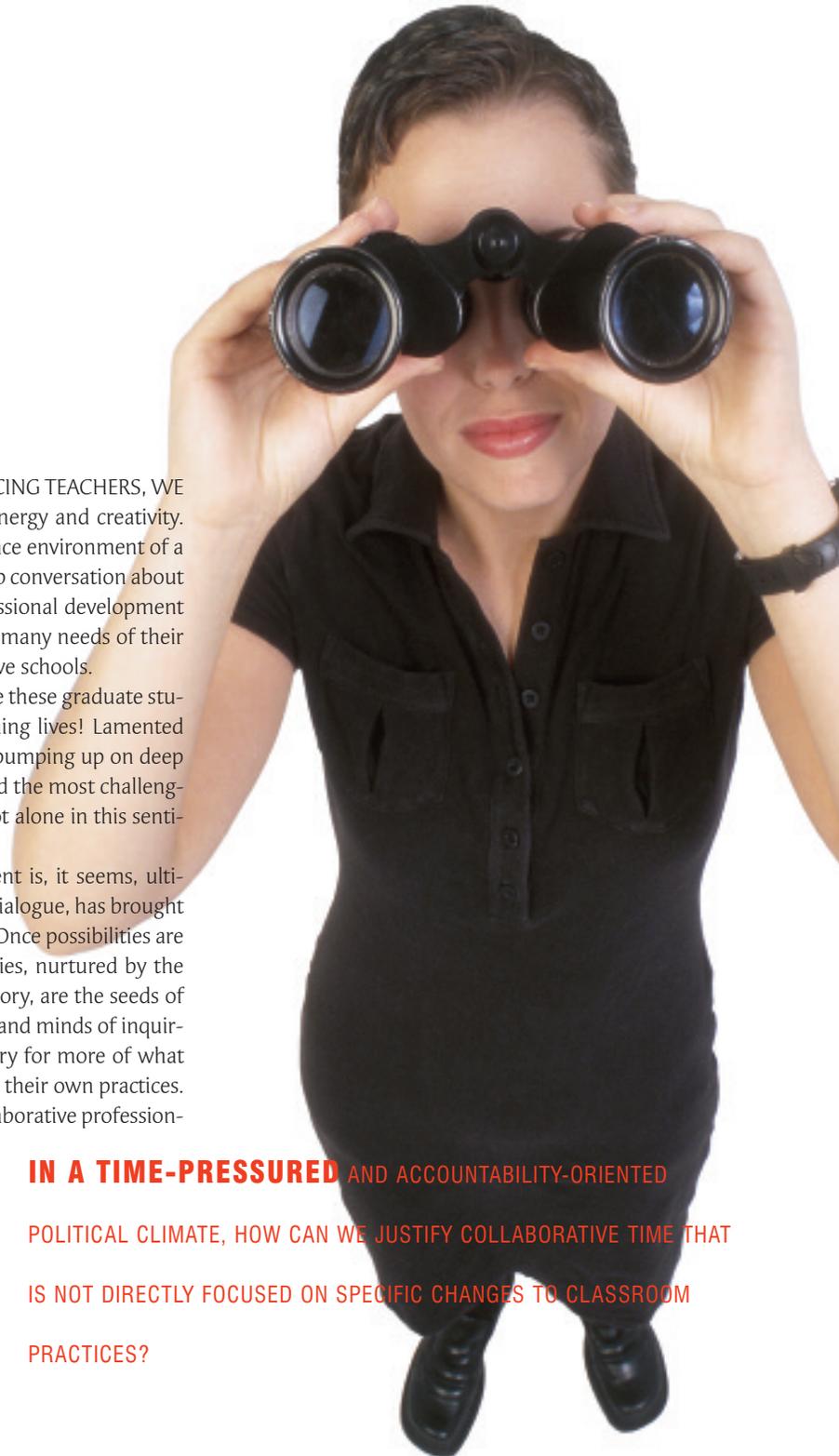
professional learning communities may be reduced to "performance training sects".[2]

Performance training might include collaborative development of teaching resources, standardization of assessment criteria within a school or district, curriculum mapping, or pedagogical coaching. These are all valuable activities to improve teaching within our present understanding of schools, but they offer few opportunities to tackle foundational questions that must be addressed for lasting school change – the sorts of questions our students wrestled with during their residency. It is one thing to work together to improve teaching strategies for later literacy; it is another to ask hard questions about why our strategies to date cannot help Aboriginal students to succeed. It is one thing to map core curriculum, but another to draw attention to the null curriculum, for example by considering the marginalization of fine arts and the impact this has on students' perceptions of school and learning.

There is no shortage of challenging questions to ask in public education, many of which should be drawing our attention to systemic issues – issues that are not resolved by better teaching alone. How can we use inquiry learning with a heavily mandated curriculum? How can we help a diverse, multicultural student population when we can't bridge language and cultural barriers to engage their parents? How do we manage special needs students without adequate resources? Are we doing enough to teach and model citizenship?

It seems that these foundational questions have few clear or simple answers. That is what makes them so difficult. It is why precious collaborative time spent on foundational questions can come off as wasteful and unproductive. Thus there is counter-intuitiveness to making space for critical reflection. In a time-pressured and accountability-oriented political climate, how can we justify collaborative time that is not directly focused on specific changes to classroom practices? Administrators and their staff are under enormous pressure to produce "results," so the obvious temptation is to use PLCs for the sorts of technical task work that fall under Hargreave's rubric of "performance training."

Besides, what is wrong with technical work? It focuses directly on improved teaching. In theory, improvements are researched, and "data driven decision making" has a reassuring air about it. We can allow teachers to collaborate so long as we know they are spending their time on "stuff that works," or has a positive and discernable impact on student learning. No frittering time away on how to fund the volleyball tournament, or on swapping fun resources for students that lack pedagogical value. The idea is that teachers consciously employ inquiry or action research skills to focus their practices on the sorts of skills and activities that research tells us helps students to learn. This is a notion well-supported, both by common sense and by school improvement literature.[3]

PLCS: WHAT'S MISSING?

To focus on research-supported teaching practices is so sensible, so compelling in fact, that we might wonder why the professional learning community model is so difficult to implement. Yet it is. Establishing a sustainable culture of collaboration is proving to be tricky business indeed, char-

EN BREF À l'ère de la transparence, nous sommes parfois tentés d'utiliser des mécanismes de collaboration qui portent strictement notre attention sur des objectifs ayant un impact immédiat sur les pratiques en classe. Cependant, si nous ne prenons pas le temps de réfléchir au pourquoi de nos actions, il est très peu probable qu'une véritable culture de collaboration puisse émerger. Le dialogue sur des questions parfois difficiles – une difficulté récurrente en éducation - motive les enseignants à imaginer l'ampleur du possible et à innover avec leurs élèves et leurs collègues. Maintenir notre détermination pour le changement ne peut se faire qu'en conservant l'espoir et un sentiment d'urgence dans notre travail quotidien. C'est à travers des occasions de participer à des dialogues intelligents qui incitent à la réflexion et à la mise en commun de convictions personnelles diverses mais bien intentionnées sur la nature même de l'enseignement que nous pourrons y arriver.

acterized by fitful micropolitics,[4] the "balkanization" of the school into departments and smaller interest groups[5] and climates of fundamental mistrust.[6] These challenges suggest that collaboration involves far more than the systematic implementation of improved teaching skills and strategies. Were it this straightforward, we could anticipate that best practices and the imperative to use them would be sufficient incentive to get everyone "on board" the same school improvement train.

However, the problem rests not with the basic rationale for collaborative work, but with our inattention to the assumptions that underlie the collaborative process itself. First, there is the belief that the banner of "improved student learning" is one under which we can – and should – rally the troops. While student learning is obviously an essential or core task of teaching, it is also easily reduced to sloganeering – oversimplified representations of the complex and competing interests that make schools very human (and very unpredictable) places within which to work and learn. We are taking a leap of faith when we assume that the motives behind what we do are always of the pure-of-heart-the-kids-come-first variety. This ideal will always be compromised, at least to some extent, by competing interests, scarce resources, and pragmatism.

Also, we make a large and erroneous assumption when we expect that, when we talk about "improved student learning," we are all talking about the same thing. In practice, we don't always stand in agreement about what students should learn, or how they should learn it. Turning to the written curriculum provides only limited guidance; value judgments quickly come into play when we begin to apply it, and can become a source of disagreement and tension among collaborators.

Further, it seems at times assumed, despite the theoretical alignment of the professional learning community model with "teacher leadership" or "distributed leadership," that the work of overcoming resistance to change still rests with the forceful-yet-sensitive, no-nonsense leadership of an administrator. Here, when "problem individuals" become

the responsibility of policing principals instead of the collaborative group, a scapegoating dynamic emerges, wherein dissent and tension – necessary for personal and professional growth – are displaced. This strategy causes us to look at individual resistors as the problem instead of examining the school's culture and politics more holistically. It deflects the responsibility of developing authentic discourse away from its proper place within the collaborative setting.

Finally, the instrumental focus of professional learning communities means that school outsiders – government policy makers, corporate interests, and educational publishers – are still calling most of the shots about what students will learn and what teachers will teach. The inquiry focus of the PLC thus has some rather pronounced delimitations, which can be sources of frustration and disempowerment for the very teachers who are most committed to school improvement. Teachers are not insensitive to the discontinuity of being asked to critically inquire about their practices and at the same time wilfully ignore the contextual issues that shape and in some cases restrict the scope of that inquiry.

RATHER THAN FOCUSING ALL INITIAL EFFORTS ON PINNING DOWN A MISSION STATEMENT, WE NEED TO ALLOW TEACHERS' SENSE OF PURPOSE TO EVOLVE FROM THEIR COLLABORATIVE WORK.

In sum, these problems suggest that a focus on the technical work of teaching causes us to ignore important subtexts of the professional learning community, which in turn lessens the likelihood of achieving the sort of empowered collaborative culture that is promised in "transformative" school change literature. This observation may shed some light on the causes of – and some potential solutions to – the problem of PLC sustainability. Enduring changes cannot be expected to emerge from the sorts of "performance training" that occupy most PLC work to date. An authentic culture of collaboration, bound by commitment to core values and principles of the sort advocated by school improvement gurus, can only come out of our engagement with difficult questions, and the work of dialogue required to come to some consensus on the purposes of our work in schools, and the scope of our inquiries.

BUILDING COMMITMENT AND VISION OVER TIME

The popular Professional Learning Community model presented by Rick Dufour and Roger Eaker acknowledges that the establishment of a sustainable culture of collaboration is a complex undertaking.[7] However, the linear representation of the model may unwittingly lead practitioners to view the PLC "building" as a stepwise process. The first "step" advocated is the clarification of a school's vision, mission, values and goals. Presumably, once staff members have come to consensus on these foundations, the collaborative work can begin.

What the Dufour & Eaker model fails to capture is just how iterative or "back and forth" the process really is. There is no straight line from setting goals to acting on them to achieving them. Rather, technical work toward improved practice – if teachers take the time to reflect on it – should

be fodder for continuing conversation about the beliefs and values that have guided past actions and will motivate future ones. Rather than focusing all initial efforts on pinning down a mission statement, we need to allow teachers' sense of purpose to evolve from their collaborative work.

To do so, we ought, perhaps, to recover and more readily use the concept of teaching *praxis* in place of teaching *practice* when we discuss professional learning communities. Praxis, conceptually popularized by Brazilian critical educator Paulo Freire, stresses that critical reflection and action should inform each other. But Freire, it must be remembered, was a critical pedagogist – he saw the literacy he sought for poor Brazilian peasants not only as comprehension of the written word, but as comprehension of systemic conditions that privileged some, and marginalized many.[8] Cultural and political literacy were tapped along with "literacy" in its traditional sense. Freire made no real separation between learning and political empowerment, and unabashedly set out to change lives.

We may at times use "praxis" synonymously with "reflective practice," yet have largely lost the context of Freire's proposition: that both learning and action are informed by an urgency to uplift others, and a larger sense of purpose to right injustices. This purpose comes to us only when we reflect critically on the world around us, and determine what needs to be changed. This process resonates well with our knowledge that professional collaboration requires, to recall Dufour's language, "mission, vision and values" that are shared by all collaborative participants.

However, too often, we lose this wider sense of purpose, caught up as we are in practical, daily realities. Critical reflection comes to be equated with the analysis of teaching strategies – a misconception that is strengthened by the emphasis on "data-driven decision making." We become skilled at assessing the effectiveness of the school experiences we shape, and fail to discern the worth or value of what it is that we are effectively implementing! The latter is the work of critical inquiry, and it is a meta-dialogue of sorts. It requires that we set aside the instrumental "task" work of the collaborative group, and collectively evaluate the premises and beliefs that underlie it.

Thus the work of a professional learning community is not a linear process of determining mission, vision and values and then proceeding with the "how to" of implementation; rather, these two modes of work – action and reflection, praxis in the Freirian sense – are intertwined and continuously inform each other. Hasty and formalized first efforts to procure mission, vision and values from staff in the interests of getting on to the "real business" of the collaborative work can come off as insincere and inauthentic, and it is entirely possible to come up with a mission statement on paper that has no personal resonance for anyone. Instead, we can allow a school's sense of purpose to evolve through informal and ongoing dialogue

CONCLUSION

I cannot say that we teach the graduate students in our Masters of Educational Studies program how to be better at their daily work. We do not offer strategies and best practices that are supported by research. We do not tell experienced teachers how to teach. We do not provide answers, but we do ask questions. Provocatively, it is this

open-ended dialogue without easy answers that seems to inspire teachers to seek out and create answers for themselves. There is no contemporary genius to this; Socrates understood that there was little learning in telling, and knew the power of dialogue to cultivate not only knowledge, but also wisdom.

In our present era of accountability, there is a real and justifiable temptation to use collaboration to focus strictly upon instrumental goals that have an immediate impact on classroom practices. However, without some time and reflection devoted to why we do what we do, a sustainable culture of collaboration is unlikely to emerge. In our experiences with our students, it was dialogue about the tough questions – the perennial problems of education – that sent so many of our own students roaring back into their schools, imagining the possible, and ready to innovate with their students and colleagues. Sustaining change momentum, it seems, has much to do with keeping both hope and urgency alive in our work. To do so may require only the simple opportunity to connect, through open-ended reflective dialogue, with our own diverse but generally well-intentioned beliefs and understandings about what it means to educate students. ▌

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Notes

1   R. Dufour and R. Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (Bloomington: National Education Service,1998).

2   Andrew Hargreaves, *Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity* (New York: Teachers College Press. 2003).

3   Dufour & Eaker; B. Joyce and B. Showers, *Student Achievement Through Staff Development*, 3rd ed. (Alexandria VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004).

4   B. Achinstein,"Conflict Amid Community: The Micropolitics of Teacher Collaboration," *Teachers College Record 104*, no.3 (2002), 421-455; E. Rusch, "Institutional Barriers to Organizational Learning in School Systems: The Power of Silence," *Educational Administration Quarterly 41*, no. 1 (2005), 83-120.

   Micropolitics refers to the "small-p politics" that shape power relationships in micro-environments, here the culture or environment of the school or jurisdiction. An example might be the competing interests of a principal and vice-principal, each of whom has supporters on staff who become pawns in a power struggle. See Achinstein for a more detailed description and analysis.

5   Michael Fullan and Andrew Hargreaves, *What's Worth Fighting For in Your School?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).

6   M. Bottery, "The Leadership of Learning Communities in a Culture of Unhappiness," *School Leadership & Management 23*, no. 2 (2003), 187–207.

7   Dufour and Eaker (1998).

8   Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000).

9   S. Imel, "Change: Connections to Adult Learning and Education" *ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career & Vocational Education. ED446252*, 2001. Retrieved January 23, 2006 from ERIC database.

10 Achinstein; J. Little, "The Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers' Professional Relations," *Teachers College Record 91*, no. 4 (1990), 509-538.

DEEPENING CRITICAL INQUIRY IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: SOME PRINCIPLES

In a high-stakes accountability climate, it is understandable that PLC efforts be directed to tangible improvements in curriculum and pedagogy. However, without making time alongside these efforts for more critical and philosophical lines of inquiry, teachers may fail to gel around a deeply felt sense of purpose in their collaborative efforts. The following strategies may help a professional learning community to share the sort of dialogue from which Dufour's "mission, vision and values" can emerge as the authentic will of the community.

Provide time for critical reflection, even where it doesn't appear to be immediately "productive."

Transformative learning theory suggests to us that we underestimate the importance of "idle" time. Changes in the belief systems that underlie practice require periods of ferment and reflection, which may on the surface appear as periods of inactivity.[9]

Ask some questions to which there are no easy answers.

The purpose of such questioning is not to find immediate answers, but to encourage the sorts of dialogue that clarify our core beliefs, and challenge contradictions – both in our own thinking, and in the diverse perspectives of the group. In addition to work focused on classroom practices, choose some provocative study readings that encourage more holistic thinking about the ultimate goals of education. Anti-racist education, school choice, curriculum critique, policy analysis, and international (comparative) education are all thought-provoking topics that can engage teachers in critical thinking. Case study formats with questions for discussion are ideal.

Giving teachers ownership of their collaborative time.

Excessive efforts to hold teachers accountable for their collaborative time can be demotivating, and can cause PLC work to focus on short-term, instrumental goals alone. In a low-trust school climate where administrators or department heads are perceived to be unsupportive, mandating the work of a PLC or implementing overly complex and detailed "reporting out" procedures will only exacerbate tensions. Negotiate timelines and guidelines to keep PLC work on track, but leave control with the teachers.

View school's vision/mission as an evolutionary process; don't try to "make it so" before the collaborative work begins.

A school's core values and culture are a work in progress, and much evolves through the collaborative work itself. Early and highly structured attempts to articulate a mission – before teachers see the value and are committed to the process – can backfire. Instead, create regular spaces in collaborative settings to revisit a collective sense of purpose and identity.

Conflict is inevitable and healthy. Anticipate it, and build skills to work through it.

Many authors have proposed that collaboration based on surface agreements and a fear of conflict generate neither the depth of learning nor the depth of commitment required for a sustainable learning community.[10] Devote some of your professional development resources to developing teamwork/collaboration/process skills. These skills can help colleagues to challenge one another's thinking in constructive and respectful ways, thus furthering individual and group learning.