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# Two Professional Learning Community Camps: Differing Opportunities

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*One of the newest ideas du jour is the idea of the Professional Learning Community (PLC). Since the late 1990s, schools across the Southwest and the Heartland have been embracing the concept of the PLC at a fever pitch. Marketing materials and more recently empirical reports are beginning to surface describing what this concept is and how effective it is. It is certainly a concept related to many others that have come before. However, the literature on the idea of the PLC shows it to be something new and never really truly holistically explained in the past. Two camps have arisen to explain this concept. One concentrates on the community aspect of the PLC and the other concentrates on the learning aspect. Opportunities are offered to educators to take ownership of their practice and to students in having their educational needs truly met based on data. Educational administrators seeking to implement or support such an effort on their campus should have an understanding of the literature differences of the two camps or they might implement something other than a PLC based on the literature.*

*Keywords: Hartsoch PLC Professional Learning Community*

There is some disagreement over what exactly constitutes a Professional Learning Community (PLC). There is general agreement about most of the broad characteristics or variables of a PLC but these minor disagreements blur the definition and cause educators some confusion when setting up PLCs on their campuses. Two schools emerge when one reads the literature on PLCs creating the proverbial apples and oranges. The first school centers on Shirley M. Hord (Hord, 1997) and consists of such persons as Delores B. Lindsey, Linda D. Jungwirth, Jarvis V.N.C. Pahl, Randall B. Lindsey (Lindsey, 2009), Jane B. Huffman (Huffman, 2003), Kristine K. Hipp (Hipp, 2003), and others. This school concentrates on the community part of the PLC and is more educator development focused. The second school centers on Richard DuFour (DuFour, 1998) and consists of such persons as his wife, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Michael Fullan, and others (DuFour, 2005). This school concentrates on the learning aspect of the PLC and is more student development focused. Most literature on the subject is written by cohorts from either one of these groups, few literary pieces will mix the two groups. Although others probably exist, the author of this paper has only been able to locate one source which quotes both schools of thought (Lindsey et al, 2009). A second theme emerging from a review of the literature suggest that as the two cohorts further studied and contemplated the PLC phenomenon, they made small changes to their respective definitions, furthering the divide between the two camps. In both cases, PLCs are opportunities for teachers to take ownership of their professional practice and for students to learn, each just has a different focus.

While the idea of a PLC may be older than the term Professional Learning Community, a brief search of available literature shows Shirley Hord et al as being at least one of the earliest writers describing this concept using the terms professional learning community. Other have been writing about similar concepts for some time (Miller, 1968), but Hord appears to be the first one to describe in the literature the term PLC. She describes PLCs as communities of continuous inquiry and practice. They are opportunities for educators to grow and learn as a community. (Hord et al, 1997). According to this source, PLCs have the following characteristics:

1. A leadership that supports a collegial relationship with and among the led.
2. A community with shared values and vision.
3. Learning that occurs collectively as a community.

4. Professional interactions that support the work being done.
5. A shared personal practice deliberately created by a formalized structure.

A PLC is a place where continuous learning occurs according to this source. Hord et al also makes it clear that a PLC is not a program or a prescription. A PLC is a process involving a community.

In a later work, Hord et al (1999) describe the PLC characteristics she used for the Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement (CCCII) project. For her CCCII project she has dropped the characteristics of a collegial relationship, professional interactions, and a formalized structure and added shared leadership, and an application of learning. In an even later source, she changes shared values and vision to shared beliefs, values, and vision (Hord et al , 2008). By adding the word belief, she has changed her description of PLCs to include the acceptance of the same truths by all or most teachers in a PLC. It is important to note the differences in these characteristics as these characteristics are potentially variables which would have to be considered in any study of PLCs or PLC implementation.

Another relatively early group of writers describes PLCs existing in educational settings as having three big ideas (DuFour et al, 2005). These ideas seem to offer the opportunities more to the learner. The first of these ideas is that educators in PLCs work to ensure that students learn and are not merely taught. In other words, the educator is constantly checking for understanding and adjusting the lesson as required ensuring the student gets it. DuFour et al diverge in their writing from the Hord et al definition in this first big idea. Hord et al does not mention the need for a PLC to ensure students learn but is hard to believe she would disagree with this. Hord et al simply concentrates more on teacher to teacher interaction than student to teacher interaction. Secondly, a PLC is a culture of collaboration. Teachers communicate, share ideas, and essentially synergize. The final "big idea" ties in the first, but at more of a macro level. This idea states that PLCs focus on results and relatively less on process. In other words, data drives instruction. Opportunities are still there for educators to take ownership of their practices, but the real opportunities are geared toward meeting student needs based on what data tells the educator. DuFour et al have also proposed lists similar to those proposed by Hord et al . Like Hord et al , the DuFour et al lists also use differing terms across time. DuFour's first list of PLC characteristics was published in 1998 (DuFour, 1998) as follows:

1. Shared mission, vision, and values.
2. Collective Inquiry.
3. Collaborative teams.
4. Action orientation and experimentation.
5. Continuous improvement.
6. Results orientation.

In 2008, the DuFour et al list changes as follows (DuFour, 2008):

1. Shared mission (purpose), vision, (clear direction), values (collective commitments), and goals (indicators, timelines, targets)- all focused on student learning
2. A collaborative culture with a focus on learning.
3. Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality.
4. Action orientation: Learning by doing.
5. A Commitment to continuous improvement.
6. Results orientation.

The second list adds more variables which would need to be implemented into a school before that school could be considered a fully-functioning PLC.

Either camp offers professional ownership opportunities to educators and learning opportunities to students. Nevertheless, administrators seeking to implement or support a PLC in their school are faced with two sets of training manuals, marketing materials, and other such items. If they use materials from both camps they are in fact creating a new hybrid form of the PLC which may or may not work as they have in fact changed the variables originally studied within the two PLC camps.

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I am descended from Dunkard Brethren who broke off the main congregation in the eastern U.S. and headed west to help settle the frontiers. Although my father and grandfather turned from the church as it disintegrated in the west and they were cut off from the east, many of those beliefs and ways live on in me. Family values are important. I am married to a wonderful woman and life partner, Lauri. We have three children in school: William, Hannah, and Kirsten. Education is important. I hold a Bachelor of Science in Political Science with a Minor in Information Systems Technology from The University of Houston, a Master of Education in the Gifted and Talented from The University of St. Thomas, and a Master of Business Administration from Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi. Finally, work is also important to my heritage. I started off working in the oil and petrochemical industries. A few years ago I changed careers to that of my Brethren Dunkard grandfather, education. Education had always been at least an avocation of Dunkards spread out on their isolated farmsteads across North America. I felt it as a calling. My philosophy is to teach where I am needed most. I take the assignments no one else wants. This has given me a broad experience base as a teacher as I have taught and am certified in multiple subjects including English, social studies, and business. Additionally, I hold a Texas administrator's certificate and a certificate in gifted and talented education. Mostly I work with at risk students as I get personal satisfaction in knowing that people are going on to better lives in small part to me. Currently I am in my last 12 hours of doctoral studies in educational leadership at the University of Houston. My goal is to go into administration of a high school campus with large numbers of at risk students, such as a DAEP or a School of Choice. I currently teach government at Windfern High School in Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District. Windfern High School is a school of choice which offers opportunity to parenting teens and over aged high school students. Helping such good folk is central to who I am.

