

Teacher professional growth: The power of online learning communities in PD

Stephanie Myers

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In a recent article in *Language Arts*, educational professional Richard Beach (2012) poses the question, “Can online learning communities foster professional development?” What first appears as a seemingly obvious question becomes more complex when examined through the lens of educational theory and emerging trends in autarchic professional practice.

Beach’s paper focuses on school-specific implementation of online professional development (PD) and the gains that can be made when PD involves both onsite and online professional learning communities (PLCs). Beach sees online PLCs as providing an arena where all teachers and administrators of a school can “engage in collective inquiry and/or action research to address questions related to improving student learning” (p. 256). For Beach the “online” component of learning communities is a necessity of teachers’ busy schedules. He emphasizes the use of online tools for school-wide collaboration such as: curriculum repositories, online discussion forums, and a common online space for storage and evaluation of students’ work. His idea of a “central learning commons” encourages an online space where school staff can “gather, build ideas, collect information and pursue questions together” (p. 258).

Beach’s model of an online learning community incorporates what have been identified as core features of effective PD: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation (Desimone, 2011). However, Beach’s view is limited in scope and fails to consider the value of online learning communities for isolated, rural, or smaller schools where access to online learning communities is essential for effective PD.

Melinda George’s (2011) article, “Online learning communities”, provides several examples of district and state initiatives that encourage teachers to take advantage of online PD options to enhance their knowledge, skills, and classroom practice. Teachers in many states are able to access online videos, discussion forums, and study groups to meet licensure requirements

and ensure professional growth. Teachers use synchronous and asynchronous technologies to connect with experts and other teachers on topics of personal interest and the needs of their individual students.

Rather than traditional models of PD that rely on experts transmitting information to teachers in one-time or short-term training sessions, new models of PD focus on personalizing and contextualizing the learning experience for the teacher and placing each teacher at the center of their PD, while providing on-going, active growth and reflection in an integrative learning community. Not only are these core attributes of effective PD but they are also the tenets of constructivism. There is no denying that we are in the midst of a significant paradigm shift (Beach, Desimone, and George), a shift that is a direct result of digital technologies and changes in the theories with which we approach learning.

It is through the constructivist framework that 21st century teachers are encouraged to promote personalized learning for their students. Teachers are to ensure their classrooms are student-centered, lessons situated in real-life context, and above all else must support collaborative, project-based learning opportunities whenever possible. If we as educators are encouraged to shift our pedagogy and our practice to align with the constructivist framework why then is our own PD influenced and guided by traditional or positivist principles and Behaviourist and Objectivist traditions?

Limiting teachers to PD with one-off sessions and face-to-face interactions with immediate colleagues is short-sighted and rings true to a scientific model that no longer fits students or teachers in the 21st century. While Beach falls short of identifying the overall value-potential of online learning communities, he does touch on one critical facet of online learning tools for teachers, and subsequently their students. In his argument for online PLCs Beach

mentions what I see as a significant benefit of teachers working collaboratively in online learning environments; he says that “as classrooms change and as students bring more digital capabilities and sensibilities to school, our PD mechanisms also need to change in ways that not only improve PD, but also enhance the use of digital tools in the classroom” (p. 256). George too sees the need for teachers to practice what they preach; of this she says, “Online courses expose educators to the same technologies that they must incorporate into their teaching” (p. 2).

So, to answer Beach’s question, yes, I absolutely believe online learning communities can foster PD and I also believe that our PD should be guided by principles that align with 21st century learning theory and constructivism. To do so would require the implementation of a self-direct PD model utilizing 2.0 tools to create, collaborate, and promote critical thought and reflection with colleagues from around the globe who can broaden our perspective, deepen our learning, and enhance our practice. Online learning communities make this possible for all teachers, regardless of school size or geographic location.

References

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