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Comparing Professional Development Experiences: Viewing the Constructivist Design Conference through the lens of a Professional Learning Community

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Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

The first step in this comparison process is to gain a clear understanding of the term “professional learning community.” Ubiquitously used in current educational literature, there is an inherent need to define a professional learning community’s essential components (DuFour 2004). For the purposes of this piece, the concept of ‘professional learning community’ has four defining characteristics. These essential attributes are:

- (1) Supportive and collaborative conditions
- (2) Commitment to continuous improvement
- (3) Results orientation
- (4) Shared mission, vision, values and goals

While definitions that are more elaborate exist, narrowing the essential characteristics that this piece will examine in light of the Constructivist Design Conference will allow subsequent reflections to be more applicable to one’s own professional development. Through the comparison of these two models, it is our intention to provide a framework for understanding other professional experiences.

Supportive and Collaborative Conditions

One of the fundamental characteristics of a professional learning community is the structure of support and collaboration that develops among constituents. Since a professional learning community is a “process” for professional development rather than a “program,” building in conditions to support collaboration is essential to its success (Eaker, DuFour and DuFour 2002).

This notion of support and collaboration has two main components (Leo and Cowan 2009). First, there is support stemming from physical structures. Structures necessary for professional learning communities include sufficient meeting space, resource availability and the necessary time to accomplish goals. Professional learning communities cannot thrive if stakeholders are not able to contribute (Huffman and Hipp 2003). Therefore, supportive structural conditions must be in place for collaborations to succeed.

Another category of supportive conditions is respectful and collegial relationships (Leo and Cowan 2009). Clearly defined expectations must be in place so that all members of a professional learning community feel like trusted, respected and valuable contributors. Supportive conditions to ensure a safe working environment include developing procedures for feedback, using protocols for productive dialogue and the use of norms to ensure respectful interaction (Hord 2003).

How is this tenet modeled at the Constructivist Design Conference?

In order to understand the inherent supports of the Constructivist Design Conference, first consider how teams of participants prepare for this conference. According to the Conference website (www.learnercentered.org), participant teams bring with them a task that they wish to complete in one week's time (Institute for Learning Centered Education 2009). Tasks from previous conferences include, "How do we generate a character education curriculum?", "How do we develop partnerships among schools and colleges?" and "How do we develop an e-portfolio using Live Text to assess pre-service teacher learning?" (Institute for Learning Centered Education 2009). The teachers, administrators and other school personnel who attend this conference as a team use this experience as a springboard for the establishment of school improvement or professional improvement plans.

With this end in mind, the Constructivist Design Conference provides teams with workspace at St. Lawrence University, five or more hours a day of uninterrupted work time, technology support, and a trained facilitator. Unlike a typical conference primarily comprised of presentations, teams spend only one hour per day at workshops and the rest of the time working on their task. As Eaker, DuFour and DuFour (2002) suggested when they mentioned accessibility to required personnel resources, teams at the Constructivist Design Conference also have access to consultations by over 60 educational experts. These experts immerse themselves in teams' tasks, sharing their expertise in support of teams' continual professional development.

Another instance of the "supportive conditions" inherent in the design of the conference, are the structures used to create conditions for collegial, respectful and productive teamwork. On the first day of the conference, participants draft a team contract with their facilitator, explicitly defining roles and expectations. Along with the contract, teams also draft process and product rubrics. Throughout the week, teams use these rubrics to judge the quality of their interactions and the results of their efforts.

Results orientation

According to Jessie (2007) a professional learning community differs from a traditional professional development initiative in its intentional response to data. The focus of an effective professional learning community is not intentions, but results. Therefore, the use of feedback is imperative in determining and maintaining the effectiveness of school improvement projects (DuFour and Eaker 1998). Ongoing formative assessments draw attention to areas in need of improvement, highlight the need for interventions, and provide steps for future action. In the school setting, effective professional learning communities use feedback data to determine whether initiatives are enhancing student learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many 2006).

How is this tenet modeled at the Constructivist Design Conference?

The very nature of the Constructivist Design Conference necessitates the results oriented mindset called for in the professional learning community model. As previously described, teams come to the conference with an authentic task to work on for the week. Beginning with the development of an action plan checklist, teams narrow their task into a series of realistic undertakings. With the assistance of their facilitator, teams create a timeline and graphic organizer, and devise rubrics to serve as physical representations of the task ahead. These structures develop the results orientated attitude needed to complete the task within the specified time.

Once teams have developed initial drafts of their products, conference facilitators begin a series of protocols designed to help teams gather and make sense of formative assessment data. Teams have a choice of gaining feedback using either a Critical Friends or self-assessment protocol. Both options provide the teams with well-structured, poignant reflections that is used to improve teams' products. The feedback provided during these sessions often becomes launching pads for creative and critical thinking. As is the case in professional learning communities, this data collection allows teams to strengthen their outcomes, and develop subsequent action steps.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Embedded in any successful professional learning community is the quest for continuous progress towards their collective goal (DuFour 2004). Members must be committed to initializing change, and have the desire to implement new ideas to advance their agenda. This commitment includes (1) a plan for implementing change, (2) a mechanism for gathering data on the effectiveness of the change, (3) a method of analyzing the data, (4) a means of applying any findings and (5) a plan for continuing the improvement loop (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many 2006). Since this cycle of improvement does not happen quickly or without the contribution of many individuals, members of effective professional learning communities must be committed to the process of perpetual learning.

How is this tenet modeled at the Constructivist Design Conference?

The Constructivist Design Conference encourages continuous improvement through its focus on daily reflection. As Schon (1983) describes, reflection is critical for not only initial professional development, but also day-to-day practice is improved through this method of continuous growth. Through targeted and thoughtful reflection, teams consider what they are doing, why they are doing it and what they could change to make their product even better. Setting aside reflection time at the conference helps to instill metacognitive thinking, while modeling the power of such practice.

At the conclusion of the conference, the creation of a team follow-through plan also helps to support continuous improvement. These follow-through plans mirror the DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many (2006) model, as they force participants to lay out the subsequent steps necessary to implement the ideas generated at the conference. The team considers methods for ongoing evaluation of their product, as well as how to improve its effectiveness once they return home. Creating follow-through plans at the conference is timely, as participants are able to use conference personnel as resources to help ensure their product's success.

Since involvement and buy-in by school leadership is critical for implementation success, at this stage, school administrators and other school leadership are invited to help teams create their follow through plans. This helps to ensure that the team's product "fits" with the school improvement efforts. It also makes it more likely that teams leave with a plan targeted to meet the needs of their school districts.

Shared mission, vision, values and goals

Analogous to its use in business, deliberate strategic planning is at the heart of any successful professional learning community (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many 2006). These guiding principles are necessary to give the learning community its initial shape and critical in providing future direction. Acting as a decision making beacon, these principles should be constantly redefined, articulated and

referred to when making decisions (Hord 2003). As in business, the success of the collaboration is dependent upon how well the group defines and is able to live this shared conception. In school, this shared mission, vision, values and goals should clearly define what students must know and be able to do to be successful (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many 2006).

How is this tenet modeled at the Constructivist Design Conference?

BELIEF STATEMENTS	
We believe that:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A learning environment is one in which resources and support abound for learners to actively create knowledge and construct their own meaning. • All students can learn in an environment which reflects their different learning styles. • Authentic assessments, when properly implemented, are critical strategies for enabling people to properly demonstrate learning. • Teachers are (should be) lifelong learners. • Diversity makes our country strong and healthy. • A respect for the diversity of people and ideas is critical to being successfully educated. • The constructivist theory of learning and knowledge will support teachers and students in creating a community of learners. • An on-going Institute for people engaged in restructuring would provide a major resource base for those who are striving to articulate reform initiatives. 	

The Institute for Learning Centered Education, who sponsors the Constructivist Design Conference, lists the core ‘beliefs’ of the Institute on their website (Institute for Learning Centered Education 2009). Evaluation of these beliefs reveals, in essence, the strategic plan of the Constructivist Design Conference.

Taking note of the major elements of the conference discussed so far, there appears to be clear congruence between the belief statements of the Institute for Learning Centered Education and the actual practices of its conference. Recall that a successful professional learning community must operate in accordance to its guiding principles (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many 2006). This organization seems to have refined and mastered this facet of operational professional learning communities through the structures put in place during its conference. Alignment of the Institute’s belief statements and their manifestations in the conference is below:

Belief Statement (Guiding Principle)	Manifestation of this belief at the conference
“A learning environment is one in which resources and support abound for learners to actively create knowledge and construct their own meaning.”“The constructivist theory of learning and knowledge will support teachers and students in creating a community of learners.”	Teams of participants bring in their own authentic task and leave with a product they created. This makes all learning experiences personalized and meaningful. Facilitators and teams work together to achieve their task specific goals.
“All students can learn in an environment which	With the help of their facilitator, participants

reflects their different learning styles.”	(analogous to the “students”) are provided with individualized instruction and over 60 experts to support them with their task.
“Authentic assessments, when properly implemented, are critical strategies for enabling people to properly demonstrate learning.”	Participants’ authentic assessment is the product they create during the weeklong conference.
“Teachers are (should be) lifelong learners”	Conference presenters and facilitators are also participants in the conference. This conference prides itself on mutual learning and continuous improvement.
“Diversity makes our country strong and healthy.”“A respect for the diversity of people and ideas is critical to being successfully educated.”	This focus on diversity manifests itself through the deliberate infusion of diversity presentations throughout the week.
“An on-going Institute for people engaged in restructuring would provide a major resource base for those who are striving to articulate reform initiatives.”	Conference participants create a follow through plan before they leave the conference. They then receive follow-up services from their facilitator and other Conference personnel.

Conclusion

In creating and sustaining productive communities of learners, one must establish (1) supportive and collaborative conditions, driven by a (2) results orientation and (3) commitment to continuous improvement, by individuals who have a (4) shared mission, vision, values and goals. In highlighting the Constructivist Design Conference as a professional experience exemplifying these same core principles, it was our intention to provide both a model and exemplar for enhancing teaching and learning. It is our hope that the analysis offered here can be coupled with one’s own professional development situations to promote meaningful academic growth.

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