The Role of Conversation, Contention, and Commitment in a Professional Learning Community[*]

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Abstract

The process of creating a professional learning community can be difficult, lengthy, and incredibly rewarding. Based on the author's experiences working as an administrator in a professional learning community school, this article discusses the role that conversation, contention, and commitment play in the development of a PLC, and includes specific suggestions and strategies for school leaders engaged in building a professional learning community in their own schools.

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It is 1997, I am a third-year teacher, and the faculty of my high school is engaged in a contentious debate. The school is going through a re-accreditation process, and as part of the process we are required to re-examine the school's mission statement. A sub-committee has drafted a new mission for faculty review, and they are now presenting the mission statement to the entire faculty at an after-school meeting.

One of the members of the sub-committee has put on the overhead a transparency that reads, "We will provide a high-quality education to all students," and debate among the faculty begins. Opinions come from all sides of the room as teachers struggle with the level of individual and institutional responsibility for student learning that they are willing to assume. Finally, one English teacher, John, raises his hand and argues, "We can't promise a high-quality education to all students. The best that we can do is to provide the opportunity for a good education. Then it is the students' responsibility to take advantage of that opportunity. It is not our fault if the students don't work hard, if we don't have parental support, or if the town doesn't give us a big enough budget. At a certain point, our students' success is simply out of our hands."

Many members of the faculty murmur their assent, while others shift uncomfortably. I am dissatisfied with this argument and the lack of accountability that it suggests, but I remain quiet. After several minutes of further discussion, a final version of the mission statement is approved: "We will provide the opportunity for a high-quality education for all students." And, for the next seven years, I remember my frustration.

Fast forward to 2004. I am now beginning an administrative internship as an assistant principal at a new middle school in North Carolina. The faculty is in summer "Boot Camp", preparing for the school's opening in several weeks, and we are several hours into the process of writing the school's mission statement. A sheet of paper hangs at the front of the room, and on it is the line: "We are a collaborative community that _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ high student achievement." The faculty has put forth multiple contenders to fill in the blank: "focuses on", "prioritizes," "provides for", and, finally, "ensures." After considerable discussion, the principal raises his hand, reminds the faculty that our new school is being built on a professional learning community model, and reads a quote from a recent Rick DuFour article (2004):

School mission statements that promise "learning for all" have become a cliché. But when a school staff takes that statement literally—when teachers view it as a pledge to ensure the success of each student rather than as politically correct hyperbole—profound changes begin to take place. (p.8)

After several more minutes of discussion, the faculty makes its unanimous choice: "ensures".

These two stories highlight the importance of what I call "the three Cs" of a professional learning community: conversation, contention, and commitment. The preceding stories revolve around the creation of school mission statements. At many schools (as at the first school above), mission statements are nothing more than testaments to a superficial energy that ultimately, through ambiguous and non-committal language, neither unites nor divides organizations. But these statements, and the varying processes used to create them, can reveal much about the underlying character, culture, and values of a school. In both examples above, faculty members openly discussed and, to a certain extent, disagreed with one another about the ultimate level of accountability that a school and its employees owe to students. But only the second school was willing to push the conversation to a deep commitment. As the year progressed for me as an administrator at the second school, I found that the process we experienced in creating a school mission—a process that incorporated all of the three Cs—foreshadowed the larger and lengthier process of developing a successful learning community.

This article examines those three Cs, focusing on the role that conversation, contention, and commitment play in the development of a professional learning community. Building on my own experiences working as an administrator in a PLC school, and incorporating lessons from research, this article attempts to provide specific advice for school leaders on ways to facilitate conversation, deal with contention, and forge commitment in the pursuit of high-quality teaching and learning.

What is a professional learning community?

The professional learning community concept builds on a variety of previous organizational models and theories. The PLC model incorporates insights from the work of Rosenholtz, McLaughlin, and Darling-Hammond and their examination of the importance and impact of workplace factors, institutional support for individual professionals, opportunities for collaborative inquiry, and the process of shared decision-making as they relate to organizational performance (Darling-Hammond, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Rosenholtz, 1989). The PLC concepts also owes much to Peter Senge's theory of learning organizations, which emphasizes individual empowerment and improvement, shared goal setting, collaboration, and the concept of systems thinking (Senge, 1990).

In addition, the PLC model builds on recent research into the complexity of dynamic systems, often termed "systems thinking" or "living systems theory". "Living systems theory" attempts to explain the complexity of organizations through the metaphor of a living system. Baird-Wilkerson (2003) contrasts classical organizational theory with living systems theory in the following way:

An integrated living-systems view of change is different from the commonly accepted Newtonian, or mechanistic, view of change. The mechanistic paradigm espouses that organizations run well if they operate like a machine, separated into narrow processes that are linked together. The mechanistic perspective posits that preservation of an organization is preservation of its current form — therefore leaders manage the parts so that the machine continues to function predictably... From a living-systems view of change, organizations

are systems that self-organize, create, think, adapt, and seek meaning. If the organization violates any of these imperatives, the system will fail. The key then for change work is facilitating a process and building organizational capacity to honor these imperatives. By doing so, the organization is able to learn from itself and create appropriate and relevant change efforts based on new knowledge; hence, it is self-organizing and functions as a learning organization. (p.6-9)

According to Rick DuFour (2004), one of the leading professional learning community proponents, a functioning PLC exhibits three key features, which incorporate elements of the previously mentioned organizational models:

- Ensuring student learning—By agreeing to ensure student learning, a school staff creates a commitment to a common understanding, common goals, and a common language.
- Developing professional collaboration—Through regularly scheduled, team-based professional collaboration, a school connects individual members in ways more likely to lead to innovation and to mutually agreed-upon and consistently implemented decisions, thus connecting disparate parts of a dynamic organization.
- Focusing on results—The process of identifying, analyzing, and addressing agreed-upon student and school data reinforces a common vision and vocabulary, connects curricula and instruction across classrooms, reinforces organizational norms, and aligns leadership and staff.

Within the PLC structure, conversation, contention, and commitment play critical roles. Conversations become the medium of information exchange and the foundation of organizational learning. Contention, when handled productively, exposes differences of opinion and practice and creates space for growth. Finally, commitment ensures that organizational efforts are grounded in a common understanding of purpose and values. The remainder of this article explores these three Cs in more detail, with specific recommendations on ways to use the three Cs within an organizational context.

1 The First C: Conversation

Conversations happen all the time in schools. There are formal conversations, such as the ones that occurred in the two stories at the beginning of the article, or the ones that occur in department or grade-level meetings. There are also informal conversations: one teacher stopping by another teacher's room after school, stories told and retold in the teachers lounge, even electronic conversations through e-mail or discussion board exchanges. In a PLC, conversations become the lifeblood of organizational learning, and the nature of those conversations can differ markedly from the types of conversations typically found in "business as usual" schools. What distinguishes conversation in a professional learning community? Primarily two things: the purposeful nature of the conversations and the underlying structure within which they occur.

A purposeful conversation, in this context, is a conversation that has some underlying goal related to teaching and learning. Consider a department or grade-level meeting. In a more traditional school, these types of meetings are frequently marked by superficial references to curriculum, assessment, or instruction. One teacher might share a lesson plan that she used recently, with a brief discussion of the details of its implementation, while other teachers might ask a polite question or two. But there is no underlying purpose related to teaching and learning. That is, the purpose of the sharing is not to have an impact on the teaching behaviors of the other teachers, but rather to go through the motions of collegiality. It is the type of activity that feels like something that should be done, but ultimately makes no real difference in the practices of the participants.

In contrast, the same meeting in a professional learning community would look quite different. In a PLC, department or grade-level meetings are focused around a specific purpose, such as creating a common assessment, discussing and comparing student work samples in order to ensure consistent grading practices, or using assessment data to identify effective teaching practices. The purposeful nature of these conversations changes their tenor and increases the likelihood that they will have some impact on teachers' classroom behaviors.

The second distinguishing factor of the conversations in a PLC is the structure within which they occur. Teachers are typically organized into specific teams within a professional learning community—whether these teams are based on grade level, subject area, or an area of professional interest—and these teams are given time during the school day to meet and converse. Furthermore, teams are expected to make decisions and create products as a result of their conversations; examples might include common assessments or structured academic interventions for struggling students. Finally, teachers have conversations within an environment of distributed decision-making; that is, teachers know that they have the power to make workplace-changing decisions based on their conversations.

Because of the structure and expectations associated with conversation in a PLC, discussions are likely to look like real conversations, as opposed to the ritualistic facsimiles found in more traditional schools. As teachers discuss issues and decisions that will affect their own classroom practices, they bring a level of investment that pushes conversations to substantive depths. And, as conversations become more purposeful in formal arenas, it is more likely that informal conversations will carry on that purposeful nature—the teacher stopping by a colleague's room after hours is suddenly interested in continuing a discussion of assessment practices, and not just wondering what time the following day's assembly will begin.

One of the first steps that a school leader needs to take in creating a professional learning community is to encourage purposeful conversations. Modeling these types of conversations is one strategy in this direction; a leader who actively engages others in purposeful dialogue focused around teaching and learning sends a message that this type of dialogue is important and valued. Another strategy is to set organizational expectations that encourage, or even require purposeful conversations. On the structural side, build a schedule that creates multiple opportunities for collaboration and set up explicit teacher teams. Then, identify collaborative expectations: asking teachers to create quarterly curriculum maps is one possibility; creating a schedule requiring periodic common assessments and collaborative analysis of student data is another. Finally, recognize the difference between encouraging and controlling dialogue. It can be difficult to spot this difference—many leaders inadvertently control dialogue without wanting or intending to. A simple litmus test is: ask yourself how you react when the result of dialogue is not what you had hoped for. Do you allow the dialogue to continue, or do you actively attempt to force the conversation in the direction you want? As a teacher leader or administrator, you might be able to nudge the tenor of schoolwide conversations in certain directions, but any attempts at controlling dialogue will have the opposite effect and stifle conversation.

2 The Difficult C: Contention

One of the inevitable byproducts of conversation, especially purposeful conversation, is contention. In the story above, both schools experienced some level of disagreement in finalizing their mission statements. The difference was that, in the first school, teachers retreated from the point of contention rather than attempting to explore and understand it. The English teacher, John, made a legitimate point: how can teachers say that they ensure student learning when there are so many different, important variables that are out of their control?

When educators are asked to make collaborative decisions, there are bound to be differences of opinion. If you and I are required to give a common assessment at the end of a unit on adding and subtracting fractions, we are also going to have to agree on certain curricular and instructional points. I may favor a quiz full of multiple-choice questions and short word problems, whereas you may favor a performance task in which students apply their knowledge of fractions to a novel situation. In order for students to be successful on either of these assessments, they will need to have participated in activities that align with those assessments, i.e., curriculum and instruction will both need to lead toward the assessment. Now we are not just talking about a common assessment, we are talking about philosophies of teaching and learning. Once the assessments are graded, what if I require every student with a failing grade to retake the assessment until they score at least a 70, while you count the first score no matter how low it might be?

In PLCs, teachers have to work through contention. In fact, research suggests that it is the way in which teacher teams deal with conflict that ultimately determines the extent to which a school can become a

true professional learning community. In a comparison case study of two middle schools, Achinstein (2002) examined the micropolitical factors that can affect the development of teacher community. One of the key features that emerged from her study was the way in which teachers managed conflict within teams. According to Achinstein (2002):

The kinds of organizational learning purported to result from building community among teachers are deeply linked to how they manage the difference amid their collaboration. The processes of conflict are critical to understanding what distinguishes a professional community that maintains stability and the status quo from a community engaged in ongoing inquiry and change. (p.446)

So how does a school leader help teachers address contention in productive ways? First, it is important to remember that many educators have never been required to collaborate in this manner. In traditional schools, teachers can retreat from contention, returning to their classrooms to do things the way they want to do them. Therefore, while it is important to require that teachers work together and achieve some level of team consensus despite contention, it is also important to support teachers in this process. As a school leader, sit in on formal conversations that have a chance of becoming contentious (department or grade-level meetings focused around developing curriculum or assessments, or meetings that include analysis of student data are good candidates), and model for teachers the ways in which contention-laden conversations can be addressed. One strategy in this arena is to emphasize practice over personality; that is, in discussing teaching or assessment strategies in the classroom, use language that focuses on the actual practice disconnected from the teacher who employed it. Take the temperature of faculty members through formal data collection practices (e.g., staff surveys) and informally through casual conversations, and be willing to slow down if disagreements or frustrations are interfering with organizational effectiveness. While some contention is a healthy sign that important issues are being addressed, be careful that feelings are not getting hurt and that teachers feel supported and valued in their efforts. Finally, consider the following strategies:

- Publicly address the subject of contention in faculty meetings—let teachers know up front that disagreements are not just okay, they're expected.
- Talk about consensus with the faculty and ask teacher teams to determine how they will reach consensus in their groups around difficult decisions, including practices such as majority vote, unanimity, or thumbs up (in which each participant uses a thumb up to indicate agreement, a sideways thumb to indicate reservations but willingness to move on, and a thumbs down to indicate strong reservations with a need for more conversation).
- Stick to your guns—if you are going to expect teachers to deal with difficult topics in productive ways, then do not be afraid to raise and discuss thorny topics yourself.
- Remember that consensus does not mean agreeing with you—sometimes teachers will achieve consensus with which you disagree, but unless you are willing to empower teachers to make decisions (even if you do not always agree with those decisions), they will disengage from the process.

3 The Ultimate C: Commitment

As stated earlier, schools are highly complex organizations, with individual teachers and small groups of teachers constantly moving in and out of work relationships with one another, trying new ideas, moving in different directions, but all still connected through the common work of teaching and learning. This complexity, however, leads to a difficult challenge: if schools are such complex organizations, with people moving in different directions at different times, how is it possible to create a professional learning community in which teachers are working together, dealing with contention, and collaborating to make good decisions for students?

The answer is commitment. By getting all of the participants to commit to schoolwide goals and a process of collaborative decision-making, you can accept the complexity while still moving in a common direction. That is what the first school lacked in the story above, a common commitment, and that is what made the difference in the second school. Purposeful conversations will inevitably lead to some level of contention, but in a professional learning community the participants can ultimately deal with contention by relying on

an underlying level of commitment to common goals. For a true professional learning community, these are likely to include a commitment to ensuring student learning, a belief in the power of true collaboration, a model of distributed leadership and decision-making, and an ongoing process of reflection and inquiry.

Getting to this level of commitment is no simple matter. As a school leader, try to create formal and informal opportunities for participants to discuss the principles that they are willing to commit to, to debate them and translate them into practical ideas and statements. Make sure that you have created opportunities for doubting members to share their doubts. In the story above, John should be given the opportunity to share his concerns openly, but commitment ultimately means working through concerns and identifying common beliefs, and not just accepting the least-common-denominator decision. In many schools, this process begins with a small group of participants who are willing to commit themselves to a set of principles, and then that small group becomes champions for those principles as they spread throughout the school. As a school leader, recruit these champions and do what you can to both encourage and support them.

Purposeful conversations focused around curricular and instructional practices are the lifeblood of any successful learning community—fostering those types of conversations is one of the first steps that any school leader should take towards creating a PLC. But purposeful conversations inevitably evoke deep-held beliefs and philosophies, beliefs and philosophies that will vary across a faculty. When differing opinions are brought out into the open, contention will arise. It is at this point that the successful leader must walk a tight line, encouraging staff members to address contention and work through it, while recognizing the emotional toll that disagreements can take. Ultimately, it is organizational commitment to a set of underlying principles that supports the creation of a PLC. By subscribing and adhering to core beliefs focused around student learning and staff collaboration, schools can make the transition from "business as usual" organizations to true learning communities.

3.1 References

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