Critical and Transformative Practices in Professional Learning Communities

By Laura Servage

The concept of a professional learning community, perhaps most ubiquitously understood at present within the framework proposed by Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker (1998), has captured the collective imagination of North American educators with its promise of fundamentally altering teaching, learning, and the bureaucracy and individualism that pervade so many schools. In Alberta, many current school improvement projects receiving envelope funding from the provincial government through the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) outline long-term plans to develop professional learning communities in individual schools and/or across districts. Sergiovanni (2000) represents the agreement that strong and purposeful community is critical to school effectiveness when he states, "developing a community of practice may be the single most important way to improve a school" (p. 139).

What Is A Professional Learning Community?

Laura Servage is program coordinator of the M.Ed. in Educational Studies Program with the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

The professional learning community (PLC) is one model within a constellation of models and theories characterized by a number of core beliefs: (1) that staff professional development is critical to improved student learning; (2) that this professional development is most effective when it is collaborative and collegial; and (3) that this collaborative work should involve inquiry and problem solving in authentic contexts of daily teaching practices. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) offer this definition: "[T]eachers

work collaboratively to reflect on practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes" (p. 4). While I focus on the professional learning community specifically for the purposes of this work, the PLC should be understood as an exemplar that also could be more broadly applied to many collaborative professional development models with similar characteristics and defining beliefs.

Typically, the professional learning community brings teachers together on a regular basis to engage in collaborative planning, curriculum study, and learning assessment. However, the PLC is more than group work. The language of professional learning community literature promotes two ideals: democratic schools, and schools as *Geimenschaft* or relationally-bound communities. The democratic ideal is promoted by frequent references to distributed leadership (Lambert, 2003; Zmuda Kuklis & Klein 2004), shared decision making (Gordon, 2004; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006), and an emphasis on dialogue (Dufour & Eaker 1998; Zmuda, Kuklis & Klein, 2004).

Collaborative teacher learning calls participants to develop a strong sense of community, the glue of which is collective responsibility for student learning (Harris & Muijs, 2005). Participants explicate and act on shared norms and values: what Dufour and Eaker (1998) call "vision" and "mission". Lambert (2003) also refers to a shared mission, a "collective responsibility for the school" (p. 3), and Zmuda, Kuklis, and Klein (2004) describe a "collective autonomy and accountability to meet even higher expectations for the school as a competent system" (p. 181). However, a shared purpose is only a partial definition of community. Lambert includes "mutual regard and caring" (p. 4) in her conception of collaboration. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) believe that interest in schools as communities is only one aspect of widespread attempts to relieve alienation: "[P]eople are engaged in a search for place…companionship…identity and belonging" (p. 3). In her extensive review of school improvement literature, Beck (1999) notes that community in schools is frequently equated with the intimacy of a family or a small village. The PLC model is thus called upon both to benefit collective work and shared responsibility, yet also, in powerful ways, to meet relationship needs.

Transformation or Reformation?

Popular professional literature about collaborative models embodies hope for profound and positive change to emerge from shared professional learning: Dufour and Eaker (1998) claim that, properly implemented, the professional learning community represents a "transformation" from factory-model schools to schools that "embrace ideas and assumptions that are radically different than those that have guided schools in the past" (p. 20). In their ASCD publication "Transforming Schools," Zmuda, Kuklis, and Klein (2003) call for "significant shifts" in the culture and thinking of schools (p. 1). The hoped for result of collaborative efforts is a staff "sharing their work and critically examining practice with others as trusted

members of the school community and always against the standards of excellence defined by the shared vision" (p. 179). Sullivan and Glanz (2006) propose that learning communities can build distributed leadership: "[I]ndividual strengths of all educators are identified, valued and nurtured" (p. 46). Shared leadership is also central to Lambert (2003), who states, "When we learn together as a community toward a shared purpose, we are creating an environment in which we feel congruence and worth" (p. 4).

The works cited here are essentially field guides to implementing professional learning communities. They share a strong hope that teachers' collaborative work can significantly change or even "transform" schools. Yet, what schools are to be transformed *into* is not really articulated beyond the idea that whatever happens in a PLC should further student learning. The content and purpose of learning and achieving receive little emphasis.

My intent, in reviewing the above-mentioned works, was to question the sort of changes the professional learning community model can hope to create. Specifically, I was captured by the powerful and positive affect of the word *transformation*. Although reformation and transformation are by definition synonymous, the latter term connotes profound or radical change. *Re-form* implies that we re-shape a lump of clay into something that looks different. It assumes the essential nature of what we are working with is redeemable (O'Sullivan, 1999). Transformation, in contrast, evokes images of transforming the clay itself into something else. It is a case of form vs. substance—school change understood as something that alters appearances and functions, versus school change understood as a fundamental shift in what schools *are*. It seems to me that, when we speak of school reform, we are often unclear about whether the changes we seek are of the sort that re-shape what already is, or the sort that are truly *transformative*, creating an entirely new means of public education. Thus I wonder what sort of change can be advanced with the professional learning community model: reformation or transformation?

Critical Reflection for Transformation

It is my contention that, presently, professional learning communities focus their efforts on the means of teaching and not its ends. In our present achievement- and accountability-oriented political climate, the *learning* in a professional learning community is understood, for the most part, as best practices or a body of pedagogical, technical expertise that in theory will guarantee positive academic outcomes for students. Studying best practices has value and utility as a form of teacher learning, but it is an incomplete representation of collaborative processes. It is not *transformative*. While improved pedagogical skills doubtless have positive impact, an exclusive focus on these skills does not promote the critical reflection required to understand PLCs—and schools—as complex social and political entities. And, I believe that transformation can occur only if the school is able collectively to imagine other possibilities for itself.

To propose an alternative, I would like to look more closely at the potential for transformative learning theory and critical pedagogy to build committed, thinking professional learning communities able to reflect critically upon both their own actions and the social and policy contexts within which these actions are framed. The cited literature for developing professional learning communities calls for "critical reflection," but this tends to be an apolitical reflection that focuses on beliefs and practices specific to the immediate daily work of teaching. I concur with Brookfield (2003) that it is not enough to think of critical reflection only in terms of teaching practices.

If concepts like community and democracy are to be as fully embraced as the PLC literature implies, critical reflection must extend to consider the conditions that prevent these ideals from being realized. Surely a focus on teaching for academic success is not enough to overcome problems of societies deeply divided by class, race, gender, and gross disparities in wealth and social capital. Thus we must turn to critical reflection in the sense that it used by critical pedagogists. Schools can be sites where we uncover and challenge beliefs and practices that undermine democracy and perpetuate social injustices. While critical pedagogy has many trajectories, these are "all in one way or another committed to the imperative of transforming the social order in the interest of justice, equality, democracy and human freedom" (Biesta, 1998, p. 499). Central to critical pedagogy is the idea that schools can be places where, through dialogue, we are enlightened of the conditions that rob some members of society of their freedom, dignity, and hope (Biesta, 1998; Brookfield, 2003).

Transformative Learning Theory

Brookfield believes that, for critical pedagogy to have an impact, transformative learning is required. Unlike learning that simply builds skill or knowledge, transformative learning causes an individual to "come to a new understanding of something that causes a fundamental reordering of the paradigmatic assumptions she holds and leads her to live in a fundamentally different way….[T]ransformative learning and education entail a fundamental reordering of social relations and practices" (Brookfield, 2003, p. 142). This fundamental shift in one's world view or "meaning perspective" (Mezirow, 1995) emerges from intense critical reflection that challenges previously held beliefs and assumptions. Transformative change may result from dramatic and sudden insight, or may be the product of a long process of thought and self-scrutiny (Cranton, 2002). Although transformative learning involves profound personal change, explicit to the theory is that such change emerges from dialectic engagement among a group of learners with diverse perspectives (Mezirow, 1995).

I believe that transformative learning theory has been underutilized in school reform discourse. When school improvement literature speaks of transformation, it

is usually as a transformation of the school or the school culture, not transformation of the individual. Yet school improvement literature also defines teachers' learning as a lynchpin of any potential progress (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Guskey, 2000; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). It makes sense, then, to consider the extent to which teachers themselves must undergo transformation if substantive and sustainable change will occur.

The value of considering this question is twofold. First, it is a means to help us more fully consider the possibilities and limits of the change we can expect to result from collaborative learning. Second, it helps us understand why the establishment of a professional learning community is more challenging than first meets the eye. To explore these issues, I briefly outline the processes and dimensions of transformative learning theory. I then apply this theory to the work of professional learning communities, looking specifically at the impact of individual transformative learning on the success of collaborative endeavours and the capacity of transformative learning to develop teachers as critical pedagogists.

Transformative Learning: Background

It is not possible within the scope of this work to provide a full account of transformative learning theory, although a brief overview may help distinguish what transformative learning is from what it is not. In a school improvement climate where vague references to "transformative leadership" and "transformed school culture" are common, Mezirow's transformative learning framework is a useful way to organize and delimit our expectations of the individual learning that takes place in professional learning communities and how individual learning might impact school improvement.

Brookfield (2000) argues that the concept of transformative learning has been subject to widespread misuse and should be understood as Mezirow's original theory of adult learning intended it: a deep and profound altering of one's world view, an "epiphanic or apocalyptic cognitive event" (p. 139). Discourse, or "dialogue involving the assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59) is also a core tenet of transformative learning theory, meaning that a social context for learning is inherent. Learners are not transformed in isolation; as Brookfield (1995) observes, the most critical and self-aware among us still have blind spots and require observations, insights, and challenges from others to identify them.

The dynamics of these exchanges are, however, complex, and the social context of transformative learning can be viewed from a number of perspectives. Mezirow's own emphasis stresses the importance of *reason and rationality*. Here, group members serve as a sounding board for one another's propositions and coach one another toward authentic, reasoned, and persuasive discourse. For Mezirow, the cultivation of sound reasoning and democratic participation skills is essential, both for an individual's personal growth and learning and for his or her contributions to social transformation (1995).

Transformative learning is more than a rational undertaking, however. Learning also has intuitive, nonrational, creative, and even spiritual dimensions that play significant roles in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of our fundamental worldview (Grabove, 1997; Taylor, 1998), or what Mezirow terms our "meaning perspectives" (1995). Adult educator Dorothy Mackeracher (2004) claims that we have a tremendous investment in our representation of ourselves to ourselves, in the worldview we construct for ourselves, and the beliefs that we hold about our places in it. Not infrequently, challenges to our deeply-held beliefs represent a threat to our integrity that can be met with hostility, denial, or distress.

Transformative learning theory proposes that this distress can serve as a catalyst for significant personal and professional growth. Ideally, this growth is supported by critical friends in a psychologically safe group setting. However, it is also important to recognize and anticipate the potential negative outcomes for those who simply do not want their fundamental beliefs to be challenged. In turn, these individuals can create distress and antagonism in the learning group. Conversely, it is unlikely that individual transformation can be realized in a dysfunctional social setting. For better or worse, the affective states of individuals and the climate of the group as a whole are mutually influential.

A more contested aspect of transformative learning is the extent to which it critically engages the social world. Transformative learning theory has been faulted, especially by critical theorists, for overemphasizing self-development and underemphasizing action for social change (Brookfield, 2000; Inglis, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). At its worst, transformative learning can be perceived as self-indulgent "navel gazing" that offers little in the way of improving the world. Mezirow, however, argues that social transformation depends upon and is largely preceded by individual transformation (1995).

For Mezirow, transformative learning theory should focus on the individual, much in keeping with his own unapologetic belief that adult learning should render learners increasingly capable of autonomous, rational, and rigorously self-scrutinized thinking (Mezirow, 2000). This perspective has been challenged and enriched, however, by scholars who emphasize the social and affective dynamics of transformative learning, including the role of the transformative adult educator, the characteristics and behaviours of learning groups, and the impact of broader social and political considerations (Clark & Wilson, 1991). As a result, we can conceptualize transformative learning systemically and holistically, examining both the individual psychology of transformation and its dialectical relationship with the larger learning context.

Transformative Learning
in Professional Learning Communities

This brief foray into transformative learning theory suggests that its tenets have

much in common with the characteristics of the professional learning community as idealized in school improvement literature. Both emphasize critical reflection, dialogue in group settings, and transformative change. We should also appreciate that the general idea of transformation, both of the individual teacher-learner and the larger school environment, resonates with the professional learning community model but has been under-conceptualized.

Thus, transformative learning theory can enhance our understanding of PLCs in significant ways. One is the discernment of the learning we are actually doing in collaboration. The problem with professional learning communities is that they largely focus on instrumental learning, yet anticipate—if a fundamental change in school culture is truly desired—the transformative impact of communicative learning. This is not unlike hoping one's cat will produce a litter of puppies. Transformative learning theory can help us shift emphasis away from collaborative teacher learning as merely a social setting for the mastery of technical skills, to a communicative framework more appropriate for exploiting any transformative potential present in a professional learning community model.

Mezirow's (2003) application of Habermas' (1981) tripartite representation of human communication is helpful here, for he makes a clear distinction between instrumental learning focused on goal-oriented behaviour and communicative learning that stresses understanding:

> Instrumental learning involves…controlling or manipulating the environment or other people. It involves predictions about observable events which can be proven correct, determining cause-effect relationships, and task-oriented problem solving….Communicative learning….involves understanding values, ideals, feelings, and normative concepts about freedom, autonomy, love, justice, goodness, responsibility, wisdom, and beauty." (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59)

Most of the PLC activity I am familiar with through my engagement with Alberta's AISI school improvement projects, involves curriculum study, collaborative development of lessons and assessment tools, analysis of student achievement data, and the implementation and assessment of new teaching strategies. These are not bad or wasteful activities. In fact, AISI reports suggest that these tasks had positive impacts on students and teachers alike (Taylor, Servage, McRae, & Parsons, 2006). But the focus is, by Mezirow's definition, clearly instrumental, keeping teachers locked into a hypothetical-deductive mindset, and focused on relatively short-term goals. Bottery (2003) questions the impact of collaborative activities that focus teachers on the means rather than the ends of their work. Further, there is no guarantee that changes in practice reflect teachers' understandings of the philosophies behind them (Thompson & Zeuli, 1999). It is fair to raise doubt about the sustainability of changes taking place, encouraging as some of them are.

In contrast, communicative learning, as Mezirow (1995) describes it, is an interpretive act that addresses the foundational questions we need to ask if our

task-oriented behaviour is to be guided by shared norms and values, which, by all accounts, are critical to the sustainability of a collaborative culture (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Gordon, 2004; Lambert, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Transformative learning for teachers requires that they be willing and able to critically explore, articulate, negotiate, and revise their beliefs about themselves, their students, their colleagues, and their schools. Only through this level of self-awareness can teachers, in turn, understand their colleagues' foundational perspectives and critically evaluate not only the content and processes of proposed practices, but also the philosophies that underlie them, and their potential long-term consequences. In this way, transformative learning theory locates systemic transformation in the transformed educational visions of individual practitioners. The collaborative setting serves as the context and catalyst for personal transformation.

To encourage communicative learning in teachers thus requires at least a partial change in the focus of collaborative time toward more open-ended dialogue. I fear such change, in a climate where accountability reigns, can not take place. So long as "data driven decision making" and "focus on student learning" are the exclusive concentration of collaborative work—and this concentration is almost entirely un-challenged in mainstream school improvement literature—we cannot expect much time or energy to be dedicated to the sort of critical reflection Mezirow advocates for transformative learning. This is an egregiously short-sighted and impoverished use of collaborative dynamics; it forecloses on possibilities for the technical aspects of teacher learning to serve as a foundation or complement to communicative dialogue. If Mezirow is correct that both instrumental and communicative forms of learning can be connected (2000), we need not forsake one for the other; yet, through fear, pragmatism, or a sheer lack of knowing any better, this is precisely what many do.

Transformative Learning as Personal Change: Dissent and Psychic Risk

A further door to understanding professional learning communities opened by transformative learning theory is its emphasis on the psychology of profound personal change. It is a gift to recognize that significant learning is "threatening, emotionally charged, and extremely difficult" (Mezirow, 1995). Such insight can liberate us from the strategic blindness and defensiveness that keep us, as organiza-tions and individuals, stuck in self-perpetuating, dysfunctional patterns that actively work against change (Argyris, 2004). For schools, it answers the question of why professional learning communities are so difficult to establish and maintain.

I remain fascinated by the gap between the eloquence of the professional learning community model on paper and its messiness in practice. I am fascinated by our seeming inability to anticipate and address this gap in our implementation efforts. Its critical manifestations appear to be the barriers created by dissent and

resistance. Leonard and Leonard (2005) conclude that, despite concerted collaborative efforts and voluminous school improvement literature attesting to PLC merits, the attainment of a full and sustainable culture of collaborative teaching and learning has experienced "limited success" and remains "at best difficult, at worst doubtful" (p. 25). In Alberta, AISI school improvement reports submitted to the province's Education ministry lament problems posed by lack of "buy in" on the part of resistant teachers and administrators (Taylor et al., 2006). The difficulty of bridging diverse and specialized interests, particularly in high schools, has been well documented (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1997). Achinstein (2002) addresses collaboration problems from a much underutilized micropolitical perspective, examining the ways power operates within and amongst groups to undermine consensus and collective action. Rusch (2005) illustrates the ways in which jealousy, competition, and politics in school districts undermines the "scaling up" of promising school improvements.

While the dearth of time and resources for collaboration should not be overlooked as barriers to change, it appears that the problems that stymie effective collaboration are, at least in part, the terribly human kind. Failure is the collective consequence of our individual weaknesses, our individual choices, our individual insecurities, our individual fear of change, and our individual quests for power. Yet we tend to reify and depersonalize resistance to change in school improvement literature, as if it were a force "out there" to be overcome by effective and persistent leadership. The error of this approach is its technical and systemic take on what is better understood as affective, personal, and less-than-gracious individual responses to the psychic risk posed by transformative change.

To appreciate the extent of this risk requires that we recognize teachers' collaboration for the radical proposition it is. Teaching, always characterized as a psychologically isolated and isolating activity, suddenly becomes not only a more public undertaking, but a publicly threatening one, as teachers are asked to lay bare their assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses before their colleagues. And the more that collaborative work tends toward the sort of communicative dialogue required for authenticity and sustainability, the more likely it is to generate challenges to teachers' identity integrity. Drawing from Argyris and Schoen (1978), Mitchell and Sackney (2000) emphasize practitioners' frequent misalignments of espoused theory and theory in practice. The inability to detect discord between espoused theory and actual practices represents a major barrier to effective communication about improved practices. It is also, as Mitchell and Sackney point out, a highly personal and traumatic process to have these inconsistencies brought to light. Argyris (2004) observes, "Asking human beings to alter their theory-in-use is asking them to question the foundation of their sense of competence and self-confidence" (p. 10).

It is no wonder, then, that the collaborative endeavour is threatening, and no surprise when it fails if the PLC is regarded as a dispassionate hypothetical-deductive task set. When attention is focused on technical work alone, we fail to address

the underlying social and emotional dimensions of learning and working in groups. Transformative learning theory attends to these dimensions because transformative pedagogy not only premises, but also proposes to work constructively with learners' vulnerabilities in the face of challenging ideas. Critical dialogue in a transformative setting uses dissent to help learners understand themselves and each other. Such practices confirm the belief that dissent is a healthy and necessary part of community building (Achinstein, 2002; Hargreaves, 2004); but transformative learning theory further explains how and why dissent is healthy, as well as cultivates the discourse skills required to use conflict and disagreement as tools for critical inquiry and reflection in group settings.

Interestingly, the facilitation of such learning has been an ongoing concern in the field of adult learning, as adult educators wrestle with the ethical implications of directing learners' disorienting dilemmas for educative purposes, the skills required to help groups engage in critically reflective discourse, and the limits of their agency to induce personal and social transformation (Knights, 1993; Taylor, 1998). The relative inattention to these matters in the equally complex environment of teachers' collaborative groups suggests that schools have rather naïve expectations that a harmonious collegial culture will emerge simply from an unsubstantiated notion that diverse perspectives can be corralled under the deceptively common sense moral imperative of a focus on student learning.

Transformative Learning for Systemic Change:
The Role of Critical Pedagogy

A perennial problem with transformative learning theory is its ambiguous relationship to critical theory (Taylor, 1998); or, to rephrase the problem as it was stated earlier, the relationship between individual transformation and social transformation. Although Mezirow has employed Freirian *conscientization* and expressed the belief that personal transformation should lead to social action (1995), he has been hesitant to state that social action is an essential outcome of transformative learning. Critics have asked, can we rightly call a change "transformative" if it does not manifest itself in tangible social action? If not, what is the proper place of critical pedagogy, or education for emancipation?

The education of the educator confounds this problem of praxis even further. In some cases, students may choose, as Mezirow (1995) suggests, the extent to which personal transformations lead to social action; but, for the educator, teaching itself is unavoidably a social act. The act of shaping educative experiences for others carries distinct powers and responsibilities that make it impossible to separate personally transformative learning experiences from their impacts on the social context and power dynamics of the classroom. It can be argued that, as educators, we do not have the luxury of stopping short at communicative learning for personal transformation. We are necessarily led to emancipatory learning that considers the

broader socio-political contexts and consequences of our actions. Critical pedagogy presses teachers to reclaim these dimensions of teaching and learning.

Collaboration and the Case for Critical Pedagogy

For the purposes of school change, the necessity of the emancipatory dimension of transformative learning poses the problem of determining to what extent the content of PLC discourse should examine the premises of schooling itself. When teachers dialogue about their meaning perspectives, how far should their insights venture into critical territory? If we are content to limit PLC work to improving what we already do in schools by improving pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, we can be content with the activities that most PLCs are engaged in today: a re-formation of the same clay or stuff of schools. We can recognize and accept limitations, and focus realistically on what is within our control, using the PLC model to bring together like-minded teachers who have a genuine interest in improving student learning by improving their teaching practices.

In my mind, however, this good work still leaves many questions unanswered and many problems unaddressed. Teachers can improve standardized exam results but cannot seem to educate the public about the narrowness of the learning represented therein. Teachers can streamline curriculum, but they cannot challenge its content or the stifling quantity of what is mandated. Teachers can improve and differentiate pedagogy to reach more diverse student populations but cannot ameliorate the effects of poverty and racism in their larger communities. In short, the perennial and systemic problems of education remain outside the scope of teachers' improvement efforts, whatever forms these take.

Such problems can seem overwhelming; thus there is always a temptation to reduce critique to condemnation. When one speaks of "being critical," it is generally equated with being negative, finding fault, or denunciating. In academic discourse, the critical theorist/pedagogist must avoid the slide into philosophical obscurantism, or worse yet the self-assumed role of knowing better than those who, lacking the wisdom revealed in the Marxist tradition, remain mired in their own false consciousness. Neither approach is likely to win the widespread support of practitioners. In the latter case, the act of critique merely replaces "bad" or unenlightened ideological content with "good," rendering pedagogy distinctly *un*critical, or inspiring earnest young teachers to ask their Grade Two students to reflect on European colonialism instead of coloring Thanksgiving turkeys (Ayers, Mitchie, & Rome, 2004).

Such practices are akin to doing needlework with power tools. Critical pedagogy, bound up as it is in critiques of liberal capitalism, can equate resistance with hegemonic warfare. It should instead be understood as a process of discovering our hidden assumptions, evaluating the worth of what we are doing now, and imagining possibilities for the future. Resistance is, in this sense, not an *ipso facto* condemnation of the status quo, but a tool we use to understand our position within our

larger social and political contexts. It is in this manner that I use the terms *critical pedagogy*, and *critical thinking* for this particular work, and more generally as a prerequisite or corequisite of transformative learning and transformative praxis. This is also, I believe, consistent with Mezirow's position on the role of critical reflection in transformative learning.

Mezirow and others also stress that such critical dialogue requires both time and psychologically safe space. These conditions have, to date, been relatively absent in teachers' continuing professional development. Here we may consider the potential of the professional learning community to serve as a means of transformative, critical pedagogy. Within the PLC model, this time and space is embedded and given some priority: a distinct—if fledgling—shift in the structure of the North America school day. And, while not all schools are characterized by warm and trusting collegiality required for authentic and transformative dialogue, the professional learning community model has provided a focus on its importance as a precondition to change.

Conclusion

Professional learning communities have been held up as powerful structures for teachers' continuing professional development. In this work, I have applied transformative learning theory to highlight the psychic risks of collaborative teacher learning, as well as the need for practical efforts to improve student learning—the means of education—to be complemented by critical pedagogy that permits teachers to actively consider the ends of their work as well.

Administrators, teacher leaders and professional development specialists can, I believe, enhance the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of a professional learning community by providing opportunities within its structure to for teachers to hold open-ended conversations oriented to communicative learning. Teachers should deliberately direct such conversations to foundational—rather than immediate—educational issues: Participants can share formative experiences as teachers or students that shaped their beliefs and values about schools; explore what it means to "learn" or to be "educated"; or consider the social, economic, and political characteristics of their local school communities. Short, provocative readings can be used to stimulate conversations about the impact of government policies on the work of schools; gain insights from comparative/international education; or explore the relationships between political ideologies and education.

The goal of such conversations is not to "find answers" or apply solutions in a technical manner, but to find questions—the sort of questions that, over time, may nudge the professional learning community closer to its potential role as a sight of transformative learning for participants. By building trust among PLC participants and encouraging critical reflection beyond the immediate day-to-day concerns of practice, pedagogy for transformative learning has the further value of getting at

the heart of the sorts of deeply held beliefs and values that, unaddressed, can plague PLC efforts with debilitating dissent, mistrust, and conflict.

It is my hope that this work will encourage professional learning community participants to look beyond the rhetoric of transformation that characterizes much of PLC "how to" literature, and very intentionally apply a transformative pedagogy to their collaborative learning efforts. Teachers need to use their collaborative time to engage one another in hopeful, critical, and creative dialogue. Herein may lay the seeds of public schools that are truly transformed.

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