

Professional Learning Communities: Beyond the Boundaries



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Introduction

I am now the principal of a rural secondary school in the South Island, having recently moved from an urban single-sex school in the North Island where I was Deputy Principal for five years. I was the honoured recipient of the 2009 NASDAP Scholarship and have fully utilised the opportunities this provided.

The 2009 NASDAP Scholarship gave me the opportunity to work on a case study of the professional learning community at one school, and to evaluate this case against current literature and some international perspectives. The Scholarship also contributed to my travel to England in July 2010 where I visited two secondary schools and attended two conferences to help further my understanding of professional learning communities from an international perspective.

Learning goals

Goal	Purpose
1. Complete a case study of a professional learning community	To collate the rich data from a four-year journey of establishing, maintaining and sustaining a PLC in one school
2. Evaluate the case study with reference to current literature and other examples, in association with Dr Jan Robertson	To make connections between the data from the case study and a range of theory and other perspectives in order to draw some informed decisions
3. Visit schools in Leicestershire	To gain insights into another education system, through an international learning community
4. Attend a leadership conference at the IoE, London, and meet with Louise Stoll	To learn from an international expert on professional learning communities
5. Attend the BELMAS conference in Reading	To network within an international learning community
6. Share my findings with the NASDAP community	To provide useful tools and questions for Deputy Principals in New Zealand

This report outlines the key findings of my case study, and summarises the perspectives gained from my international visit. In combination, these experiences contribute to my conclusion that professional learning communities are ‘boundary breaking’, and to that end I refer to the *Boundary-Breaking Leadership Development Model* (Robertson & Webber, 2002). Each chapter provides Deputy Principals with some questions that might lead to reflection on leading towards such an outcome for their own schools.

Boundary-Breaking leadership

This model was developed by Jan Robertson, then of the University of Waikato, and Charles Webber, University of Calgary, in the early 2000s, emerging from a collaborative on-line discussion forum for post graduate students and subsequent study exchanges (Robertson and Webber, 2002). From analysis of these experiences Webber and Robertson were able to identify eight attributes of leadership and learning that can emerge from boundary-breaking experiences: those that cross the boundaries of institutions, forms of communication, leadership, countries and the status quo of education.

The eight ‘pedagogical attributes’ of the boundary-breaking leadership development model, and their possible implications, are:

Pedagogical attributes	Possible implications
Construction of meaning	Co-learning; reduced hierarchy
Provision of a forum for discussion (in their case, through on-line means)	Potential discomfort; technological infrastructure; skill development; seamless integration of technology
Validation of personal knowledge	Confluence of theory and practice; reduced status differential
Generative approach to learning	Flexible structures; varied evaluations; issue relevancy; contextualised participation
Formal & informal leadership	Extended participant profile; shared responsibility for learning
Sense of community	Reduced teacher isolation; global community; enhanced local community
Growth of a counterculture	Pushing the edge of beliefs and practices; ‘possibilizing’
International perspectives	‘big picture’ focus; alternative perspectives

This model has contributed to the title of my paper, and has been a useful tool against which to reflect my experiences.

1. The Case Study

GOAL: To collate the rich data from a four-year journey of establishing, maintaining and sustaining a PLC in one school

For research ethics purposes I will not identify the school to which the case study applies in this report, but to give some perspective, it is an urban single-sex secondary school of 650 students, with a staff of 45 teachers. To prepare the case study I gathered all of the material available relating to the development, implementation and evaluation of a professional learning community over four years. I summarise here some key points relating to this case study:

Year 1: The Beginnings A group of curriculum leaders and the Deputy Principal identified the benefits of learning, talking and being together as professionals, and instigated a PLC model that could work in that school. They did this through researching a range of models, identifying the aims of a PLC, and exploring the practicalities of making it happen. Time spent with Dr Jan Robertson motivated the leadership team, and provided an evaluation framework as a starting point. Once the vision and the model were established, the initiative was launched in a staff meeting at the end of the year, prior to its implementation the following year.

The Vision The leadership group hoped that bringing teachers together in a planned, cross-curricular programme of dialogue would build unity in improving student learning outcomes. Specifically, the aim was *to build a professional learning community among teachers and encourage collaborative practice, learning conversations, action research and targeted professional development in order to improve student learning outcomes.*

The Model Some key elements of the PLC model in this case study were:

- Six PLC groups were established to include every teacher
- Teachers were allocated to a PLC group by the DP at the beginning of each year, based on a cross-curricular spread
- PLC time was timetabled into the school week, with a 35 minute meeting time before interval each Tuesday, during which the students were engaged in a supervised whole-school activity
- Learning Journals were provided for each teacher, to be used in PLC time and other professional learning times
- Each PLC group appointed a facilitator, and training was provided for facilitators in skills such as leading dialogue
- A booklet outlining the topics and tasks for each term was provided, to guide a cohesive whole-school focus for the PLC
- Whole-school professional learning throughout the year was structured around the PLCs working together to explore new concepts, such as those introduced by guest speakers
- A team-building day was factored into the teacher –only-days at the start of the year in order to launch the PLCs and to build new shared experiences among the teachers
- The PLCs completed an evaluation at the end of each term to help guide the development of the model

Year 2: Getting underway The team building day to launch the PLC initiative took place at an outdoor adventure facility where teachers were able to do caving, bush walking and abseiling, so they got to know each other in the context of new shared experiences.

Each term the PLCs were given a focus, with a series of guiding questions to direct the dialogue and help them to understand the process. Each focus was connected to a school-wide learning initiative, and was reinforced through staff workshops and guest

speakers. There was an evaluation at the end of each term. The focus areas were:

- Term 1: building a learning community
- Term 2: engaging students with ICT
- Term 3: pastoral care
- Term 4: evaluation of our PLC

The Evaluation

At the final meeting of each term the PLCs completed an evaluation which helped the lead team to identify strengths and weaknesses of the model and make any interventions as necessary. The evaluation template for each term asked for comments under the following headings:

Learned
Affirmed
Challenged
Specific insights
Questions raised
Actions

The focus of Term 4 was to complete a full evaluation, using Jan Robertson's '10 Principles of a PLC'. Discussion of this tool is included later in this report.

What they said

- *PLCs help us to be reflective more often than just at the end of the year*
- *The meetings provide us with a forum to share our strategies*
- *Taking risks means the possibility of 'stuff-ups' but also the opportunity to develop our teaching expertise*
- *Sometimes things were too prescribed – let us do things our own way*
- *PLC discussions are helping us with ways of upskilling, like sharing useful websites*
- *Our PLC has been a healthy forum for sharing ideas in a positive way we have giggles in PLC meetings!*

Overall, the PLC experience had provided the teachers with a new way of talking and learning together, and had built relationships and improved the culture in the staff. Most teachers had valued this time together and the collegial support it had provided.

Some teachers were still unsure of the purpose of the PLC initiative and did not take it seriously, and some felt the guided focus for each term was too prescribed – they would like to discuss their own issues and ideas beyond the scope of the school-wide focus areas.

Year 3: Losing momentum

In keeping with the typical trend of any new initiative, this second year of the PLC model took some time to gain momentum, experiencing a dip in motivation. Some contributing factors to this dip could include:

- a change in school leadership, and the subsequent uncertainty this brings

- teachers were placed into new PLCs for the year, with the intention always being to mix people up each year, which took some time to get used to
- the teacher-only 'day out' at a local coastal venue did not focus entirely on building the PLC, but also included other information and focus areas, which shifted attention from the important step of team building
- a school-wide professional learning afternoon with an international guest speaker was not well received by the staff and so subsequent PLC conversations took a negative approach

Overall the trust, excitement and commitment that were features of the first year were not evident in the second year, and evaluations from the first term confirmed this.

Back on track

Some teachers thought the second year had been somewhat 'rudderless' and felt they needed more guidance in the PLC, despite asking the previous year for greater autonomy over topics. The PLC facilitators agreed that a compromise could be to set PLCs a focus for each term, but that each group would take its own inquiry approach to the topic. Subsequently the focus areas for terms two and three were:

- Key competencies: an action research
- Professional reading: building a library of shared readings

The Evaluation

Despite the slow start to the year in PLCs, evaluation comments included:

- *The readings started out as a chore but turned out to be very interesting – we realised we need to prioritise reading more in our busy days*
- *Great dynamics in our group, we were confident to share ideas and always wanted longer*
- *I felt empowered by discovering others are struggling with the same issues as I am*
- *We get to know staff we might not otherwise know*
- *The action research took theory about the key competencies into action in a non-threatening way*

Next steps

At the end of the second year of the initiative there was enough understanding of the PLC concept for significant feedback on the chosen model, and key ideas were put forward in order to make the model relevant and productive. These included:

- *Autonomy and flexibility: let the PLCs choose their own focus topic, carry out the inquiry, and present back to the staff*
- *Theory to practice: wanting to see what's happening in other classrooms and apply the strategies we've discussed*
- *Openness and trust: keep the Senior Leadership Team out of the PLCs so we are free to be open in our conversations and to show they trust our professionalism*
- *Facilitation: take this more seriously, address negative dynamics before they become destructive*

A commitment

As one teacher put it: *A lot of school time has been committed to PLCs and the past two years have opened up a lot of dialogue – there is room to improve our commitment to it – our group has gelled and could actually achieve something if we put our minds to it.*

The new principal was fully committed to the PLC model, and the re-energised leadership team was prepared to take on the suggestions from the evaluations.

Year 4: Towards sustainability

The third year of PLCs firmly cemented the model and its vision in the culture of the school: it had become ‘the way we do things around here’. Features of the sustainable PLC model were:

- A highly anticipated and positive teacher-only team building day to launch the PLC for the year, featuring a mystery bus trip: to a zoo!
- Beginning the term with a structure, guiding the newly formed PLCs through the process of establishing a functioning group of collaborative practitioners
- A whole-school professional learning workshop with an international educator whose visit was well prepared for and whose messages were followed up in the PLC context
- Professional readings were shared from within the PLC, and beyond
- Senior Leaders were not allocated PLCs, although they were often invited into different PLC groups to contribute a perspective or hear a problem or proposal
- Terms two and three were given over to PLCs to select an area for action research into a topic of their choice, following a workshop for the whole staff on the inquiry process.
- Term four was dedicated to presentations to the staff from each PLC on the outcomes of their inquiries.

Reflecting on the revised model

Inquiry / Action research: with a free reign on selecting a focus area and committing to carrying out an inquiry that would improve student learning outcomes, many PLCs took a long time to get underway, and many outcomes showed minimal impact on students.

Reflections:

- *It was great to have discussions across departments but we did lose our way sometimes, and change our focus.*
- *Next time we would slow down and cover fewer points, in greater depth*
- *We liked choosing our own topics*
- *We should have got to our specific goals earlier*
- *We relied on our facilitator to give all guidance and motivation – we should have been more committed as a group*

Presentations: although given 20 minutes each to present, and the challenge to be as creative as possible, most groups read from Power Points and talked over time about findings that were quite

specific to their own topic rather than the whole staff.

Reflections:

- *The presentations were not great examples of teaching! We could have done that better.*
- *We should have presented our learning journey, which was common to all the PLCs, instead of focusing on trying to 'teach' the knowledge we had gained*

The Evaluation

The more practical, applied approach to PLCs, combined perhaps with the increasing familiarity and commitment by the staff, led to evaluation comments such as:

- *We used it as a sounding board for ideas and felt we had a voice with Senior Leadership – it opened up a communication platform and we got things done*
- *We went into each others classrooms – a first in my career!*
- *It exposed our talents and knowledge as a collective*
- *This has changed my style of teaching, especially for the seniors*
- *We began re-writing units together as our understanding of the NZC grew*
- *We were able to make mistakes and learn from them*
- *We took out topic from a vague idea and moved towards planning and using it in classroom practice*

Conclusion

With yet another change in Senior Leadership, it was important that the PLC initiative had moved towards its vision, and had become sustainable. The '10 Principles of PLCs' that were the guiding benchmark throughout the process had been consistently applied, and could be seen to be increasing over the three years. Along with that, a culture of collaboration was evident in all areas of the school, including departments and inter-curricular initiatives.

However, outcomes of student learning as a direct result of the PLC initiative are harder to measure, and quantitative data is not yet available on this.

A next step for this school's PLC was to expand its boundaries, to include other schools or community groups, or international learning communities. This was beginning to occur among some members of staff to great effect.

Boundary breaking

The development of the PLC at this school met several of the attributes and outcomes of the boundary-breaking model, such as:

Questions for Deputy Principals

1. What are the elements of this PLC model that you would replicate in your own context?
 2. Which challenges and barriers that this school faced could you avoid, and how?
 3. If you are currently operating a PLC model in your school, how could you expand its boundaries beyond the teachers, and beyond the school?
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boundary-breaking model, such as:

- Breaking the boundaries within the school's hierarchy, with constant evaluations leading to adjustments and improvements made to the model, as requested by the users rather than the management;
- Breaking boundaries between subjects and departments by purposefully mixing teachers into cross-curricular groups;
- Breaking boundaries of the school day, by finding time to provide a space for PLC meetings;
- Breaking boundaries between theory and practice, with PLC members having their own experiences validated through wider reading and shared experiences;
- Breaking boundaries that enabled distributed leadership to develop, including student voice and forums to help explore other aspects of school life such as ICT and pedagogy.

2. The literature

GOAL: To make connections between the data from the case study and a range of other perspectives.

Two international authorities on developing professional learning communities in schools were influential in shaping the model used in this case study: Jan Roberston (NZ) and Louise Stoll (UK). As part of my NASDAP Scholarship I was able to meet both of these educational academics which meant I could discuss their theories as it had been put it into practice.



Jan Roberston was the Director of the University of Waikato's Educational Leadership Centre at the time at which the journey towards developing a professional learning community at the school was just beginning. Robertson made a presentation to the staff during a teacher symposium day, and her perspective on teachers as leaders challenged and inspired many who heard her. It was her article 'Ten Principles for Principled Leadership Practice of Professional Learning Communities' (2005) that underpinned the model that was eventually established, because the group of leaders developing the model felt strongly that these were the indeed the principles that they would like to see modelled in that school.

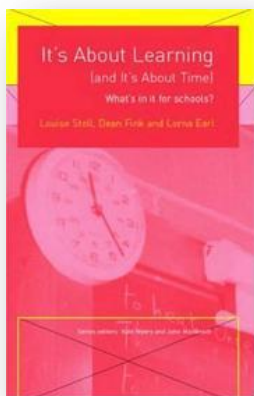
The article asks, “What would I see if I came into your organisation when you had achieved the goal of a professional learning community” What would it look like?”, and suggests it would show evidence of the following principles:

1. Inquiry
2. Risk-taking and challenge
3. Responsibility and trust
4. Shared learning
5. Support
6. Building capacity
7. Quality
8. Innovation
9. Critical thinking and reflection
10. Belief

At the end of each of the first three years that the PLC was in operation, it was against these principles that each group self-evaluated. Collation of this data shows a gradual progression towards the implementation of these ten principles.

Ten principles for professional learning communities (Robertson, 2005)	Evaluation comments from the case study
Principle 1: Inquiry – the importance of researching practice and seeking information. Teachers ask questions about their practice and engage in problem solving as a proactive search for continual improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>The PLC helps us to be more reflective more often than just at the end of the year.</i> - <i>The inquiry model gave us a starting point as there were so many variables in our learning needs.</i>
Principle 2: Risk-taking and challenge – active experimentation within a cycle of reflection and action. Teachers will be seen trying out new ideas and sharing their successes and failures with one another. Opportunities and structures will be provided to move people out of their comfort zone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Taking risks means the possibility of ‘stuff ups’ but also the opportunity to fully develop our teaching expertise.</i> - <i>Our discussions and idea sharing have encouraged us all to integrate ICT into our lessons</i>
Principles 3: Responsibility and trust – accountability and ownership of one’s own practice and development. Teachers take responsibility for their own work and are critically reflective about their practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Sometimes things [in the programme] are too prescribed – we want to be trusted to do things in our own way and we’ll get there in the end.</i> - <i>We looked forward to the time each week; we were given the time to discuss relevant ideas as a professional group.</i>
Principle 4: Shared learning – mutual understanding, reciprocal learning. Teachers who share understanding know why they are doing what they are doing, and the intended impact on student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Our PLC has been a healthy forum for sharing ideas in a positive way as we have a mix of talents based on different teaching methods, curriculum areas and even generations of teachers.</i>

achievement.	
Principle 5: Support – a commitment to caring for others in the institution; acknowledging one another as people as well as professionals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>We have giggles in PLC meetings!</i> - <i>We took comfort from the fact that we all faced similar issues.</i>
Principle 6: Building capacity – the ability to create and sustain the vision. Interdependence is more important than independence. Teachers have opportunities to lead and take responsibility for the vision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>We used our PLC as a sounding board for big ideas and felt we had a voice with Senior Management – it opened up a communication platform and we got some things done.</i>
Principle 7: Quality – the highest standards possible, developed through vision and values. Teachers will focus on student achievement, and as lifelong learners will always be striving to improve their professional practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>We were focused on improving student learning this year.</i> - <i>Reflecting on our topic and making changes to our practice is fundamental to students’ success in the 21st century.</i>
Principle 8: Innovation and improvement – new ways of thinking and being. Transformational teachers can show evidence of improvement, and seek opportunities to engage in futures and ‘big picture’ thinking of the kind that brings about change in education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>We feel more confident about merging and adapting traditional teaching strategies with the new IT resources we have available.</i> - <i>It has made us become 21st century teachers.</i> - <i>This has changed my style of teaching.</i>
Principle 9: Critical thinking and reflection – outside perspectives and feedback. Lessen the gap between what we think we do, or would like to do, and what we actually do in our practice, by questioning why things are done and asking for other perspectives on their work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>We learnt from each other, had open conversations.</i> - <i>Cross-curriculum sharing was great – we went into each others’ classrooms.</i> - <i>It’s empowering - the realisation that there are others who are struggling with the same issues as I am.</i>
Principle 10: Belief – in oneself, in people and in ideas. The belief that we can make a difference to the quality of learning in an institution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>When everyone has common values we move forward together.</i> - <i>We really value [the PLCs] – keep mixing them, it’s great to get to know people and hear different views.</i>



Another flagship resource as the model was developed was Stoll, Earl and Fink’s (2003) *It’s about learning (and it’s about time)*. This book begins by outlining the reasons for change in the way learning takes place in schools in the twenty-first century, and the features of learning for young people. It then goes on to explore how teachers learn, including elements that influence and enhance teacher learning, and how leaders can lead for learning. This background, along with reflective questions throughout the book, leads up to a chapter on ‘The learning community: learning together and learning from one another’.

In this chapter, Stoll, Earl and Fink draw on several definitions for a professional learning community:

- “A group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, earning-oriented and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems and complexities of teaching and learning.” Mitchell & Sackney (2003).
- “A learning organisation is one that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future.” Senge (1990).
- “To become a true learning community a school must also be a: community of relationships; community of place; community of mind and heart; community of memory; and a community of practice.” Sergiovanni (2000).

They discuss school culture and its influence on readiness for change, citing Senge who says a school is ‘doomed to tinkering’ if it does not address school culture. Depending on the culture of the school, attempting collective learning may be very different. Stoll and Fink (1996) describe five cultures of schools: moving, cruising, struggling, strolling, and sinking, and point out that the professional learning model that is adopted must take account of which mode the school is in.

They go on to identify the processes that will enhance learning for community, which can be used to evaluate the case study in terms of how learning was enhanced at that school.

Processes that enhance learning from community – Stoll, Earl & Fink (2003)	Examples from the case study
Community dialogue – the importance of moving from discussions, which harbour deeply held assumptions and block honest communication, and dialogue, which is an open process encouraging people to ‘participate in a pool of shared meaning that leads to aligned action’ (Jaworski, 1998).	Teachers had to learn a new way of talking, by applying the skills of dialogue. This was one of the first strategies learnt by PLC group facilitators, who went on to introduce ‘discussion vs dialogue’ as an early topic as the groups were learning to work together.
Self-evaluation – not just collecting data, but also “the strategic thinking, planning and action that creates useful new knowledge for the school community.”	The continual use of self-evaluation led to constant revising and refining of the model. In the fourth year, when teachers carried out their own inquiries, there was a move to creating new knowledge: “Reflecting on our topic and making changes to our practice is fundamental to students’ success in the twenty-first century.”
Team learning – learning is a social process, and “opportunities for teachers and leaders to learn, process and understand their learning experiences together are essential.”	Feedback consistently reflected on the value of the team learning that was taking place: “sharing ideas with colleagues across departments and levels of responsibility”; “interactions with other teachers to share ideas for curriculum innovations”; “it helped

	me to feel confident to implement the NZC”.
Reculturing – “visiting and challenging cultural norms, making sure they are supportive of learning”	By the end of the third year the culture of the school had tangibly shifted, to one that was supportive of teachers learning together and from one another. “We would like longer sessions and fewer interruptions”; “[Learning together] has exposed our talents and knowledge as a collective”.
Creativity and spontaneity – boundaries are pushed as people collectively identify new problems and transfer previous learning in new ways to solve these problems progressively over time.	The teacher-driven approach to inquiry in the fourth year of the professional learning community had enabled greater creativity in problem solving. “We identified barriers to using ICT in our classrooms were a combination of the ‘fear factor’ and the ‘time factor’ so we worked on addressing these together.”
Connecting everything you know – looking at the whole and seeing the relationships and patterns between the parts – ‘big picture thinking’.	This was the challenge for leadership as the model was evolving: the big picture had to be seen and communicated, despite not always being clear in the early stages. Early evaluations saw teachers still uncertain of the purpose of the PLC – “where to from here, and what is the purpose of this initiative?” – while a comment at the end of the fourth year suggests they understood the big picture: “we were focused on improving student learning this year”.

Stoll, along with colleagues at the National College for School Leadership, has developed a toolkit for developing, sustaining and evaluating a professional learning community. In the toolkit *Professional Learning Communities: source materials for school leaders and other leaders of professional learning* (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood and Hawkey, 2006) a professional learning community is defined as:

An effective PLC has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professional in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning. A PLC is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils’ learning.

They identify the characteristics of a PLC as:

1. Shared values and vision
2. Collective responsibility for pupils’ learning
3. Collaboration focused on learning
4. Group as well as individual professional learning
5. Reflective professional enquiry

6. Openness, networks and partnership
7. Inclusive membership
8. Mutual trust, respect and support

The toolkit identifies three ways to determine the effectiveness of a PLC:

- It has impact on pupil learning and social development
- It has an impact on staff morale and practice, with potential for developing leadership capacity
- The characteristics are in place and processes operating smoothly – it is part of ‘the way we do things’.

This resource is a practical guide to building a professional learning community in a school. In a series of booklets leaders are taken through theories behind PLCs, practical activities to get the teachers thinking collaboratively, and reflective questions for the journey.

The New Zealand best evidence synthesis iteration of professional development (Timperley, et al, 2007) identified teacher participation in some form of structured learning group as consistent across the core studies, but found that participation in such groups was often associated with neutral or negative outcomes for students. They found that “while teachers found professional communities a source of support, they typically had little impact on the learning of their students” (p. 202). In their analysis of the studies they identified two key qualities that promote teacher and student learning:

Questions for Deputy Principals

1. Which body of theory forms the foundation for your development of a PLC?
 2. How will you know when you have achieved the goal of a professional learning community?
 3. Which tools do you have to help you implement a PLC model?
 4. What questions will you ask in evaluating progress towards your vision?
 5. How will you know if your PLC is having an impact on student learning?
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“1. Participants were supported to process new understandings and their implications for teaching

- Dialogue challenged problematic beliefs and tested the efficacy of competing ideas.
- Expertise external to the group brought new perspectives and assisted in developing these dialogical norms.

2. The focus was on analysing the impact of teaching on student learning.

- Artefacts representing student learning helped ground discussions
- Teachers had high but realistic expectations of students and believed they could make a difference.
- Norms of collective responsibility for students replaced teacher-focused norms of individualism and autonomy.” (Timperley, et al, 2007, p. 203).

It is essential to keep at the forefront of any learning community model the intent to improve student learning, and to consider ways of measuring this. Timperley, et al conclude in this section of the BES that, “participation in

professional learning communities can either promote professional learning or work against it, by reinforcing the status quo” (p. 205).

Other well known authorities on learning communities in education are Richard Dufor and Rebecca Dufor. They say “members of a professional learning community create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what the organisation must become in order to help all students learn” (2003). Their professional learning community evaluation rubric is also a useful tool.

There is a lot of literature available on the topic, and a useful review of the literature is available from Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas (2006).

3. School visits

GOAL: To gain insights into another education system, through an international learning community

In planning my travel to the UK I drew on my international networks to help select schools to visit. With time limited, and with an idea of where I would be based, I selected two schools that would be accessible, and would give me insights into the English education system. Setting up these school visits was as straight-forward as emailing each of the Head Teachers with an introduction and a request for a meeting, both of whom responded immediately and positively.



The goals for my school visits were:

Goal	Outcome
<p>To see a school in a different country, and how learning takes place in a different culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It was the end of the school year for these schools, with the requisite range of activities and students coming and going that are part of this time of year. I was still able to see parts of the schools in action. - Both schools had long histories, with one dating its origins back 900 years. This created challenges in updating school buildings, and both schools had significant building programmes in place. - Technology and ICT tools were very well resourced, with student access to computers throughout the classrooms, study spaces and libraries. One school even had banks of computers throughout corridors for casual student use. - Teachers moved between classrooms, booking a

	<p>different classroom space depending on the type of lesson they had planned (for example, a practical lab, a lecture, a group activity).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Senior students in both schools had large, well equipped common rooms, with a senior mentor to supervise the space while also assisting with study, career planning and pastoral care.
<p>To understand the challenges and opportunities experienced by English school leaders, through sharing leadership stories</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - At the time I was in England the new government was making dramatic budget cuts in education, including freezing funding for school property. This made for interesting conversations! - Many other issues, such as leading change, managing a full curriculum, student engagement, and the workload of a principal were issues we shared. - The Head Teachers were very interested in comparing the education system in New Zealand, and in understanding some of the challenges faced here too. - What I gained from this was a sense of collegiality and connectivity between people on the other side of the world who are driven by the same moral purpose for education.
<p>To reciprocate through sharing my research and my own leadership stories</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - With time limited, and with such gracious hosts who were prepared to let me do most of the learning, we did not delve deeply into my research. However, some information and ideas were shared, and the possibility for on-going connections and conversations was opened up.

Visiting the two schools was a highlight of my trip, and really illustrated the extent to which professional learning communities cross boundaries – in this case, international boundaries.

One school in particular struck me as being a true learning community. While most schools are focusing in the early stages on establishing functional learning communities within their own institutions, as in the case study above, Stoll, Earl and Fink (2003) describe professional learning communities as being:

- Learning for community
- Learning of community
- Learning from community
- Learning with community
- Learning as community

At Beauchamp College, Leicester, <http://www.beauchamp.leics.sch.uk/> I identified several features of a learning community that has begun to operate beyond the boundaries. For example:



- All teaching staff are undergoing Masters programmes in association with the University of Leicester, and are mentored by a Researcher in Residence.
- The college is a teacher training outpost for the University of Leicester, with a senior staff member facilitating the residential training programme for trainees.
- All non-teaching para-professionals working at the school have access to relevant degrees and other qualifications, delivered on-site by university staff.
- The college facilities include a community gymnasium, beauty salon, school for the deaf, early childhood centre and specialist spaces for autistic children, all of which are operated by students on vocational courses for the community to access.
- The college is seeking opportunities to extend the boundaries of its learning to include staff and students of community schools, such as contributing primaries and neighbouring public and state schools.

Questions for Deputy Principals

1. Which networks and contacts could help you to connect with schools in other countries?
2. How could you take your school's learning community beyond the boundaries of the institution?

Boundary breaking

Using Robertson and Webber's model, I can see that my international school visits broke the boundaries of my own national context by providing alternative perspectives, and a sense of a global community of educators. I could bring back to my own school the experiences and observations I gained, and look at them in my own context. Also, by travelling with an intent to share and reciprocate there is the possibility of further international integration and sharing of resources. In particular, I saw one school that was breaking boundaries within its own community, and was ultimately benefiting its students through such an open and collaborative approach.

4. Leadership Conference (London Institute of Education) with Louise Stoll

GOAL: To learn from an international expert on professional learning communities



Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

I attended this leadership conference (<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/newsEvents/33003.html>) at the University of London's London Centre for Leadership in Learning with the intention of networking with local school leaders, and to hear Louise Stoll as the keynote. I had arranged in advance to spend some time with Dr Stoll during the course of the conference.

In her keynote, Stoll focused on ‘Leading deep change: stimulating learning conversations’, on the premise that, in a professional learning community, the learning conversation is the most powerful strategy for teachers in sharing knowledge and practice. Her definition of a PLC is: “an inclusive and mutually supportive group of people with a collaborative, reflective and growth-oriented approach towards investigating and learning more about their practice in order to improve pupils’ learning” (Stoll, 2007), and she identified the learning conversation as the most powerful strategy for teachers in sharing knowledge and practice. Stoll asked us to consider, what is the difference between talking to each other and sharing practice, and a learning conversation?

Stoll defined a learning conversation ‘an approach to professional dialogue that supports each member of the community to reflect on their practice. As a result they gain new knowledge that they can use to improve their practice.’ Her presentation went on to identify the features of a professional learning conversation as:

- An approach from enquiry-mindedness
- Evidence of a given focus
- Having a structure and agreed protocols
- Exploring diverse perspectives
- Including ‘expert’ knowledge or theory
- Elements of respectful challenge
- Elements of risk taking
- Expecting a level of reflection that challenges thinking
- Mutual learning and knowledge creation
- Leading to action – change in practice

(Stoll, 2010)



I was also fortunate to spend time with Louise throughout the conference, during which time we chatted about my own research and she generously supplied me with further resources on professional learning communities. Louise challenged me to think about next steps for a school’s PLC, again looking at opportunities to extend the boundaries of what constitutes ‘community’.

During the conference I attended workshops on leadership of professional learning in schools, and a Learning Conversation, where delegates selected a ‘conversation’ to attend and participated in a facilitated discussion on a given topic. This was a wonderful, informal opportunity to gain greater insight into the English education system, and to build an international perspective on issues facing educators there.

Questions for Deputy Principals

1. To what extent could you refine the ‘learning conversations’ that are taking place in your school?

2. Which current academic or writer would you make contact with, and what questions would you have for them? How could you meet them, or have them visit your school?

Boundary breaking

The approachability and willingness of a world-renown educator to meet with me, share experiences, and provide resources certainly broke the boundaries between the academic and the practitioner. I have been fortunate to have such experiences with academics such as Jan Robertson and Louise Stoll, and encourage others to make personal contact with the people whose books or leadership models are inspiring them.

5. BELMAS Conference

GOAL: To network within an international learning community



‘BELMAS is an educational charity that aims to provide a distinctive, independent and critical voice in the pursuit of quality education through effective leadership and management. We are concerned with ideas and practice and the interrelationship between the two.’ (<http://www.belmas.org.uk/belmas/home.eb>)

Having met the Chairperson of BELMAS at a New Zealand conference I was delighted to find that their international conference would be taking place at the time I would be in the UK. The true scope of the international research community was evident, with speakers and delegates from the UK, USA, Asia and all over Europe. The conference theme was ‘New organisations, new leadership?’ and the papers were diverse.

I attended workshops including:

- The changing leadership landscape... how should we grow future leaders?
- Succession planning in England: new leaders and new forms of leadership
- A ‘local solutions’ approach to national challenges
- Building and sustaining success in principalship: the importance of trust
- Challenges of school administrators in Yucatan, Mexico
- Culturally responsive leadership practices in Norway, the USA and Cyprus

This conference provided a fascinating opportunity to network with the international learning community as the delegates represented the full spectrum of educational settings, from early childhood to tertiary, and the presenters were both practitioners and academics. One keynote was from UCEA President Autumn Tooms from Kent State University. She explored the purpose of schooling in today’s global environment, and the extent to which change is possible in educational leadership. She described change as coming from “small moments of courage”.

Boundary breaking

Attending a truly international conference of this scale was both challenging and affirming. From an international perspective it gave me the opportunity to understand that many issues in educational leadership that are faced in New Zealand have commonalities around the world, and there was a sense of solidarity among all of us who work with teenagers and

within the confines of changing government policies. Further, I could see that our own leadership models could be challenged by experiences of those working among other indigenous cultures, those in major urban centres, and those for whom other cultures and languages are just a train ride away.

Questions for Deputy Principals

1. Which networks could you join that would enhance your own profile at national or international level?

2. What understanding do you have of international issues and perspectives in education that could assist you with your own leadership practice?

BELMAS is a huge international educational network, but New Zealand leaders have access to some strong networks too, such as NASDAP (www.nasdap.org.nz), NZEALS (www.nzeals.org.nz) and iNet (www.ssat-inet.net). Belonging to such networks opens the door to international research and perspectives, contacts, debate and reciprocal learning. They also provide an avenue for New Zealand educators to present their own findings, through journal articles or workshop presentations, and a way for our own educators to gain an international profile.

6. Share my findings with the NASDAP community

GOAL: To provide useful tools and questions for Deputy Principals in New Zealand

In the spirit of networking and sharing experiences, and in keeping with the requirements of the NASDAP scholarship, it is my hope and intention to explore the questions raised in this report with the Assistant and Deputy Principal network in New Zealand.

Professional learning communities that are boundary breaking will have an impact on student learning if they challenge the status quo, and put students at the centre. In analysing this case study in relation to the literature and an international experience I have been able to identify what could be done next in developing a learning community model and how this could be shared with a wider audience. I encourage Deputy and Assistant Principals to consider these questions, no matter where they are in building a learning community, and take bold steps towards improving teacher learning for the sake of student learning.

For any questions or for further information I would welcome queries from NASDAP members, through telephone 03 6930017 or email j.hayes@geraldinehs.school.nz.

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