External Professional Communities for Teachers: The Community of Practice Approach

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External professional communities can play an important role in connecting local peers with essential learning about the craft of teaching, research and practice. This article highlights examples of external peer communities, and suggests ways that school leaders can help strengthen the connection.

Professional development for teachers can be accomplished in a variety of locations (internal to the school, external to the school, online), structures (workshops, lectures, informal conversations) and time periods (pre-service, in-service). The combination and mutual reinforcement of several strategies of professional development support successful teacher learning in a school. In 2001, the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago published "Teacher Professional Development in Chicago: Supporting Effective Practice" a Report of the Chicago Annenberg Research Project. The Annenberg report concluded that "teachers experience higher quality professional development when they draw on a combination of sources, including teacher networks, external professional organizations, and school-based activities" (Smylie et al., 2001, p. 60). The chart below represents the diversity of professional development opportunities along two key dimensions articulated by the report:

	Formal	Informal
Inside School	Supervision, pre-service guest experts, workshops, self study	Peer to peer learning, internal professional community, informal shop talk
External to School	Workshops, online courses, accreditation, curricular reform efforts	Peer to peer learning with professionals outside of the school, professional communities of practice for teachers

Formal vs. Informal: Formal professional development activities are the most well known: expert visitors, workshops, and online courses can occur inside or outside of the school. In the past decade increased attention has focused on peer-to-peer learning communities that are based on the strength of informal learning. In addition to formal professional development activities, teachers benefit from informal learning in conversations with each other that take place in the faculty lounge, through "shop-talk" on the playground, in hallways or in school meetings. The Annenberg report cites professional community is one of the three most important elements in effective teacher development, the other two being time and organizational support.

*A **Community of Practice (CoP)** is a community of professionals who share a common set of problems and systematically share their knowledge, expertise and tools in order to improve their practice and the performance of their organization by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4).*

History of Learning Community: Learning communities are an ancient way of sharing knowledge and arise naturally as people interact with each other informally. When the shepherds gathered around the well with Rebecca, they likely traded stories about the breeding of sheep and camels. What's so important about informal learning is that participants can decide what to talk about on the spot, negotiate just how much detail is useful, and talk about what it means to them personally. The past two decades have seen the growth of a field that seeks to develop expertise in supporting intentional learning communities, referred to as Communities of Practice. In many cases intentionally cultivated communities are supported with technology to make participation more time efficient and allow community members to connect at a distance.

Communities of Practice at any level employ a variety of activities to support their members' learning, including brainstorming solutions to difficult problems, sharing resources, hearing from guest experts, organizing site visits, and conducting surveys. They also employ a variety of communication vehicles, including face-to-face meetings, teleconferences, listserv, blogs, wikis, and websites. Communities of Practice supported by technology and appropriate facilitation have been utilized in the business world for more than a decade and are becoming increasingly common in educational settings as well. As the number and communities in education are growing, more research is being done on their effectiveness.

Communities of practice can support teachers in many areas of their work, from helping them solve problems, allowing them to share their successes with others, or even simply finding answers to questions they have.

Internal vs. External: A healthy network of conversations creates a vital context for classroom teaching and learning. But internal conversations receive a significant boost from an additional level where local communities connect to conversations outside of the institution, at a regional, national, or international level. "This combination of 'inside-outside' sources provides an important mix of relevance, impetus, and expertise that promotes teacher learning and instructional improvement" (Smylie et al., 2001, p. 60).
A key finding of the Annenberg study was that a school's ability to retain curricular reform depended on the health and vitality of its local communities of practice. Since combining methods of learning is so valuable for teachers, this article will share some brief resources and suggestions for accessing and creating (or developing) external professional communities for teachers in Jewish day schools at the local and national level.

External communities of practice can supplement the internal professional development of teachers. Like internal professional communities, external communities can create "collaborative . . . environments … [for] reflective dialogue and shared norms focused

on improvement of teaching and learning…. Professional development can stimulate ongoing learning, experimentation, and improvement…. [Teachers may] find among their colleagues sources of new ideas, intellectual stimulation, and feedback essential to deepen learning and promote instructional change. They also find encouragement (Smylie et al., 2001, p. 50)".

In external communities, a network weaver helps the community connect to the periphery where new ideas come from. According to network theory, external connections are an important source of innovation for a network. Because they interact with so many teachers, a head of school can encourage and support the learning of teachers by acting as a network weaver for internal professional communities and helping internal members link to those on the fringes (periphery) with those at the core of the community. Alternatively, a head of school can support a teacher or other person who plays the role of network weaver.

> The periphery allows us to reach ideas and information not currently prevalent in our network. The core allows us to act on those ideas and information. … The network weaver maximizes the reach of the periphery into new areas, while keeping the core strong (Krebs and Holley, 2002-2006, pp. 15-17).

By assisting in linking people together, information and learning can reach further afield, explore deeper specialization, and uncover the knowledge that each member has to contribute. For large schools, teacher participation in learning communities outside of schools will encourage them to bring new ideas and innovations into the system. For small schools, participating in an external community of practice can relieve isolation. The external structure helps to spread resources and learning among large and small schools when, left to their own devices, those schools may be less able to access these resources.

Of course, informal communities of practice are no substitute for other, more formal elements to support learning and guidance of teachers. Although this article focuses on communities external to the school, internal conversations and communities are an essential link between external communities and the classroom. In connecting teachers to external communities, it's important not to forget the significance of fostering internal conversations. Heads can use their position as a way to connect teachers to each other and to external communities.

Below are three examples of Communities of Practice at different scales:

Local Teacher CoP

Ilene Sussman, of Combined Jewish Philanthropies in Boston, has started to convene local math and science teachers at Jewish day schools in recognition of the CJP's DAF: Jewish Day School Advocacy research on the importance of science and math for Jewish day school parents (http://peje.org/docs/DAFStudy.pdf). With the demand for high quality education as well as the rapidly changing curriculum, this group is already proving to be a welcome addition to the professional development of these teachers. The Math and

Science Teachers Network was created in the spring of 2006, when teachers came to observe a math and science community event created by DAF for the Jewish day school students. As the teachers met for the first time, they came to realize their commonality including the advantages and challenges of teaching at a day school. They realized the importance of creating curriculum that allowed smooth academic transitions to the next level and subsequent conversations that coordinated that transition. They identified note taking skills as a deficit in many of their students. After hearing a case study on how to teach good note-taking and study skills, teachers are now working on creating a "universal note taking" method. By getting input from their colleagues in other academic areas and in other grade levels, the network is expanding. Much of the conversation has now switched to a blog (http://math-science-educators.blogspot.com) that is open to public readership although writing is only open to local teachers, allowing more teachers to participate. The forum is also helping the teachers realize their role in marketing their school.

National Teacher Community of practice

In Monsey, New York, Rabbi Yakov Horowitz, Dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam, is working towards elevating the standard of first grade Judaic Studies teachers in Haredi schools. He secured a grant from the AVI CHAI Foundation to initiate a pilot, peer-to-peer mentoring program for seven rebbeim. He has also begun to create a nationwide Community of Practice for first grade rebbeim. He started by sending a detailed questionnaire to 400 rebbeim across the USA inviting them to share ideas and materials. More than 110 responses were returned from that initial mailing.

District Wide CoP and Long-Term Impact Assessment

Using this method over time can produce profound systemic change in a field. In 2004, the Ball Foundation provided funding to schools in the Chula Vista Elementary School District to form a community of practice devoted to increasing student achievement in the areas of literacy and reading. In two years, the community has grown from six to ten schools. The project resulted in positive changes in the classroom and beyond. The Ball Foundation web site (www.ballfoundation.org) chronicles the unfolding of the project and presents the project assessment which includes participant comments like those below:

> "It is starting to shift our thinking from using external experts to looking at our own staff and learning from one another as peers."

> "Our six schools are beginning to develop common language and strategies. This may help with student mobility issues and when students move from grade to grade."

> "Building collective knowledge speeds up learning for our students."

Accessing Existing CoP for Teachers in General Education
The attached chart lists some existing on-line peer to peer communities for teachers.

Here is a sampling of external communities for teachers

Community name	URL	Comment
Tapped In	http://tappedin.org	The online workplace of an international community of education professionals. K-12 teachers, librarians, administrators, and professional development staff, as well as university faculty, students, and researchers gather here to learn, collaborate, share, and support one another.
Knowledge Loom Website	http://knowledgeloom.org	The Knowledge Loom is a place for educators worldwide to do the following: 1. review research that identifies promising practices related to various themes 2. view stories about the practices in real schools/districts 3. learn to replicate the success of these practices in your own organization 4. add your own stories and knowledge to the collections 5. discover supporting organizations and resources, including annotated Web links More importantly, using the Knowledge Loom makes you part of an active online teaching and learning community.
The Inquiry Learning Forum is an Inquiry Learning Forum Project	http://ilf.crlt.indiana.edu/	The Inquiry Learning Forum (ILF) is an online community of K-12 math and science educators working together to share, improve, reflect, and create learner-centered classrooms.
The Getty's Art Education Website	http://www.getty.edu/artsednet/	Join TeacherArtExchange, an online community of teachers and learners. You'll take part in conversations through e-mail about art education with colleagues from across the United States-even around the world.
iEARN Website	http://www.iearn.org	There are over 150 projects in iEARN all designed and facilitated by teachers and students to fit their curriculum and classroom needs and schedules. To join, participants select an online project and look at how they can integrate it into their classroom. With the project selected teachers and students enter online forum spaces to meet one another and get involved in ongoing projects with classrooms around the world who are working on the same project.

See http://del.icio.us/tag/teacherscommunity for an expanding list of communities for teachers. Anybody (including you) can add to this list.

Conclusion:

Diverse and mutually reinforcing professional development opportunities have been shown to be important for successful learning among teachers. Some steps you can take to begin to connect to or establish learning communities for teachers are:

Find out whether teachers in your school are already connected with external communities of practice and leverage connections or communities that you find. Learn about existing external communities of practice (such as those listed above) and share the information with your teachers.

Encourage teachers to participate by allotting time for engaging with a community, providing access to technology to make participation easier, and orientation to make them more comfortable with the community. Ask teachers to bring back something they learned through external community participation to their peers within the school.

Arrange visits between teachers in your school and neighboring schools, to develop local connections peers. Contact your local BJE and see if they would be interested in partnering with you to convene a group of teachers to talk about their work. Initially plan just a few sessions per year, to plant the seed, like Ilene has done. Let the group set the agenda to make sure content is relevant to their needs.

Suggest to your local denominational organization that they create a special track that combines formal presentations with informal conversation for teachers' of a certain subject matter or grade level at their next conference.

Follow Rabbi Horowitz's example: design a questionnaire (use an email survey company like survey monkey if you can) to survey peers about a particular topic your school is interested in. Report back both internally and externally.

There are many good approaches to getting a community going. When and if the group needs more support, you can find appropriate resources such as more advanced technology or an experienced community facilitator. When significant growth in membership, topics, focus, or involvement is needed, outside expertise can make a significant difference.

Learning communities can be highly beneficial and important for teachers and can bring about positive changes, improve teacher retention, and improve the overall quality of education that students receive. The linking of teachers to external teacher communities provides collegial support, expands teacher horizons and stimulates the introduction of innovation. We hope that we have stimulated readers to enhance their connections to peer communities and to explore knowledge sharing techniques for teacher professional development.

Authors and acknowledgements

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