



Learning Is a Social Endeavor: Professional Learning Communities and Graduate School

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Social Learning Networks

Numerous research journals, such as *Educational Researcher*, *International Journal of Instructional Design and Distance Learning*, *Journal of School Leadership*, *Middle School Journal*, and *Teaching and Teacher Education*, contain articles about the benefits of establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) in K–12 education. These researchers contend that the establishment and implementation of PLCs is a strong reform strategy. A search of the literature reveals that communities of practice (CoP) are more common in higher education and are especially beneficial in online learning. While similar in nature, there are subtle differences between the two.

Communities of practice are defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2004, p. 1). Communities of practice establish themselves around common interests. While they may not be purposefully or overtly established in a graduate class, they often emerge among students with a passion for a given problem or topic. PLCs also gather around a shared goal but may be broader in nature and practice as well as deliberate in formation. Professional learning communities are

in essence about the culture of the organization and/or group. While both social systems have proven to be beneficial, the question arises as to the role either or both can play in graduate school.

Graduate teachers and professors developing course syllabi may hope that CoP emerge as students work through shared content. The formation of a PLC cannot be left to chance. Since a sustained core membership is vital in the process of developing a PLC, a cohort model of program design is a natural fit, particularly when viewed through the lens of doctoral studies.

Bair and Haworth (2005) indicate that between 40 and 60 percent of doctoral students never receive their degree. In a paper presented at the annual conference of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration in Camarillo, CA, Mahmoud Suleiman and Danny Whetton (2014) explain the numerous benefits of a cohort model in EdD doctoral programs. In addition to bolstering the program's completion rate, the authors explain that participants in cohorts develop both collaborative and leadership skills. To ensure student success, deliberate action may well be required to develop cohorts that act as PLCs.

Social Learning in a Doctoral Program

The Plymouth State University (PSU) Doctor of Education program welcomed its first students in the summer of 2009. The program designers established it as a cohort model because they were mindful of the statistics regarding the low completion rates in doctoral programs nationwide. Since then, the program has admitted six additional cohorts.

Professional learning communities and cohorts are a natural pairing. Professional learning communities are environments of collaboration. The conceptual underpinnings of PLCs rest on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and other social constructivists. Students of education often learn about Vygotsky in their basic psychology courses. Even in a well-established PLC, the realization of a connection to social constructivism may be lost.

The developers of the PSU model paid close attention to concepts of both PLCs and cohorts. The program consists of alternating open and closed cohorts. The first, third, fifth, and seventh cohorts are designed as closed cohorts, meaning there is one point of admission and students progress through their courses in a lockstep routine (Maher, 2005). Eight doctoral courses were scheduled during the period of 13 months, after which candidates begin their dissertations. The alternating cohorts (second, fourth, and sixth) are open in that all courses are not taken in a lockstep manner. There is also one point of admission in the open design. However, some students take additional courses outside the cohort. In this way, they interact with non-cohort students. Students take their eight doctoral courses over four summers with their original cohort. Once the coursework is complete, the candidates work at their own pace on their dissertations.

In this doctoral program, the connection between social constructivism and professional learning communities is not left to chance. The first doctoral class in the PSU program is entitled Emerging Perspectives on Learning and Development. The course emphasizes research on the

social brain, reflective thinking and questioning, and social constructivism. The professional learning community develops as cohort members articulate their beliefs and values while naming their group. The development of the cohort is overt and clearly transforms theory into practice.

As instructors of the first course, we know how important the cohort is to the individual success of students. On the first day of the first class, students often have a “deer in the headlights” look. They speak openly about wondering why they were chosen and if they have the intellect and ability to complete the program. One student commented that she was glad there were 20 in her cohort because if there were only 19 she would not be there. Professional learning communities have been shown to have an impact on efficacy (Hord, 1997). Without a sense of self-efficacy, completion of the program would be in doubt. Bandura (1977) reminds us that “[p]ersistence in activities that are subjectively threatening but in fact relatively safe produces, through experience of mastery, further enhancement of self-efficacy and corresponding reductions in defensive behavior” (p. 191).

Doctoral students, candidates, and graduates praise the cohort model. Beard (2014) interviewed members of four active cohorts (a mix of open and closed) attending a New England university. Through the interview process, he learned of their thoughts and feelings relative to the cohort. He states, “Many of them used the words *friends* or *family* when speaking of their cohorts. It was evident that they rely on their fellow cohort members for emotional support as well as for practical assistance with aspects of their coursework” (p. 111).

The PSU program includes a number of international students. Some of these are Americans working abroad and some have left their homeland to study in New Hampshire. One member of a closed cohort was a young woman from a Middle Eastern country. She was pregnant with her third child when the program began. Towards the end of the first class she made an announcement to her cohort. She told them that when she found out she was pregnant, she wanted her mother and sister to come and be there for the birth of her child. Then she said, “But now I don’t think that. I have my family” and she pointed to the others in the room, many of whom immediately offered to help.

Many upper-level professionals are represented in the PSU EdD program as well. Participation in the EdD program is a steppingstone for them to move forward. They are often strapped for time, balancing family, career, and academics. At the beginning of one open cohort, there were two comments made by more-senior members of the group, one of whom stated, “I may be here for a time in the summer, but I’m not gonna have time for you guys during the year.” This doctoral student was the first to engage the cohort after summer academics were over. Another member recalls her first experience with her cohort, saying, “Cohort, shmohort!” She now admits that she would not be able to continue her work without the cohort.

Feedback received from course evaluations benefits the program, and the instructors in the EdD program take those seriously, knowing the sustainability of the program depends on paying attention to students’ needs. One student remarked on the evaluation form for the first course that “it is also impressive that the design is clearly well thought out and intentional; content was

unpacked, understood, and implemented simultaneously and all the threads were nicely pulled together.” Another student remarked during class, “You know, this is connivingly brilliant.”

Learning and teaching in a cohort model can be life changing. One student stated, “This was the most meaningful and transformational class I have taken. I feel that I have grown a great deal as a person, a student, and a professional leader.” Such growth comes from the knowledge (content) and process (collaborative learning).

Importance of the PLC/Cohort Model in EdD Programs

Why is this important? The Council of Graduate Schools reports a 57 percent attrition rate in doctoral programs (2008). The PSU EdD program has an attrition rate of less than 10 percent. While many factors contribute to the success rate of the PSU program, both students and faculty consider the development of the cohort a prime reason for retention. Tinto (1993) supports this notion by suggesting that a major factor in student retention is social interaction with faculty and peers. Tinto considers the lack of integration, both social and academic, a primary reason for student attrition. The PSU EdD program’s intentional creation of PLCs encompasses both forms of Tinto’s integration. “Social membership within one’s program becomes part and parcel of academic membership, and social interaction with one’s peers and faculty becomes closely linked not only to one’s intellectual development, but also to the development of important skills required for doctoral completion” (p. 232).

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The integration of academics and social endeavors is clearly apparent in the PSU EdD cohorts, both formally and informally. The EdD program hosts three major events per year that combine the social and the academic. The first event of the academic year is the annual externship presentation. These presentations are a requirement for the advancement to candidacy of doctoral students. They must present the results of their externship, a steppingstone to their doctoral work. The entire university community is invited to participate in this event, which culminates in a celebration as students move into the next phase of their studies. The second official social event occurs in the spring, just prior to commencement. This is an opportunity for current doctoral students to applaud those who have successfully defended their dissertations and to showcase their own work through poster sessions. The final event of the year occurs during the summer when all active EdD cohorts are on campus. The EdD social provides an opportunity for all doctoral candidates, students, alumni, and faculty to gather informally and get to know one another.

The three-day writing retreat in the spring and fall of each year provides another opportunity for social learning. This informal event allows students at various stages of their doctoral process to observe and share in the development of their required original research. The agenda is open and dependent upon the students’ needs. Faculty members and students volunteer their time to help

each other refine research questions, determine the extent of their literature reviews, help edit dissertation chapters, and provide much-needed academic and emotional support.

Finally, cohorts often create times to gather to celebrate the successes of their members, as opportunities to share challenges, to welcome new cohorts into the program, or to simply socialize. Impromptu summer meetings, when the active cohorts gather on campus, provide much-needed stress relief through humor, commiseration, and support.

Implications for Non-Cohort Classes

Only a small percentage of the graduate classes at Plymouth State University and other institutions of higher education are either doctoral level or established in a cohort/PLC manner. Still, we can learn some important lessons from the success of the PSU EdD program. Most of these lessons can easily be adapted to non-cohort graduate classes.

First and foremost is the concept of support. This is evident in many graduate classes now. Those who elect to work with graduate students and are successful doing so understand the difference between pedagogy and andragogy. Adult learners may have different needs as researchers, as Knowles (1980), Merriam (2001), and Wlodkowski (2008) have clearly shown. However, they still need support. Students in the doctoral program want to know faculty members are interested in them and their educational journey. One student said, “That it sets us up for our journey and that the message from the beginning is clear: you will be supported!”

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Second is the commitment of the faculty to design learning experiences that are relevant to the adult world. A Doctor of Education degree is designed for the scholar-practitioner, not the scholar-researcher, as is a Doctor of Philosophy degree. Courses like Program Evaluation: Theory and Practice (the second course in the PSU doctoral program) are designed to help practitioners in their work environments.

Third is the process of collaboration. Years ago, cooperative learning was an instructional strategy of vogue. It has been shown to have great benefit in the classroom (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2004). Attention must be paid to establishing positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing—the elements of cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1991). While members of typical graduate classes are not together long enough to become a PLC, they can become a cooperative community of practice.

Conclusion

We are most fortunate to be part of the Plymouth State University Doctor of Education program. As faculty, we have the honor and privilege of facilitating the first course in the program. We help each cohort establish themselves as a PLC and watch group members mature as scholars and practitioners throughout their program and beyond. This work has only reinforced our personal beliefs in the power of social constructivism.

Students too confirm the power of learning together. “You will continue to process and apply what you have learned in this course [EP 8000] throughout your studies in the EdD program. I don’t think we will fully realize the value of what has happened ... until we hit our dissertation phase” (Anonymous, 2015)

The lessons learned from the application of professional learning communities in the graduate classroom are powerful. They bring the words of Michael Fullan (2010) to life: “The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things” (p. 72).

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