

# A CRITIQUE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WITHIN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

---

LUBOMIR TCHERVENKOV

Corresponding Author: Lubomir Tchervenkov, MEd, MSc (Eng), MIEEE

Last Date of Revision: 12 April 2013

## KEYWORDS

---

- professional learning (PL), professional learning community (PLC)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

• Introduction.....	3
• Professional Learning Communities Construct .....	3
○ Background.....	3
○ Literature Review.....	4
○ Discussion.....	5
○ Implications.....	10
• Conclusion.....	11
• References.....	11

## SYNOPSIS

---

This paper explores what constitutes the term ‘professional learning community’. It outlines the background of this concept and explores the relevant literature. Then it discusses if my particular workplace can be regarded as a professional learning community. Based on the definitions for PLC given in the literature, it answers negatively to this question. Then, it goes further to explore the possible benefits for students, lecturers and the Institution, if one day this model is really implemented in my workplace.

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

Starting from the eighties the idea of professional learning communities gradually began to emerge within the academic educational circles. In a nutshell, it promotes the mutual collaboration between teachers and administrators towards their continuous learning. It aims towards the unceasing improvement of lecturers as professionals and encourages them to act upon what they have learned. Such practice should result in better teaching outcomes, which ultimately would benefit the students. This paper is a critical analysis of my personal professional learning experience as a lecturer in TAFE.

---

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY CONSTRUCT

---

---

### BACKGROUND

---

Professional learning communities were originally based on a model, widely used in the business sector. This concept is well described in the paper “Professional Learning in the Business Curriculum: Engaging Industry, Academics and Students” (Lawson, Fallshaw, Papadopoulos, Taylor, & Zanko, 2011). The idea is to engage the students into a deep learning model, closely related to the tasks which they are going to perform in their future employment. Such an approach requires a trilateral arrangement between the learners, the industry and the academics. As students are embarking on a life-long journey for professional learning, so should their lecturers. Professional learning in the business model is inextricably linked to the industry needs. Industry supplies the resources and in return it demands very well trained personnel. Thus, both students and academics have to adjust their professional learning to meet specific industry requirements.

The creation of professional learning communities at schools is an attempt to replicate the success of the business model in relation to education. The idea is that collaborative efforts should be made between lecturers and school administrators in order to create a learning work culture for teachers. If adults are talking collaboratively about teaching, learning, delivery and then taking action, this should result in better student learning and achievement (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

---

The review of the literature revealed that there is no universal definition of what a professional learning community actually is (Stoll, Bollam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Various authors use different terminology and apply different meanings to the term. Astuto, et al. (1993) propose three types of related communities: (1) the professional communities of educators, (2) learning communities consisting of teachers and students, and (3) stakeholder communities. For the purposes of this assignment we will only focus on the first type. In this respect, Mitchell & Sackney (2011) suggest that this is a group of educators who share and critically interrogate their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive and goal-oriented way. King & Newman (2001) add that the individual knowledge skills and dispositions of the teachers must be harnessed and cultivated in what they call an “organized, collective enterprise”. Hord (1997) agrees with Astuto and colleagues and combines in her definition both the process of continuous learning and the anticipated outcomes. She defines it as:

...the *professional community of learners*, in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the student’s benefit (p.10).

She also goes on to introduce a different name for professional learning communities, which I am omitting here in order to not further complicate things. Haberman (2004) states that a group becomes a learning community when its members share a common vision and that the learning outcomes are their primary criteria for evaluating success. Visscher & Witziers (2004) refer to them as “settings, where teachers share values, try to improve instruction and de-privatise classroom practice”(p.788).

## DISCUSSION

---

The general model of professional learning communities, when it is applied to the primary and middle schools is lacking one of the three key players, described in the introduction of my assignment, namely the industry. It is ostensible that those types of teaching institutions cannot apply the traditional business model directly. This is so, because the very nature of their activities is compulsory education, which in this context cannot be classified as a business. However, education in tertiary educational enterprises, such as TAFEs and Universities can (and often do) operate under such premises. Of course, one may pose the question, is it morally justifiable to run them as business or not. Many authors argue that the moral qualities of the leaders are more important than their business and managerial capabilities (Lashway & Eric Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1996). The topic is extremely interesting; however this social issue is beyond the scope of my assignment. The important point I wish to make is that tertiary institutions *can* be operated as businesses and often this is their primarily modus operandi. In this regard the organisation I work for (TAFE) comprises all three key elements, which are the same in the traditional model for professional business learning communities – i.e. students, lecturers and industry.

However, the idiosyncrasies of the TAFE culture dictate a different model to the one commonly proposed in the literature for primary and secondary schools. In this respect it is necessary for me to establish, am I in fact part of a professional learning community? The answer to this question will navigate me further in my study. If it is a “yes”, then I would examine the strengths and the weaknesses of the PLC, which I am part of. If the answer is “no”, then I would explore the probable benefits and weaknesses which such a system may have, if it is to be implemented in my workplace in the future.

Professional learning communities, as stated by these three words, should be defined by *communities*, comprising *professionals*, who are eager to *learn*. Therefore I needed to find definitions for all three terms and determine if my organisation fitted into this model. According to Hord (2009), the term professionals are “Those individuals, who are responsible and accountable for delivering an effective instructional program to

students, so they learn well. Professionals show up with a passionate commitment to their own learning and that of students, and share responsibility to this purpose” (p.41).

In my opinion, all lecturers employed in the Electrotechnology section of our division fit into this description. All of us are professional engineers, who hold either a bachelor or master degree in some engineering field. All of us have at least a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Some of the senior lecturers have graduate diplomas of education. Most lecturers have many years of work experience in the industry, or as educators. We are responsible for delivering complex engineering subjects and we are held accountable for the student’s progress. In this respect, professionalism is both a requirement and a commitment for all TAFE lecturers.

The only stipulation I would make is not using the adjective *passionate* in front of the word *commitment*, as this is rather a personal characteristic. According to my observations, the younger colleagues are those, who tend to be more passionate about their professionalism. Those who already have reached a certain level of experience tend to rest more frequently on their laurels. Notwithstanding this minor disclaimer, in my opinion, all lecturers in our section can be identified as being *professionals*.

The second criterion of professional learning communities pertains to their capacity and willingness to learn. Hord, defines learning as “The activity, in which professionals engage in order to enhance their knowledge and skills” (2009, p. 41). In my opinion we fit into this second description as well. “Professional development” is a term, which is embedded in the Western Australian TAFE Lecturers General Agreement (SSTUWA, 2011). It constitutes part of our continuous professional improvement. Some of the incentives include accrued professional development leave for up to 37.5 hours in a year. In essence lecturers are given an extra week off duties, if they undertake recognized professional development and learning, approved by the college. The college on the other hand is required to provide such opportunities for lecturers. In my experience these clauses are fulfilled by both parties, which result in a combination of some compulsory professional development activities and personal self-study in lecturer’s free time.

It would be really good if lecturers are given more opportunities to share and improve on their teaching practices. Some research has shown that the majority of the lecturers who undertake long-term professional development are more likely to change at least some aspects of their teaching practice (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004). Although the management provides selected opportunities for some courses of this kind, more could and should be done. However, overall I would say that we fit in the second essential criterion for PLC, related to learning. This so far defines our section as a group of *professional learners*.

The third important measure describing professional learning communities is the fact that they must be organised into such a structure, where all individuals operate collectively and collaborate. Again, according to Hord (2009), those are defined as “Individuals, coming together in a group, in order to interact in meaningful activities to learn deeply with colleagues about an identified topic, to develop shared meaning, and identified shared purposes, related to the topic” (p.41). In my opinion, our section does not fit into such a description. Although comprising highly educated and intelligent individuals, we fail to collaborate, to share and even to regularly meet with each other. We work in disarray and this has been an ongoing problem for many years.

In my opinion, the demise of collaborative learning in our section started about 10 years ago, with the introduction of a strong, vertical, hierarchical model of management. During the years preceding this event, as far as I know, our section was managed by the lecturers themselves. The principal lecturers were the ones mainly in charge. They were given some time off lecturing duties and were responsible to manage the section budget, to ensure that strong technical support existed for lecturers, to manage the timetables and to oversee the delivery of the curriculum. The section was managed by professionals, who were simultaneously both engineers and principal lecturers. According to the recollections of the more experienced than me lecturers, professional meetings were held back then on regular, frequent intervals and decisions were taken collaboratively. Based on those testimonies, I conjure up that the old model of the section management was very close in essence to what we call today *professional learning communities*.

When I joined the TAFE in 2004, those functions were already the responsibility of a program manager: a TAFE appointed administrator. My understanding is that by implementing such change, the TAFE upper management was hoping to better oversee the section budget and to centralise the resources of both our section and the neighbouring mechanical engineering section. This concept is not new and it could be well described by the terms 'welfarism' vs 'new managerialism' (Gewirtz & Ball, 2000). While this may have been envisioned to be beneficial, at the same time the appointed manager was neither an engineer, nor an educator. This situation led to a series of problems between management and lecturers, which lasted for years. Later on he was superseded by his brother, who holds a master's in business administration, but again lacks any qualifications in the engineering field or in the area of education. Consequently our section has been managed as a business for a very long time. Our success is measured not by learning achievements, but by financial outcomes. Unfortunately when education is run on such a practice, this could lead to some serious repercussions (Burke, 2000).

This new culture gradually produced an atmosphere of apathy and indifference amongst lecturers. After many years of unsuccessful attempts to overturn at least some of the decisions taken by the management, the majority of the lecturers in our division have gradually given up. The older ones are looking towards their retirement and the younger ones have been conditioned to obtain an approval for all their actions by the program manager. Thus, nowadays the lecturers in our section perform their duties on a highly individual basis. They know very well that their performance is evaluated exclusively by the administration and not by their peers.

The administration applies a totally different set of criteria in order to measure lecturers' performance and achievements. These could be, for example, a high number of students enrolled in a course, a high retention rate, and positive customer (i.e. students) feedback. The importance which the administration places on the actual learning and training is practically negligible. In fact, administrators have no means of measuring learning outcomes, since they themselves are not competent in the content of the taught subjects. As Dennison and Shenton (1990) point out, the new school managers are 'professional bureaucrats', who need cultivation, training and education (p.311).

Ironically, they attempt to even put curriculums together. They do this without having the slightest understanding about the content of the course, but at the same time they still refuse to seek advice from the specialists, i.e. from the lecturers who deliver the subjects. Consequently, lecturers do not collaborate with each other, but are compelled to seek advice from their manager for every aspect of their work. This often results in poor teaching and learning, but this is OK with the management, as long as the financial benchmarks are met. In fact, too high standards of teaching delivery seem to be silently discouraged by the administration, as it leads to a higher drop-out rate of students. Teamwork between lecturers also seems to be covertly dejected by management. All of the above is a direct result of a TAFE policy to appoint program managers, who are business administrators, but are not content specialists or educators. However, successful professional leaders must combine all those qualities (Dennison & Shenton, 1990).

My statements are based on 7 years work experience in this section. They are in total accordance with the vision of our prime minister Julia Gillard, who states “The combination of great classroom instructors, led by professional school leaders, using modern educational facilities, to teach the right curriculum, offers the best means to improve outcomes across the nation...(Gillard, 2008). Thus, among the other factors contributing to better education, she acknowledges the fact that the school leaders should be *professionals* and that the curriculum should be developed with great care, presumably also by *professionals and specialists*, which is essentially the spirit of her speech.

Thus, in my opinion a *community* of educators (in the meaning of the word, given in the literature) does not exist in our section. This is so, primarily because a “supportive and shared leadership” of professional leaders is an essential key attribute for its establishment (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1997). In the best case scenario, my workplace can be described as a group of highly educated, individual, professional learners. They, however, do not collaborate due to the strong vertical hierarchical structure, which governs our work practice.

The five components of professional learning communities are shared beliefs, values and vision; supportive leadership; collective learning; supportive conditions; and shared personal practice (Buck, 2008; Hord & William M. Sommers, 2008). In my opinion the

weakest link towards the successful establishment of PLC in our section is the missing supportive leadership, which is underpinned by poor understanding of the engineering content and the educational practices. The shared beliefs, values and vision are already in place: we are all professionals who have the learning of our students at our hearts. Once a supportive, competent leadership is also in place, it will lead to supportive conditions, which in turn will lead to shared personal practice and collective learning. This theme could be explored in greater depth in the future if a working professional learning community is indeed to be implemented in our TAFE section.

---

### IMPLICATIONS

---

Based on the findings in the discussion above, I was primarily interested in what the benefits would be for our section, if one day the idea of professional learning communities is embraced and implemented in my workplace. The posed question is rather personal to me, because I hold two Masters degrees (one in engineering and one in education). Thus, I may need to make some very important decisions in the future.

There are many superlatives in the literature about professional learning communities, but I wanted to go deeper and be convinced of the benefits for my particular workplace. In this regard, I found two serious studies which prove the validity of PLC. The first one is Vescio, Ross & Adams (2006). It studied the findings of the most prominent educational research institutes and the published research in several major databases between 1990 and 2005. It concentrates primarily on 10 qualitative studies conducted in this period, one of which took place in QLD, Australia. The second research paper is Lee, et al. (1995). This quantitative research sampled 9 570 students, enrolled in 787 secondary schools nationwide in the USA. Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM) was used to analyse student achievement in mathematics, science, history and reading.

Both papers conclusively demonstrate that large, bureaucratic schools produce poorer results than the smaller goal-oriented professional learning communities. For me this is sufficient evidence that if implemented, PLC will be an apt and powerful tool for improving teachers and students, learning in our section.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

Based on the above discussion, I can conclude that my workplace successfully addresses only two of the three important criteria, in order to be classified as a PLC. It can be classified as a group of professional learners, but not as a community. In order to become a successfully functioning professional learning community, the administrative staff should be willing to distribute some of its power to the lecturers. At the same time, the lecturers themselves should be willing to implement change in their practices, collaborate and share responsibility. Both lecturers and admin staff should revert to their old value system, i.e. placing the learning of the students at the centre of their work. Implementing such a change is not going to be easy: for too many years both administration and lecturers were forced to adhere to false values, which are based only on financial outcomes. However, if both parties agree to implement such changes, and if it is supported by the very upper echelon of the TAFE management, it will bring many wonderful improvements in students' learning and training.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Astuto, T. A., Clark, D. L., Read, A. M., McGree, K., & Fernandez, L. d. K. P. (1993). *Challenges dominant assumptions controlling educational reform*. Andover, Massachusetts: Regional Laboratory for the Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands.
- Boyle, B., While, D., & Boyle, T. (2004). A longitudinal study of teacher change: what makes professional development effective? *Curriculum Journal*, 15(1), 45-68. doi: 10.1080/1026716032000189471
- Buck, J. T. (2008, 2008/12//). Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices From Research and Practice. *School Administrator*, 65(11), 48.
- Burke, C. (2000). Opening up public schools for business: the issues of equity and ethics. *The Practicing Administrator*.
- Dennison, W. F., & Shenton, K. (1990). Training Professional Leaders: The New School Managers. *Oxford Review of Education*, 16(3), 311-320.
- Gewirtz, S., & Ball, S. (2000). From 'Welfarism' to 'New Managerialism': Shifting discourses of school headship in the education marketplace. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 21(3), 253-268. doi: 10.1080/713661162

- Gillard, J. (2008). Education revolution 2008-09: statement by the Honourable Julia Gillard MP, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Social Inclusion, 13 May 2008 (Vol. 2008-09.). Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Haberman, M. (2004). Can Star Teachers Create Learning Communities? [Feature Article]. *Educational Leadership*, 61(8), 52-56.
- Hord, S. M. (1997). *Professional Learning Communities: Communities for Continuous Inquiry and Improvement* Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Hord, S. M. (2009). Professional learning communities. *Journal of Staff Development*, 30(1), 40-43,78.
- Hord, S. M., & William M. Sommers. (2008). *Leading Professional Learning Communities: voices from research and practice*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.
- King, M. B., & Newmann, F. M. (2001). Building school capacity through professional development: conceptual and empirical considerations. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 15(2), 86-86+.
- Lashway, L., & Eric Clearinghouse on Educational Management, E. O. R. (1996). Ethical Leadership. ERIC Digest, Number 107: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Department 5207 University of Oregon
- Lawson, R., Fallshaw, E., Papadopoulos, T., Taylor, T., & Zanko, M. (2011). Professional Learning in the Business Curriculum: Engaging Industry, Academics and Students. *Asian Social Science*, 7(4), 61-68.
- Lee, V. E., & et al. (1995). Another Look at High School Restructuring. More Evidence That It Improves Student Achievement and More Insight into Why.
- Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2011). *Profound Improvement : Building Capacity for a Learning Community* (2 ed.). Retrieved from <http://ECU.ebib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=668840>.
- Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. (1997). Professional Learning Communities: What Are They and Why Are They Important. *Issues ... about change*, 6(1).
- SSTUWA. (2011). *Western Australian TAFE Lecturers General Agreement 2011*. Perth, Australia.
- Stoll, L., Bollam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional Learning Communities: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7, 221-258. doi: 10.1007/s10833-006-0001-8
- Thompson, S. C., Gregg, L., & Niska, J. M. (2004). Professional Learning Communities, Leadership, and Student Learning. *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 28(1).
- Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2006). A review of research on professional learning communities: What do we know? *Paper presented at the NSRF Research Forum January, 2006*: University of Florida.
- Visscher, A. J., & Witziers, B. (2004). Subject Departments as Professional Communities? *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(6), 785-800.