Communities of Practice

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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. 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:

- **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.
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.

- **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.

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. 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 pro-
fessional learning depends upon systems of support that
often remain invisible in discussions of teaching and learn-
ing. Such support does not, of course, guarantee the suc-
cess of all communities of practice, but some institutional
conditions must be in place before communities of prac-
tice can thrive and avoid barriers to alignment. Educators
need support for instruction from their school administra-
tion and organizational conditions that allow communi-
ties 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 over-
looked but nonetheless crucial in schools hoping to encour-
geage 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 stu-
    dents 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 poli-
    cies
  - Respect for all staff and administration evident in
    professional behavior

Features like these combine to create positive organiza-
tional conditions or school cultures that make it possible
for teachers to develop effective communities of practice.
Educational policies that support instruction and or-
ganizational conditions are essential to help foster the
creation of communities of practice that foster student
learning.6

Endnotes
  and identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


