A PLG (Professional Learning Group): How to Stimulate Learners' Engagement in Problem-Solving

Alia Sheety, Frida Rundell

International Institute for Restorative Practices, Bethlehem, USA

This paper aims to describe, discuss and reflect the use of PLGs (professional learning groups) in higher education as a practice for enhancing student learning and team building. It will use theories supporting group-learning processes, explore optimal social contexts that enhance team collaboration, and reflect on the practice of PLG. The strength and weaknesses of the PLG practices will be shared.

Keywords: PLGs (professional learning groups), team building, collaborative learning, scaffolding, replication of practice

Introduction

Teaching practices that enhance learning are worthy of replication. Recent technology in higher education allows access to knowledge that has turned the teachers' role from an ownership of knowledge to a facilitator of processes that enhance learning. Learners are no longer passive receivers, but active and engaging participants (Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978; Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, & Miller, 1980; White, 2007). The social context becomes critical for learning to take place and different practices are recognized within the different teaching methods (Bandura, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). This paper presents PLG (professional learning group) as an example of learning in a social context. Action research and clinical supervision are two areas where the authors have implemented PLGs. The tool is flexible and maybe used in problem-solving settings where groups meet continuously over a period of time.

The basic assumption for the PLGs is that knowledge is transferred within the social context. When groups of learners in a social context allow critical feedback loops, the learners move from the known to the unknown using corrective emotional experiences. This process needs to be taught. The authors propose that a PLG is a practice that meets the feedback criteria for enhancing learning in a social context and nurtures corrective emotional responses.

The PLG practice is a social constructivist approach to learning. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning was an achievement not of independent effort, but of social collaboration. Barbara Myerhoff (1986; as cited in Freedman & Combs, 1996) advocated for calling it co-vision. Vygotsky (1978) conceptualized it as scaffolding conversations that were critical in understanding the learning. Wachtel and McCold (2000) spoke to it as doing things "with" people. Whatever name we wish to use for learning collaboratively is a matter of semantics. The important concept is that we are all social beings and primarily learn through our social

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Alia Sheety, Ph.D., assistant professor, The Graduate School, International Institute for Restorative Practices.
Frida Rundell, Ph.D., associate professor, The Graduate School, International Institute for Restorative Practices.

contexts.

Collaborative learning requires the learner to internalize the social environment. Jensen (2005, p. 55) stated that learning needs to be relevant, both active and reflective, to allow for processing time. "Getting enough good-quality feedback may be the single greatest variable for improving learning… feedback must be corrective and positive…". Jensen (2005, p. 44) further proposed that brain-based learning helped focus on critical thinking skills, strategic decision-making, learn-to-learn skills, cooperative alliance making and the strengthening of emotional intelligence.

PLG (Professional Learning Group)

PLGs underpin the sharing of knowledge, skills and experiences in a group setting (Wachtel & Rodger, 2000). All members in a PLG team, including the facilitator, are equal members sitting in a circle.

PLG in higher education build communities of students who contribute to the learning process of each other. It utilizes social context and scaffolding skills to enhance the learning process in problem solving.

PLGs Process

Each learner in the group gets a chance to present a problem or an issue to the group that is focused and takes no more than 20% of the time allocated for that specific learner. Clarification questions may be asked after the learner who has completed his/her request. It should not take more than 10% of the time.

The other learners provide feedback and suggestions as gifts (50% of the time allocated). During this time, the presenter of the problem may not respond. He/she should take notes of the ideas or ask someone to record them. The purpose is to create a safe environment for learners to bring up any ideas and suggestions without interruption or prejudice. This is the brainstorming stage of the PLG.

In the final stage, the presenter will choose and state to the group two of the ideas to follow up on, without identifying the person(s) who suggested them (20% of the time allocated).

This process is repeated again with the next learner, until all learners in the group have presented their issues and have feedback (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. PLG process.

The Examples of PLG Process

Dave's PLG session

Dave's question to the group: (2 minutes)

I am a juvenile probation officer working with youth and following up on them at schools. I want to enhance the processes. How could I engage teachers and others to support a restorative process within schools?

Clarification questions: (1 minute)
Whom do you work with when you visit a school?
Dave's answer: The school principal and counselors.

Group gifts: (10 minutes)
- I found involving parents helpful;
- Your idea sounds like a prevention strategy that teachers may be ready to try if they knew about it;
- When I want to influence a school setting, I look for a day when the majority of teachers and counselors are present;
- I prefer to work with one student at a time and allow the ripple effect to be the motivator;
- When I visit a school, I tend to meet with a number of students in the same school and allow teachers and counselor to sit in the process;
- What I do is set a fixed monthly day to visit a school, so teachers can attend;
- I check with the principal when I can meet with the staff and introduce how I work;
- What I find is I create relationships with teachers by remembering their names and spending time chatting with them. In that way, I get cooperation.

Dave's reflection: (2 minutes)
I think I would like to start with one student at a time, then ask the principal, if I could meet the teachers and sell the idea as a prevention strategy.

Sarah's PLG session

Sarah's question to the group: (2 minutes)
I am an intern counselor at my school. I have a client for eleven sessions using narrative therapy. During my second session, my client answered their cell phone. I felt awkward and did not know what to do. I left him to answer it and waited until he had finished. I would like help in dealing with this situation and how to avoid it in future sessions?

Clarification questions: (1 minute)
Did you set some norms at the beginning of your therapy with him? If so what were they?
Sarah: Yes, I did. It was about the policy of missing a session, how long the session is and confidentiality issues. But I never thought to mention cell phones.

Group gifts: (10 minutes)
- I found that I would ask at the norming stage for all cell phones to be set to silent;
- When I have missed out on something and realized it after the session has started, I address the issue at the beginning of the next therapy session;
- I have a discussion about the value of time that leads my client and I to come to some understanding and agree on a norm for future sessions;
- I have had that before and found that I asked the client to leave the room while he took the call. Then, he could return when his call was finished. It is his time and his money;
- This is always for me a wonderful opportunity to get to know how my client addresses conflict. I address it, as my problem and see how he/she views it after the discussion.

Sarah's reflection: (2 minutes)
I like the idea of revisiting our norms at the beginning of the next session. Then, come to decision with my client how to move forward in the future.

The Critical Components in a PLG

The critical components in a PLG are as follows:

(1) Each group needs to have a "time keeper";

(2) Time allocation for each stage depends on the class time available. Experience has shown that 15 minutes for each learner is the minimum time allocation needed, if this is to be effective. The time is divided as follows: two minutes to present the issue, one minute for clarification, 10 minutes for feedback from the group and two minutes for presenters' choice. This completes one round of the PLG process;

(3) A safe environment is created, because learners all have the same expectation of time allocation, consistency and predictability with regard to problem-solving opportunities. The group's unconditional regard explores and allows lateral thinking;

(4) The greater the number of ideas generated, the greater the chance to produce an effective solution.

Yalom (2005) advocated that group learning was a microcosm, allowing interpersonal relationships to develop through corrective emotional experiences. According to Brendtro and Larson (2006), the three brains specialize in three different tasks: survival, emotions and logic. Learners during a PLG utilize all three tasks: (1) Their survival needs are met by the inherent safety of the group; (2) Their emotional needs are nurtured through empathy and the gifts offered by other learners; and (3) The coherent questions asked and the reflective time spent listening enable the learner to develop sound decision-making processes using the logical brain. Communities that connect have the ability to share using all three parts of the brain. In doing so, the balance between the three brains (Survival, Limbic and Cortex) can be integrated without dissonance. When trust is developed, learners are willing to release rigid thinking patterns and emotionally experiment. This allows two important factors to emerge: neutrality and willingness to risk new and different information for the greater good of the group. The power in the collaborative learning process has its own synergy between the three brains (Hawkins, 2002). The idea of creating a professional community for learners allows for spontaneity and free expression within a structure—giving equal time to each learner's specific needs.

White (2007, p. 275) concluded after working with Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" that individuals could not traverse this zone "without the sort of conversational partnership that provides scaffolding support for people to proceed in manageable steps".

Scaffolding Process

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development challenges the learner to learn from others (White, 2007). Scaffolding of knowledge happens through significant adults and peers. It moves from the known to the unknown. This movement is known as the zone of proximal learning. Making this journey across the zone of proximal learning requires learners to move away and distance themselves from the immediacy of the experience and see it in small manageable portions. Peers and other professionals contribute distance for the individual, which helps to scaffold the zone of proximal development. This is done through questions and statements (see Table 1). It stretches the mind to exercise imagination, so that it can achieve the learning task required (White, 2007; Freedman & Combs, 1998).

Vygotsky spoke of a "progressive and incremental distancing from the known and familiar, and from the immediacy of one's experience that makes it possible for individuals to develop 'chains of association' that establish bonds and relations…" (White, 2007, p. 272). Mastering this requires self-regulation. Feuerstein (1980) spoke to this in his studies, involving mediated learning experiences that acculturate people from

different viewpoints.

Table 1

The Scaffolding Process in the PLG

Vygotsky's proximal zone of learning	PLG stage
Known and familiar experience shared and questions asked about it for clarification	Present the issue for your PLG, ask your question and answer clarification questions
Thoughts shared to establish comparisons and categorization will enable to draw differences and similarities	PLG group respond with ideas to the presenter's question (brain storming process)
Learner is encouraged to reflect and draw realizations	The learner listens and chooses ideas that are from the PLG brainstorming
Encourage the learner to formulate the new concepts and learning from the concrete examples	The learner puts into action the ideas chosen and reflects on the results before the next PLG
Initiating changes, working in harmony with new found information	Report back to the PLG the usefulness of the ideas and the changes that were needed

Specific learning tasks need to happen in order to facilitate the incremental and progressive movements across the proximal zone of learning:

(1) Low-level-distancing tasks—known and familiar experience shared and questions asked about it for clarification;

(2) Medium-level-distancing tasks—support provided for the immediate experience. Thoughts shared to establish comparisons and categorization and enable the person to draw differences and similarities to the event, known as a "chain of associations";

(3) Medium-high-leve-distancing tasks—encouraged to reflect, evaluate and draw realizations and learn from these chains of associations, based on the concrete and specific event/challenge;

(4) High-level-distancing tasks—encourage the person to formulate concepts about life and identity by abstracting the realizations and learning from the concrete example;

(5) Very-high-level-distancing tasks—encourage the development of proposals for living and working with life in harmony with their newly found information. Initiating changes become more feasible at this stage (White, 2007, p. 271).

Building a Collaborative Culture of Learning Through a PLG Practice

Latest developments in post-modern thinking provide some of the clues as to how to build interactive learning (White, 2007; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1998). Three elements are positioned for the learning process to be effective: the importance of an interpersonal relationship(s), the corrective emotional experience and a group that acts as a social microcosm (Yalom, 2005, p. 47). The PLG process honors these three elements.

The authors have replicated it in different courses, for different reasons, over the past three years in a graduate school, with promising results.

The Benefits of the PLG Process

The benefits of the PLG process are as follows:

(1) It enhances problem-solving skills;

(2) It builds relationship;

(3) It generates new ideas;

(4) It respects/honors different perspectives during the process;

(5) It promotes scaffolding that accommodates and assimilates different viewpoints;

(6) It implements it in different settings, like work, supervision, learning and families;

(7) It engages all voices and makes them equal;

(8) It creates a safe environment;

(9) It values feedback from the group members.

One of the statements used by learners to describe the effectiveness of the feedback is: "The group gifts help me organize my thoughts and then learn better how to accomplish the task".

Another learner stated that: "You get unexpected ideas, which allow you to bring collective knowledge to the set and to utilize human resources and skills".

The Limitations of the PLG Process

The limitations of the PLG process are as follows:

(1) Expert knowledge is not always available;

(2) It is necessary in the introductory phases for some teachers to control over the process of group work; It is advisable that when introducing the PLG process to new learners, a skilled facilitator be present;

(3) Frequent advice rather than questions or statements are forthcoming;

(4) Some communities get side tracked and do not confront the side trackers.

Conclusions

PLG is a learning process that involves building a community of learners and collaborative decision-making. The authors find that learners experienced a good-quality feedback that is immediate and constructive. This directs the future task.

The circle provides sharing in real time, replicating a microcosm of the social context. The regularity of circles ensures that trust is built up incrementally, thus, it allows all voices to be heard safely (Bandura, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978; Yalom, 2005). Support for allowing the survival and emotional brain to acclimatize is attained by the scaffolding stages. Thereafter, the brain finds the challenge of thinking exciting (Brendtro & Larson, 2006). The corrective emotional process enhances learning. Scaffolding stages provide the PLG process with manageable steps on which to focus (Vygotsky, 1978; White, 2007). A pivotal part of feedback loops is to develop new ideas (White, 2007).

In conclusion, PLG groups provide a community experience that concurrently builds respect, understanding, encouragement and learning. The different perspectives allow scaffolding for learners to grow and stretch their own thinking and provide different levels of understanding. Multiple ideas allow for greater diversity and the learner is able to combine different perspectives and find their own solutions (Hormel, 2009; Wachtel & Rodger, 2000). The ability to speak freely and be challenged allows a corrective emotional process to take place. Learners gain clarity about their goals and tasks within the community (White, 2007).

Scott Peck (1990) had a strong sense of what a community should be:

> If we are to use the word meaningfully, we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure and who have developed some significant commitment. (Peck, 1990, p. 59)

This is the essence of PLG.

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