

# Communities of Practice

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

## IN THIS ISSUE

- Understanding Alignment
- Communities of Practice and New Media
- Institutional Support

## Understanding Alignment

*A group of middle school English teachers sits around a table discussing the way each of them writes comments on student writing. Initially, they find that some colleagues use rather generic language to encourage the development of ideas. "I always write, 'dig deeper,' or 'so what,' explains one." As they continue sharing ideas and looking at examples of student work, they agree on a common goal of writing more student- or paper-specific comments. At their next meeting they bring sample comments along with student revisions written in response to comments. Comparing in this way helps them learn how their formative assessment fosters improved writing. It also positions them to participate in local, state, and national conversations about writing assessment.*

This brief vignette illustrates three key features of communities of practice: the teachers share **mutual engagement** in the project of writing better comments on student papers; they have agreed upon this **joint enterprise** of working together to improve student writing; and one of their goals is to develop a **shared repertoire** for responding to student work.

What sets communities of practice apart from other teacher development models is their reach beyond individuals and toward alignment.<sup>1</sup> In this context *alignment* does not mean simply linking learning goals with instructional materials, as in curriculum alignment. Rather, in the context of communities of practice, alignment refers to a deep coherence that includes the following:<sup>2</sup>

- **Connection to something larger**  
Communities of practice serve a common purpose and address recurring problems of practice related to student learning. For example, a community of practice might develop from a schoolwide concern with students' writing abilities and be concerned about responding to external mandates for particular assessments. This shared focus enables members to contribute to larger questions and conversations both within and beyond the community.
- **Coordinated perspectives, discourse, and actions**  
Together members negotiate a shared purpose through evolving interactions with one another. They might, for instance, look at samples of student writing from across the curriculum to decide on what to emphasize and, like the teachers above, come up with a shared understanding of how they will describe what they will do together.
- **Shared resources to address recurring problems of practice concerned with student learning**  
A community of practice might identify a specific protocol for approaching discipline-based reading as a way of supporting the literacy learning of their students.

**NCTE** National Council of  
Teachers of English

This publication of the James R. Squire Office of Policy Research offers updates on research with implications for policy decisions that affect teaching and learning. Each issue addresses a different topic, and all issues can be found at [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org).

### ■ Making visible tacit knowledge or learning

As opposed to individual professional learning experiences, communities of practice open space for identifying shared practical, pedagogical, and disciplinary knowledge that might otherwise remain tacit. They can also reach beyond geographical boundaries, helping to shape professional learning *and* professional knowledge that influences student learning in multiple locations.

Some communities of practice are less successful than others when particular barriers to alignment are implemented, masked, or remain unaddressed. These barriers include:

#### ■ Privileging of one perspective over another

Some communities of practice are implemented as top-down mandates. These communities of practice, often convened in response to externally-imposed reform measures, privilege the institutional perspective over members' needs and interests. Such an approach masks members' varied perspectives, limits coordination of perspectives, and negates teachers' expertise and practice, thereby closing off possibilities for communication and action.

By contrast, in schools and districts where multiple perspectives are coordinated, because all members are engaged as valued contributors, communities of practice can spark creativity for problem solving responsive to problems of practice. In these schools and districts, administrators work collaboratively *with* teacher members to support the community's shared purpose.<sup>3</sup>

#### ■ Implementing and upholding static frameworks for collaborative work

Some communities of practice can get "stuck" in unproductive ways of communicating and collaborating. This can happen when communities develop automatic responses or refuse to reconsider when pre-established ways of proceeding no longer work.

Conversely, in schools and districts where communities of practice continue to evolve, members negotiate the ways they interact with one another in order to coordinate perspectives. These latter communities of practice are sustained over the long term and remain responsive to emerging questions and shared interests because they evolve together.

## Communities of Practice and New Media

With electronic technologies more readily available, the reach of communities of practice can be greatly extended.

Blogs, for example, provide teachers with an alternate way to be involved in a community of practice. Online communities of practice, also called electronic or virtual communities of practice, can:

- eliminate the space, time, and monetary constraints of face-to-face communities of practice
- give teachers time to critically discuss and reflect on their own and others' experiences
- include multiple perspectives and participants from diverse fields and geographic locations
- provide an archived record of conversations that can be referenced later
- provide easy access to additional online learning resources such as articles, videos, and learning modules
- close the gap between research and practice in various disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

However, research also indicates that the most successful online communities of practice, like face-to-face ones, require careful planning, strategic leadership, and institutional support.<sup>5</sup> Online communities of practice supported in this way can be an alternate space in which to work toward alignment. Online communities of practice eliminate material concerns such as time constraints or the need for common facilities, but their success depends upon the presence of certain factors, including:

- initial technology training for teachers
- continuing technology support for members of the community of practice
- leaders and/or moderators who are responsive to the group's changing needs and interests.

Online communities of practice have the capacity to operate at multiple levels simultaneously, thereby creating alignment with larger institutional goals. For example, teachers could join geographically diverse communities online, but still be asked to tie the discussions and learning that occur there to local contexts through local face-to-face discussions or professional development sessions. Such sessions can integrate online and face-to-face learning. Teachers can also participate in online communities of practice with in-building colleagues, which can supplement face-to-face meetings and allow moderators to emphasize shared goals. This multimodal approach can strengthen connections among teachers and help them work toward creating a positive and supportive local atmosphere. The collaboration performed online can be continued through additional face-to-face professional

development or small group activities which could extend the interactions, collaboration, and reflection performed in electronic spaces. NCTE's Connected Community is one virtual space where online communities of practice can be piloted, implemented, and joined.

## Institutional Support

Creating school-based communities of practice can seem like a simple matter, but this or any type of effective professional learning depends upon systems of support that often remain invisible in discussions of teaching and learning. Such support does not, of course, guarantee the success of all communities of practice, but some institutional conditions must be in place before communities of practice can thrive and avoid barriers to alignment. Educators need support for instruction from their school administration and organizational conditions that allow communities of practice to emerge across disciplinary, hierarchical, geographic, and grade-level borders.



This model shows how instruction depends upon forms of support that are vital but not always visible, and it helps to explain why teacher learning communities do not always achieve their instructional goals. *Without underlying support teacher learning cannot always be implemented for the benefit of students.*

As this model suggests, what happens in the classroom depends upon at least two inter-related systems. The first, **support for instruction**, is relatively easy to identify. It can include material conditions such as:

- funds to purchase new books or equipment,
- facilities where teachers can meet to share ideas,
- occasional substitute pay so teachers can attend professional meetings.

Support for instruction also includes features such as:

- scheduling that enables teaching teams to share a planning period.
- efforts to develop a common language about instruction.
- availability of data about student learning.

*Important as it is, support for instruction, in turn, depends on organizational conditions that are often invisible and overlooked but nonetheless crucial in schools hoping to encourage communities of practice.* Examples of **organizational conditions** that support instruction are:

- Shared goals or vision
  - What do we want students to be able to do by the end of the year?
  - How do we want the community to describe this school in five years?
- Alignment between stated goals and allocation of resources
  - Make sure academics get top billing when they're a stated priority.
  - Invest in meaningful professional development that is focused on instruction if teacher growth is a goal.
  - Assign most capable teachers to least able students if improved student achievement is a goal.
- Positive and supportive atmosphere for all members of school community
  - Respect for teachers evidenced by their inclusion in decisionmaking
  - Affirmation of students visible in disciplinary policies
  - Respect for all staff and administration evident in professional behavior

Features like these combine to create positive organizational conditions or school cultures that make it possible for teachers to develop effective communities of practice.

Educational policies that support instruction and organizational conditions are essential to help foster the creation of communities of practice that foster student learning.<sup>6</sup>

## Endnotes

1. National Council of Teachers of English (2010). Teacher learning communities. *The Council Chronicle*, 20(2),14-17.
2. Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Crafton, L. & Kaiser, E. (2011). The language of collaboration: Dialogue and identity in teacher professional development. *Improving Schools, 14*(2), 104-116.
- Harris, A. & Jones, M. (2010). Professional learning communities and system improvement. *Improving Schools, 13*(2), 172-181.
- Horn, I. S., & Little, J. W. (2010). Attending to problems of practice: Routines and resources for professional learning in teachers' workplace interactions. *American Educational Research Journal, 47*(1), 181-217.
- Levine, T.H. (2011). Experienced teachers and school reform: Exploring how two different professional communities facilitated and complicated change. *Improving Schools, 14*(1), 30-47.
- Tusting, K. (2005). Language and power in communities of practice. In D. Barton & K. Tusting (Eds.), *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power, and social context* (pp. 36-54). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Coldren, A.F. & Spillane, J.P. (2007). Making connections to teaching practice: The role of boundary practices in instructional leadership. *Educational Policy, 21*, 369-396.
- Grossman, P., Wineburg, S., & Woolworth, S. (2001). Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record, 103*(6), 942-1012.
4. Byington, T. A. (2011). Communities of practice: Using blogs to increase collaboration. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 46*(5), 280-291.
- U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology. (2011). *Connect and Inspire*. Retrieved from <http://connectededucators.org/report/>.
- Yang, S.-H. (2009). Using blogs to enhance critical reflection and community of practice. *Educational Technology & Society, 12*(2) 11-21.
- Lewis, L., Koston, Z., Quartley, M. & Adsit, J.. (2010-2011). Virtual communities of practice: Bridging research and practice using Web 2.0. *Educational Technology Systems, 39*(2), 155-161.
- Ho, K., Jarvis-Selinger, S., Norman, C.D., Li, L.C, Olatunbosun, T., Cressman, C., & Nguyen, A. (2010). Electronic Communities of Practice: Guidelines from a Project. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions, 30*(2), 139-143.
5. Putnam, R.T. & Borko, H. (2000). What do new views of knowledge and thinking have to say about research on teacher learning? *Educational Researcher, 29*(1), 4-15.
- Byington, L., & Keown, P. (2009). The tale of two virtual teacher professional development modules. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education, 18*(4), 295-303.
6. Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (1992). Communities for teacher research: Fringe or forefront? *American Journal of Education, 100*(3), 298-324.
- Dunsmore, K. (2011, June). Flipping the script: Introducing the National Center for Literacy Education. Conference on English Education, New York City.
- Jerald, D. C. (2006). School culture: 'The hidden curriculum.' Retrieved from <http://www.centerforsri.org>.

This policy brief was produced by NCTE's James R. Squire Office of Policy Research, directed by Anne Ruggles Gere, with assistance from Elizabeth Homan, Will Hutchinson, Danielle Lillge, Justine Niederhiser, Sarah Swofford, and Crystal VanKooten, all students in the Joint PhD Program in English and Education at the University of Michigan, and Amanda Thompson, a student at the University of Virginia.

For information on this publication, contact Stacey M. Novelli, NCTE Legislative Associate, at [snovelli@ncte.org](mailto:snovelli@ncte.org) (email), 202-360-3993 (phone), or 202-223-0334 (fax). ©2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the copyright holder. Additional copies of this publication may be purchased from the National Council of Teachers of English at 1-877-369-6283. A full-text PDF of this document may be downloaded free for personal, non-commercial use through the NCTE website: <http://www.ncte.org> (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader).