BEING ON THE INSIDE OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY:
A REFLECTION-ON-PRACTICE

By

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This qualitative inquiry used a reflection-on-practice to examine my experiences facilitating professional learning within an Ontario public elementary school. My research revealed that my non-traditional approach to teacher professional development might constitute a form of Professional Learning Community (PLC). The data show that as a facilitator I found myself both inside and outside the communities I tried to form and support. Further, this inquiry exemplifies the ways I both nurtured and impeded professional learning as a result of my facilitation. I hope that the information and insights gleamed from this study may be broadened to include professional learning as it relates to occupations outside the realm of education. As a result, this thesis offers approaches to facilitation that might be able to transform professional practice through PD and consequently, improve student success.
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Dedications

To my parents for eternally being there for me, Elissa for pushing me to do what I never believe I can, and my boyfriend-fiancée-husband for your support throughout this journey and beyond
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Chapter 1: Introduction

After preparation and set-up, six of my colleagues and both school administrators enter the room. Should I stand or sit? In my role as both a teacher and a facilitator of teacher learning, where do I situate myself? Ambivalently, I wait. My excitement about having the time to work together to improve our teaching practices is quickly stymied. I fear that the focus of our work might derive from the top down or worse that this may be a one-off interaction where everyone amiably attends and walks away unchanged. I pray, *please do not let this be another ineffective professional learning experience.*

Throughout this thesis I examined my experiences as a facilitator and member of the professional learning opportunities that took place at my school, and through these experiences, my understanding of facilitation was deepened to more effectively support the learning of teachers. My research was conducted over the course of two months in an Ontario public elementary school. While this is only one person’s perspective, I hope that an analysis of my experiences may shed light on teacher professional learning.

*Traditional Professional Development- Participant*

Professional Development (PD) is most often mandated by institutions as a means of informing teachers of the things they need to do better in order to succeed. This might include sharing resources and going over procedures and best practices to fulfill one’s role. The impetus for professional development typically includes new policies, programs and initiatives at the provincial, board, and/or school level. In the world of public education, my world for the past 10 years as an elementary teacher, PD is “delivered” through staff meetings, and more recently embedded through professional learning sessions with colleagues in a variety of formats and groupings. Professionals may be grouped by entire clusters of schools, or comprised of school-wide staff meetings, grade
team meetings and meetings based on whether in the Elementary panel you teach at the Primary, Junior and Intermediate division.

When I initially entered the teaching profession the format of PD was simple- find a place to sit, stop talking, look, listen and occasionally jot down notes. And so the conventional way to train teachers begins. The design and content of the workshop emerges cryptically from “above” finding their way down to the awaiting teachers. Passively, I witness this one time event and when I leave, so too does everything I just heard. This format of delivering PD effectively follows a timeline, assumes accountability by “reaching” many people in a time and cost efficient manner but is coined the one-shot-workshop (Clark, 2001) as teachers are exposed to a predetermined topic decided upon and delivered by “knowledgeable others”, presenters and/or outside experts. The workshop occurs once, typically over a couple of hours, there is no discussion or follow-up and the participants leave to either use or not use what they just heard.

In terms of sound teaching these workshops lack what in educational circles is known as the currently coveted diagnostic assessment for learning, essential to determine what learners know in order to decide what they need to be taught. Teacher input is absent from this model; and then the realization strikes me, teacher knowledge cannot be respected when it is not even recognized. As I am not involved in selecting the content of these professional development sessions, I must try to develop cognitive hooks to support an understanding of what is presented. I, along with all the other teachers, attend the workshop but just as it was created without us, it seems to move along and end without us. Often unsure of what we ought to do with what we just heard, we file out, returning to do what we did before entering the workshop.

Even the best workshops, which inspire and excite attendees, fail to create change in teacher practice. These workshops venerate brilliant ideas exemplified in
short edited videos of a master teacher perfectly executing a new teaching practice or
the use of a new resource. I wonder where the presenters come up with this idea and
how did they initiated it. I long to be the teacher who figured out how to use this or that
technique or this or that new resource, with my particular students. But, as I cannot, my
desire to run back and emulate what I remember seeing becomes daunting to the point
of pedagogical paralysis -if only, if only. I do not know how to proceed and without
anyone to ask I feel less secure in my teaching abilities and consequently,
professionally isolated.

My experiences with traditional PD made me desire a better more effective way
to teach teachers. Whether teacher professional development is self-directed/optional or
mandatory I want my professional learning to increase my competency as an
educational practitioner. When the old workshop model failed to inspire and transform
my practice I assumed something was wrong with me. After much research I now know
that no matter how potentially engaging or relevant to my teaching, the “one-shot”
workshop is an ineffective method of delivering PD in general. However, as teaching is a
profession, PD is an essential element of our activities. It is neither helpful to hope the
traditional model looks good enough nor that it is the best flawed way to teach teachers.
If the model I am accustomed to does not work the questions becomes, what does?

Changes in Professional Development

Whole group workshops are not the only form of PD I received through the course of my
teaching career. I have and continue to enjoy optional or self-directed professional
development in the form of Additional Qualification Courses, series of workshops, and
completing courses for my Masters of Arts degree. These formats are appealing as they
are rooted in personal interest and typically include opportunities to develop learning
through attempting what is taught based on the knowledge and conversations which arise in these professional development experiences. While these methods seem best for me they rarely occur in the mandatory school/board setting.

School boards traditionally find mandatory professional development via whole staff workshops appealing for good reason. This format of PD enables boards to disseminate a consistent message to large groups of professionals in a time and cost effective manner. For these reasons it makes sense for schools to continue to use the large group one-shot-workshop model even though research over the past 20 years reveals that this format is ineffectual (Clark 2001; Verloop, Driel & Meijer, 2001; Kooy, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011). While this is the case most PD continues in the form of workshops. Over the past ten years delivering professional development using only large group workshops at the individual school level shifted radically to PD occurring in groups. Many wanted to espouse this progressive format of teacher development seemingly overnight.

This newer model of PD, which school systems are currently adopting, is known as teacher-learner communities, or professional learning communities (PLCs)\(^1\). Requirements of professional learning communities include a collaborative space where teaching is viewed as a deeply reflective practice developed in an environment of openness, experimentation and respect. Other characteristics of learning communities include collaboration, making teaching practices public, shared values, and reflexive dialogue (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008; and Hipp, Stoll, Bolam, Wallace, McMahon, Thomas & Huffman, 2003; The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2008). These elements comprise a PLC and are necessary in

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\(^1\)Throughout the course of this thesis the terms teacher-learner community, learning community and professional learning community (PLC) are used interchangeably.
supporting the effectiveness of learning communities.

In education, theory and practice are reciprocal so that one informs and propels the other. In the 1930s Peirce and Dewey spoke to the usefulness of individual inquirers coming together to form communities of inquiry. Foundational to professional learning communities is the theory that knowledge is socially constructed. As such, this method of professional development allows for the social construction of knowledge through participant voice and interactions as teachers get together and talk in groups. Vygotsky’s theory of the social construction of knowledge (Arroio, 2010; Cook, 2010, Lui & Matthews, 2005) is elemental to the collaborative work conducted in these communities. Consequently, his research supports the very essence of PLCs. As knowledge is mediated through social interactions, this model provides a more effective form of professional development.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which are based on sound theory and evidence of usefulness were believed to be the format of PD that could overcome and cure teacher professional development woes. However PLCs did not, and have not had this intended and desired result. How is it that an approach as powerful and effective as Professional Learning Communities is not working as it was intended?

A much-needed change in teacher learning necessitated new means of delivering PD. As a consequence of the urgency with which these methods were adopted, major elements were overlooked. When new methodologies are adopted too swiftly issues often arise, as continues to be the case in the implementation of Professional Learning Communities to support teacher development. The urgency with which people wanted to adopt an improved method of delivering PD was not without consequence. Looking for a quick solution, educational systems, school boards and administrators adopted this model without understanding why and how they ought to be
developed. Thus, amid the excitement of an improved approach of PD, I argue that this improved model of PD has never been, and might never be, actualized in form or function in the public school setting. The consequence appears to be that school systems proudly assert their implementation of Professional Learning Communities but lack their intended structure and purpose and thus, effectiveness.

Though well intentioned, the idea of using PLCs as the method of delivering professional development is hastily adopted. So much so that it remains unclear if anyone knows what they are or how they are supposed to function. The questions that arise for administrators and teachers alike are: Are the things we do at our school actually Professional Learning Communities? And if so how do we know if we are achieving what was intended? With little thought or consideration about what they are, why they work, or how they are formed and sustained, the consequence is an educational system misusing a term. Unused, the power and effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities remains untapped.

As a consequence of the premature adoption of professional learning communities, educational settings have designed these communities around strict groupings of teachers with pre-established assignments, mandates, timelines, and topics. All of which act to the detriment of teacher learning. This is an issue for me as I am currently in a position where I am required to facilitate teacher professional development in my school through a method that perhaps only looks like a Professional Learning Community.

**From Participant to Facilitator**

After attending many workshops my interest in teacher learning blossomed when I along with three other teachers who taught the same grade and the school librarian, were
released for forty minutes and asked to work together to track our students’
achievement based on reading level. Initially, the administrator attended the first ten
minutes then dismissed herself leaving the librarian to facilitate the rest of the time we
spent together.

While we had no say on the focus of the work we were asked to do, it was the
first time I experienced a form of mandatory PD where we had time to talk to one
another! We met around a table as equals discussing our students. Our time together
was short and designed to have us numerically track student achievement in reading.
However, left to our own devices a conversation ensued. As we looked at each other’s
students’ reading levels, we talked about which students were struggling and who had
made gains.

This was the first time I experienced mandatory professional work that
unintentionally included the opportunity to dialogue about my students with my
colleagues. During this time we shared some of the strategies and practices we used to
help our students read increasingly more complex texts. By asking and answering each
other’s questions, we developed a new way of being together. This new way of being
and interacting created a situation where once our time together ended, our dialogue
continued. We obtained support from one another by seeking each other out in the
hallways to continue our discussion regarding our success and challenges as they
pertained to supporting our students reading achievement.

Upon moving to another school three years later, PD was embedded more
regularly into the instructional day. Every second or third week I met with my
administrators, a teacher facilitator, and four to five other teachers. As a special
education teacher without a homeroom I was typically grouped with the teachers whose
students I supported along with other support staff. During this 40 to 50 minute time
block we looked at the work belonging to one of the homeroom teacher’s students. Looking at and analyzing the students’ work catalyzed a discussion around what students learned based on the work we assigned them. We noticed that when we gave students explicit questions they provided explicit answers but when we sought to obtain implicit or inferential answers it was essential to provide complex open-ended prompts or questions.

We also designed lessons typically related to literacy that someone in the group would volunteer to teach while the rest of us observed and made notes on what we saw and heard. We shared our observations with the group as a way to reflect on our planning. This form of PD provided the safety to honestly discuss, pilot, and reflect on the work we created in an atmosphere of shared learning.

**Becoming a Professional Development Leader- Facilitator**

Though imperfect, the format of PD is changing from only whole group staff meetings and workshops to include small groups of teachers working together. I know now that I learn more effectively working with other teachers when opportunities for discussion and the chance to practice what we discuss are provided. However issues remained: foci for these sessions are predetermined and thus not always personally or professionally relevant to my teaching. This misalignment of professional need with professional development leads to a feeling of wanting to support my students rather than be pulled out to do other work.

Four years ago, after many years of receiving PD, I was placed in the position of professional development facilitator. This role required that I plan and facilitate the PD for all teachers in the school. At best this role was historically divisive. In this position it is assumed that I am first and foremost a teacher but simultaneously it requires that I
work with the school’s administration to plan and facilitate all professional development at the school level. While negotiating the tightrope between both these roles is challenging, the greatest challenge is how to best support teacher learning. I knew what it was like to attend mandatory professional development that was irrelevant. Now it was my job to determine the best way to satisfy all participants in a positively transformational way.

Non-traditional Adult Learning Experiences

i. Non-traditional Learning. In this section I delve into my experiences participating and facilitating professional development that have molded my current views and dispositions regarding facilitating adult learning. As a child my educational experiences were comprised on attending classes were I needed to sit and listen. With the exception of independent projects, tutoring peers in public school, and choices of courses in secondary and post secondary schooling, my prior formal educational experiences required that I attend and memorize rather than apply and create. Fortunately, two experiences provided me the opportunity to critically reexamine my view of learning in general and professional development in particular. They provide knowledge, which perpetually puts into question how people can learn in groups, in turn created this tension between what is and what I know could be.

Central to my view of education is the knowledge I acquired as a result of my twelve years spent at summer camp. It would be a grave understatement to say my camping experience was unique from that in other camps, as it functions in opposition to typical camps. Every day we worked, played, and above all else learned. At the age of eight I was engaged in learning about political and social systems, human rights and ways to positively transform myself, and the world around me. Within this setting of
informal education was the understanding that learning is first and foremost genuinely engaging, relevant, and doable. Once I became a counselor I too learned how to develop activities that allowed children to learn by playing with and applying complex concepts in attainable, fun and thus, transformational ways.

i. Facilitating Non-Traditional Learning. Every experiences gleams new insight and so I share my previous experiences with facilitation which I believe set the stage for my current role in supporting teacher learning. I summarize my previous work facilitating adult learning into three major experiences. Each of these experiences helped shape my beliefs about facilitation, influencing how I facilitate. My first experience supporting adult learning was at a sleepover summer camp working on swim staff. As a lifeguard I was required to teach the other staff basic first aid. This training was helpful to staff and campers and was overall an extremely positive experience. Only now in retrospect can I understand the many elements that made delivering this PD successful. First, the counselors were about the same age with the same emergent level of understanding. Due to the nature of the training the content was relevant and necessary for every participant. Two other elements that made the learning engaging were the hands-on work requiring members to perform the skills taught, along with the social interactions that took place between partners and groups. I recall being fully engaged with planning and running this professional development.

My next two roles facilitating adult learning were related to adult sexual education. Both in undergraduate school and at a homeless youth shelter in the Greater Toronto Area I taught young adults about sexual anatomy, development, sexually transmitted infections and safe sexual practices. While these were not instances of professional development, facilitating this type of adult learning gave me the opportunity
to use the strategies and techniques I learned at camp. In both instances I consciously made the effort to speak with the participants to get a sense of their knowledge and experiences related to the content. Participants volunteered to attend the educational sessions, as they wanted to learn more about sexual behaviour and activities. I was sensitive to the fact that some people were uncomfortable with this subject matter. My awareness of individual members’ feeling prompted me to establish a safe space where everyone felt they could securely engage in the content. What made my facilitation successful in these instances was having an understanding of how the participants felt and what they knew. This knowledge helped me create an environment where each person could engage safely, based on their prior understanding. Through this experience I learned that facilitation is about knowing and honouring those participating in the learning.

Unfortunately, understanding how to support adult learning in informal settings does not translate into an ability to support teacher learning in the formal educational setting. My only previous experience facilitating professional development within the realm of formal education was during my second year of teaching. I was asked by the school’s administration to teach the staff about how to use a particular computer program. At each staff meeting I had to introduce the staff to a new technological tool. Unlike my previous experiences facilitating learning, in this context providing PD proved much more challenging. I needed to find a way to work alongside individuals who had different levels of understanding of a topic that was not necessarily of interest to them.

I took the time to determine what staff wanted to learn to propel the PD but even with this knowledge in place it was challenging to teach what was asked in short fragmented blocks. Given only five to ten minutes made it so there was just enough time to for me demonstrate but never enough time for teachers to actually use the technology
during our time together. I desperately wanted to have time for the staff to work together to attempt to use what was demonstrated. I felt uneasy delivering PD in this traditional way. It was hard to know if teacher practice could be transformed without the time to try new strategies.

In retrospect, I think it was an innate interest in teaching and learning coupled with an ability to work with people that helped propel me into facilitating in informal contexts. These initial experiences made facilitating learning and running PD easier for me than for others and set me on the course for facilitation. I know now that my initial interest facilitating adult learning derived from my previous success supporting the learning of young adults in informal contexts. The way I learned to support adult learning in overnight camp and undergraduate school encouraged non-traditional ways of facilitating.

iii. An Introduction to Facilitating Non-Traditional PD. Another experience that influenced my perception of teaching and professional learning were taking course for my Masters of Arts degree. Teaching full-time while completing my Master’s degree part-time is challenging but what I could not have predicted was the impact of doing both concurrently as a powerful form of professional development. Upon reflection I believe the power of learning in this context is derived through the prerequisite of putting theory directly into practice in my own pedagogy. In this way the experiences I had in my academic and professional environments supported my learning reciprocally (Lee & Brett, 2013). Accustomed to memorizing information by attending lectures and reading textbooks, for the first time I was encouraged to employ what I read and heard in my personal practice. Further, I was required to share this learning with my classmates in a variety of ways. Dialoguing about my efforts to put concepts and theory into practice
helped consolidate my professional knowledge, which greatly improved my teaching practice. My excitement about professional learning continues to grow and although I still have questions, I crave to share these rich experiences with my colleagues.

My ability to support my colleagues’ learning seemed limited; I lacked the understanding of how to work with groups of professionals. Luckily, my Master’s courses allowed me to dig deeper into this area, prompting me to formally research and investigate my personal experiences with PD. My work as a facilitator of teacher learning was ultimately supported by my experiences completing my Master’s degree. It is this learning that is foundational to the work I continue to do as a facilitator. My professional work was further supported by my coursework when I was introduced to divergent ways to support teacher learning including the use of PLCs. Enthusiastically, I put into practice everything I was learning but, I still wanted to dig dipper. My desire to investigate my experiences as a facilitator within a PLC-like framework, prompted me to complete this thesis as a way to share my experiences.

**My Current Work**

Currently, I coordinate, facilitate, and attempt to be a member of the professional learning groups at my school. These groups were organized by similar teaching assignment and the same group met once a week for a four-week block of time. When groups met, members discussed professional issues that were current and relevant in the hopes of determining potential solutions in a non-threatening supporting environment. Discussions often revealed common concerns. One of the groups wanted to determine what the majority of their students could independently do while they read with a small group of their students. The major concerns with previously suggested solutions were that they lacked authentic engagement, accountability and overall
usefulness. In an effort to solve this problem members shared potential strategies and techniques. Eventually, the group selected a particular option that sounded viable. To support authentic and transformative work and learning we experimented with our chosen pedagogy using a trial and error approach. To learn how to best implement this approach in each of our own classes we first piloted it in one member’s class. This approach to teacher learning is highly engaging as teachers have control of the topic, the work, and the setting with which they will see their ideas implemented. As teachers want to see the outcome of their planning, the opportunity to test practical self-determined pedagogical strategies in an actual classroom is highly engaging.

Providing the framework for successful professional learning experiences is a challenge, as I have not had formal facilitation training. Luckily, my alternative teaching and learning experiences via informal education at camp and formal education at the graduate level continue to support my understanding of PD. I can think back and recognize the importance of engagement, social interactions, doing, and reflecting on one’s learning. However, four years in this role has not made the work any less challenging. As soon as I think I have solved an issue impeding teacher learning, another arises, making me feel like I will never fully grasp how to effectively support teacher PD. Independent of the staff or administration, I realize that this emergent quality is something that makes teacher professional development a challenge within the established framework. My experiences as a teacher and more specifically as a teacher in the role of facilitator have thus far revealed that while professional development might be based on good intentions, contradictions, tensions, and issues may place it at odds with its very purpose, which is to support teacher professional development. Amid all this complexity I struggle to understand how to locate myself within a role related to professional development of teachers in the public education
By situating myself in this reflection-on-practice I aim to make my biases and assumptions transparent as I retrospect and introspect while planning, collecting and analyzing my data. As explained, one of my biases is that traditional teacher PD is ineffective at transforming teaching practices; this view stems from negative experiences participating in traditional PD. However, I believe that professional development is essential in any field and I am relentlessly optimistic that when executed effectively, PD can transform pedagogical practices and beliefs in a way that empower teachers to promote positive social change. This belief derives not from my experiences as a teacher but from those learning as an adult in informal settings. I presume that positive and successful adult professional learning ensues if the approaches I experienced in informal settings were used in an educational context. Applying these approaches with teachers intrigues me but my minimal facilitation experience makes it challenging for me to know how to effectively apply these techniques and strategies.

**Situating my study**

Through this reflection I aim to investigate my experiences, as both a teacher and a facilitator of professional development to better understand how to support teacher learning. I seek to determine how educators emerge from a place where professional development comes in the form of a workshop or Professional Learning Communities with predetermined topics, timelines, and agendas in the name of accountability to professional learning communities based on teacher knowledge.

There is value to my experiences of the past ten years in which I worked as a teacher in the formal education system in the Ontario elementary school setting. Further, accumulated knowledge resulting from individual training, education through formal and
informal educational experiences working with children from preschool to University, affect my teaching and the way I perceive and support PD for educators. Each of my actions is influenced by this knowledge, knowledge that typically goes unheard, disregarded, silenced. Why? The wisdom I possess as a teacher should be used to collaboratively explore, examine, and build new knowledge. By examining personal experiences, I hope to improve my facilitation and determine how professional learning communities, which capitalize on teacher knowledge, support teacher learning in a public school setting.

At the heart of this work is my belief that everyone who enters a dialogue does so from different starting points based on their individual experiences and understandings. The knowledge which novice and experienced teachers alike posses is perpetually accumulating, changing, and becoming peripheral. Each participant and their stances are necessary and of equal value. With differences in understanding coupled with the capacity to learn by taking risks and reflecting, deep transformation can occur improving teaching and ultimately, student success.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

I learn most effectively when I think through my thoughts, particularly through discussion with other professionals. This realization prompted me to investigate the development of professional learning of/with teachers. In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature that argues for a conception of teacher learning that is teacher-directed, social, ongoing, sustained over time, and has meaning that reaches beyond teacher learning into reconstructed pedagogical knowledge and practice.

This chapter presents the rationale for conducting research on the professional learning of teachers. The research reveals how teachers learn, the effects of traditional and newer methods of professional development (PD), and to what degree these forms of PD support student success. My study aims to build upon this existing body of research through the intersecting lenses of one who is a member, facilitator and researcher of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

The following review of the literature related to professional learning is pertinent to my study, namely forms which have the capacity to transform teacher knowledge and pedagogy. Chapter II is organized into four sections: (a) traditional professional development, (b) conceptions of teacher learning, (c), professional learning communities in the school, and (d) how this research informs my study.

Teaching in Ontario is recognized as a profession for it is an occupation with a body of knowledge and skills put into service for the good of others (Parsons 1951). Those who work in the field of education typically share two common characteristics of professionalism, 1) there is longevity to their careers, and 2) they constantly participate in ongoing learning and development. PD is an aspect of teaching because educators must know the best ways to effectively support their students.
As professionals, teachers are required to continually redefine and reconstruct their pedagogy. To best support student learning and well-being educators are expected to be knowledgeable of growing body of knowledge related to their field and mastery of the skills required to best serve their students in response to the changing world, new research, and emerging knowledge about teaching and learning (The Department of Education & Training, 2005). Thus, PD is a key process through which teachers continually gather new understandings to improve their pedagogy in effort to support their students’ success.

**Traditional Professional Development**

However, it is no small feat to deliver the vast amount of professional development needed to support student learning to all teachers in Ontario’s public school system. How is it possible to deliver professional development to such a large group of public educators? This question was, and to a large extent is still answered with traditional methods of delivering PD. The one-shot workshop is the mainstay of what teachers are accustomed to when it comes to teacher learning (Kooy and Colarusson, 2012). This traditional method was adopted quickly and widely, and continues to prevail.

While the greatest benefit of the workshop model is its ability to “reach” large groups of educators in a time and cost efficient manner, the only true concern of PD should always be its effectiveness as determined by its ability to improve teaching practices. Traditional models like one-stop workshops disseminate knowledge by giving teachers information and then expecting teachers to translate this into practice (Gersten, Vaughn, Deschler, & Schiller, 1997). Traditional PD dispenses the same message to large groups of people but as they assume they are a homogenous group they fail to acknowledge specific teacher needs (Taylor et al., 2011). Further, as this model places
efficiency of time over all else the sessions are offered when it is convenient for those organizing them rather than for the teachers attending (Brinkerhoff, 2006). Teachers must organize their schedules based on when a workshop runs rather then when they are available or when they need the support.

This model was efficient in this regard but independent of a PD method’s efficiency, what is important is if the PD effectively supports student success. There are certain ways to determine if PD is in fact creating and sustaining desired change. The benchmark of effective PD is its impact on the school, the teachers, and most importantly the students (Hipp, et al., 2003). In addition, success is defined as improvement in student achievement scores and a unified and dedicated staff (Stein, 1998). The impact of any method of PD, including traditional methods, is apparent in its capacity to influence teaching for improved student learning.

Teachers must feel properly supported though the PD they receive. Unfortunately, when asked, many teachers feel that the traditional PD they receive is fragmented and irrelevant to their classrooms (Lieberman & Mace, 2008). When PD is primarily designed with the presenter and the content of the presentation foremost, then individual teacher needs cannot be at the forefront. In this regard the workshop is an inadequate form of professional development as it fails to take into account what teachers know or how they learn (Borko, 2004). It is not good enough for professional development to simply be rolled out to the masses. When mandatory traditional PD fails to acknowledge teacher knowledge or needs, teachers are left with the challenge of implementing practices that may be irrelevant to their students.

Those who attend workshops or conferences often feel the content is superficial, and as they lack a connection with the content, attendees soon forget what was said and return to teaching the way they did beforehand. It is for this reason that Ball (1999)
likens traditional models of PD to *yo-yo dieting*. It is unrealistic to expect educators to hear a new set of expectations in a couple of hours and confidently implement them into their classrooms the next day. It is thus not surprising that the research shows that traditional methods of delivering in-service sessions do not change teacher practice and so they have little or no effect on what happens in the classroom as a result of this kind of professional development (Malone & Smith, 2010).

Traditional approaches lack the ability to change the way teachers think and teach and therefore have little to no effect on student learning or success. As Lieberman & Mace (2008) observed:

> Instead of creating the conditions for teachers to teach each other, support their peers, and deepen their knowledge about their students, teachers are being given a “one size fits all” set of professional development workshops that deny the variability of how teachers teach, and how they and their students learn (p. 227).

A form of professional development that disregards the personal and professional needs of those attending is ineffectual. Perhaps the greater limitation to workshops is the assumption that teachers are technicians as opposed to professionals. There is the saying that “you do not know, what you do not know” but I would argue that most professionals know what they are struggling with but often do not have access to solutions. It is access and opportunity to delve into and solve current and pressing problematic situations that professionals seek.

Increasingly researchers condemn traditional methods of delivering PD. They consider this approach to be a superficial way of implementing instructional principles (Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiler, 1997). As a consequence of its superficiality, this model is unable to positively impact student achievement (Friedman, 2004; Stoll, Bolam,
McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Supporting the claim that traditional methods are ineffective the National Staff Development Council in the United States estimates that only ten percent of what teachers learn in traditional PD is ever used in the classroom (Lewis, 2002). An approach that impacts only a tenth of those it is designed to support is by any standard inadequate. Thus, it is not surprising that the literature increasingly and overwhelmingly reveals that one-shot workshops are ineffective (Clark 2001; Verloop, Driel & Meijer, 2001; Kooy, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). It is thus the task of researchers and teacher-researcher in particular, to determine alternative methods by which professional development can effectively impact upon pedagogy and student achievement.

While the traditional workshop model continues to prevail, alternative models first described over twenty years ago are gaining traction. Newer methods are piloted and refined as a result of external research within the context of teaching and increasingly influenced by teachers themselves. Grangeat and Gray (2007) succinctly describe from Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2003) the current changes in professional development for teachers:

Teaching as a professional activity is thus in the process of a shift from individual knowledge use to collective knowledge generation, where enhancements in teaching are increasingly produced through dialogue and collective enquiry within the world of teaching rather than by external research. (p.486)

New theories, and along with practical ways of improving teaching practices to improve students’ success, continue to emerge. The benefits of working collaboratively in groups to generate knowledge were introduced more than 70 years ago. However, it took the failure of traditional workshops along with research that informed a better model to
create the impetus for the current shift in PD. This shift in perspective of professional development hinges upon a better understanding and appreciation of the way teachers can learn in transformational ways.

**Conceptions of Teacher Learning**

To derive a better way of supporting teacher learning an improved model must take into account how teachers actually learn. There are seminal ideas about adult learning, which stem from John Dewey’s work. Some of these include: learning grounded in experience through inquiry that is social; the teacher as a partner and facilitator of student learning; learning requiring the teacher to carefully plan taking into consideration diverse student backgrounds, their past experiences and knowledge and use of materials that are sensitive to learner needs; and, the teacher’s responsibility to provide problems that connect to students’ present experiences, which then motivate them to seek more information (Dewey, 1897, 1900, 1902, 1916 and 1938). Emerging from these foundational ideas, current literature reveals concepts related to teacher learning that may shed light on how to support teacher development. What follows is a review of the literature about conceptions of teacher learning, broadly organized into five overarching concepts.

i) *Teacher-directed*. The literature suggests that learners, including adult learners like teachers, benefit from learning opportunities they have control over or at least some influence in (Taylor et al., 2011). Studies show that when teachers were given the chance to be part of creating the agenda and materials, learning was more personally and professionally relevant (Malone & Smith, 2010). Allowing teachers to be a part of the decision-making process promotes PD as a democratic structure. Teachers are
empowered when determining their students’ areas of need, which subsequently facilitates the focus for their learning and then develop the strategies to support these needs (Hartnell-Young, 2009). Teacher voice in determining what is discussed endorses a form of teacher-directed PD that mutually supports student and teacher learning.

Another positive consequence derived from teacher-directed learning is the sense of efficacy. One study revealed that when teachers feel they have efficacy, they are more likely to adopt new practices within their classrooms and were also found to stay in the profession longer (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The correlation between efficacy and professional satisfaction makes it easy to understand why those who have greater control over what they learn remain in their desired profession. Additionally, teachers feel more responsible when they are more involved in making decisions about how to teach, and thus can act as change agents (Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster and Cobb, 1995). Professionals gain greater self-assurance when they are directly part of the decision-making process because they more clearly understand the process. What is lacking in traditional models is including teachers in deciding what professional development they require based on their students’ needs.

ii) Acknowledging Teacher Knowledge. In his paper, The crisis of professional knowledge and the pursuit of an epistemology of practice (1992), Schön argues that although society is dependent upon professionals, including educators, they increasingly lack confidence in them. Furthermore, he argues that professionals themselves feel a lack of confidence in professional knowledge. Pervasive in traditional professional development is the omission of teacher professional knowledge. This omission reveals an indifference towards the very people professional development attempts to engage and transform.
Notwithstanding the stage of their careers, each teacher possesses different kinds of valuable knowledge, which has traditionally gone untapped. Teacher knowledge is complex but may be loosely defined as insights that are potentially relevant to teacher’s activities (Verloop, Driel & Meijer, 2001). Some professionals seem like “naturals”. This view may be a consequence of practice as practice is a type of intelligence like know-how and what derives is professional common sense (Schön, 1992). As there is an intersection between experience and knowledge, teacher knowledge extends to how teachers teach and loops back to teaching them as they teach. Even without prior direct teaching, when teachers are asked why they do or do not use certain approaches or strategies they can often articulate their reasoning (Verloop, Driel & Meijer, 2001). Teachers know why they do what they do but are rarely asked. Understanding how teachers make use of their knowledge to support student success remains a largely unexplored resource. It is clear by examining the way teachers continue to be taught that there is not enough respect for teacher knowledge in professional development (Loughran, 2012; Lucas, 2007). Teacher knowledge should be respected as a valuable resource as it allows us to glean from educators understanding of how and why they do what they do. PD which recognizes and respects the knowledge members have as a commodity, is more powerful (Webster-Wright, 2009). Teacher learning is best supported when educators’ experiences and ensuing knowledge derived from those experiences are valued and used in professional development.

iii) Social Construction of Knowledge. Another concept, which pertains to how individuals, including educators, learn relates to the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Webster-Wright, 2009; Kooy, 2009). Research on teacher learning
reveals the importance of making learning social. People do not construct knowledge by themselves but through social interactions that are situated (Dewey, 1938; Gersten, Vaughn, Deschler, & Schiller, 1997). The social interactions that take place within groups are particularly interesting due to their complexity. When people come together and talk they have the opportunity, as Dewey states, to socioculturally construct knowledge in these groups (Meyers, 2005). As learning occurs by interacting with others, education is a social process (Dewey, 1938). In this way teachers learn through socially constructed knowledge and in doing so ultimately form their own culture as the foundation for collaborative learning.

The conception of teacher learning that includes the social construction of knowledge requires teachers to share what has unfortunately become a historically private realm- their pedagogy. Teachers walk into each learning opportunity with their own set of experiences, beliefs, and knowledge making it important and possible to build on each teacher’s pre-existing knowledge (Starkey et al, 2009). The way to do this is through dialogue, which is typically nonlinear and intricate. Complexity is unavoidable as educators bring with them varying and multiple experiences (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). If speaking about our knowledge is helpful to learning then it is essential to share not only what we think but also what we do and how and why we do it. A de-privatization of teacher practice is necessary for members of a learning community (Stein, 1998; Schunk & Mullen, 1999; Ferger & Arruda, 2008; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Malone & Smith, 2010). Making the personal public allows teachers to share their practices affording them the chance to reflect on what they do and receive feedback from colleagues.

In order to make learning social there are processes that must be included. Both John Dewey’s *Reflective Thought* and Donald Schön’s *Reflective Action* support the idea that learning occurs through reflection (Schön, 1992). In both instances learning
occurs when a person integrates thought and action. When teachers think about their pedagogy and why they do what they do they are reflecting. However, the social component occurs through the act of making tacit knowledge explicit by putting one’s thinking into words. The process of articulating one’s reflections simultaneously supports the professional development of the reflector as well as those they are explaining it to. Sharing their knowledge in this way changes both the teachers’ understanding of their own practice while having the potential to support the learning of those with whom they are in dialogue with. Professionals who reflect upon and articulate their practice are more competent because they can now access, reflection-in-action which gives them the ability to think on their feet in challenging situations (Schön, 1992). Sharing pedagogical reflections with one another helps teacher refine their skills promoting greater competency of teacher practitioners.

Teachers not only learn from one another when they share their knowledge and skills but in doing so they cultivate stronger relationships. Research reveals that there are many benefits when comfortable social relationships with colleagues exist. One major outcome of positive social interactions among teachers is that experiencing these types of interactions are described as contributing to job satisfaction, which in turn is linked to student achievement (Bogler, 2001). Ensuring a social component to professional development not only supports the professional development of teachers, but positively impacts student success. If the benchmark of effective professional development is student success then the inclusion of social interactions among teachers is an essential component. However, many factors need to be in place in order to create opportunities for teachers to form relationships where they feel they can share and learn with one another.
iv) Ongoing and Sustained over time. Teacher learning must be ongoing so that the learning is sustained. Even when the concept of teacher learning takes into account the social creation of knowledge, creating systemic change is not easy. Change requires a great deal of time and patience for it is challenging for people to change their attitudes and accept their colleagues’ differing opinions (Horsley & Loucks-Housley, 1998). Educators require time to work together in social groups or communities to gain an appreciation for each other and this takes time.

Research reveals that community building is made possible when teachers have more time to learn together (Owston, 2008). The chief query is how long groups of people need to meet in order to actually create sustained change. When examining nine studies, Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, and Sharpley (2007) found that sustained change occurred when PD lasted for 14 or more hours. They found the greatest effects on improved student achievement occurred when groups met for 30-100 hours. These studies reveal that time working in social groups is important to sustaining professional development but only if it is ongoing. Others have found that 30 or more hours is effective in supporting teacher development and that 80 or more hours are needed to create improvement in student success (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). It is not enough for a group to meet for a length of time over a few days, rather the more frequently a group has time to meet appears to positively effect the probability that the PD will create positive change.

There is a difference between the PD a group receives who meet for 30 hours over a week long seminar versus the same group of people who meet for 30 hours over the course of five months. The literature shows that ongoing teacher learning helps teachers develop deeper understandings and changes in practice for logical reasons. Professional development needs to be sustained and ongoing to provide opportunities
for teachers to practise, reflect, and refine their skills (Malone & Smith, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster & Cobb, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). By providing ongoing opportunities learning can become transformational because it is more likely to be used in classrooms thus impacting on student success. When teachers are given time between PD sessions they can reflect on their attempts to try new strategies and/or materials. Members begin learning from their own experiences, through this reflexive process and enter the next meeting with more to contribute and learn from one another.

v) **Reconstructs pedagogical knowledge and practice.** Teachers learn best when learning is self-directed using teacher knowledge as a commodity in socially sustained and ongoing interactions (Hawley & Valli, 2007). In addition to the previously discussed dimensions of teacher learning, PD is only as effective as its capacity to reconstruct pedagogical knowledge and practice. Teaching is a practical profession. Teachers respond positively to professional development which allows them to see theory in action in a real classroom and then supports them in attempting to apply those strategies in their own class (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Timperley et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond & Richardson 2009; Loughran, 2012; and Holloway, 2006). Obtaining feedback is essential (The Department of Educaiton & Training, 2005; Elmore 1999). Teachers need PD that directly and positively impacts their teaching and their students success.

Professional learning can reconstruct teacher pedagogy when it is applied to authentic contexts. Thus, it is not surprising that research supports PD that is situated and relevant (Owston, 2008; Grangeat & Gary, 2007; Kelleher, 2003; Webster-Wright, 2009). Teacher learning is supported when educators have opportunities to test new
strategies in their own classrooms. The idea of learning through inquiry was introduced by Dewey who felt that students learned best when they had the chance to experience what they were learning about (Dewey, 1916). With the support of colleagues, teachers can try what the group discussed, potentially transforming their practice, creating a reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster & Cobb, 1995). Whether the outcomes of these endeavors are initially successful or not, it appears that simply attempting new tactics supports teacher learning in sustainable ways. When learners are given the time to experiment with new learning and are given support in doing so, they are more likely to use these new strategies independently (Shabani, 2010). A model of PD that supports teachers in trying what they learned then sharing these trials with colleagues has the capacity to transform teacher practice.

Teachers feel more capable when they apply new knowledge and strategies. The research indicates that teachers have a sense of efficacy when they do hands-on work as it facilitates their understanding of the content and how to teach (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Along with hands-on work, another element of sustainable learning includes the chance to reflect on each teacher’s attempts and emergent understandings. The right kind of PD is effective if there is follow-up and coaching after the training as well as a chance for members to think, plan, analyze and reflect through talking about their experiences (Holloway, 2006; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Sharing experiences gives teachers the chance to articulate success but it also helps those who initially had less success determine how their colleagues avoided or solved common issues so they can implement these the next time.

There is also a required balance between creating community environments of open-mindedness and self-doubt. When professionals participate in PD that creates too much dissonance in the way they think or teach they can easily shut down and reject
what is said (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). A component of trying new things includes a willingness to appreciate new ideas that may be in opposition to those currently held. Attempting new approaches is often uncomfortable. There are different types of teachers including those who are risk-takers and see change as useful rather indicative of a lack of ability on their part (Holloway 2006). Through authentic participation these teachers have the most to gain by trying new approaches. When teachers are willing to engage in authentic learning, what arises is messiness and teachers need to get messy (Webster-Wright, 2009). If messiness is appreciated as part of the learning process rather than an indication of failure then trying and reflecting become integral to transforming pedagogical knowledge and practices.

**Professional Learning Communities**

As awareness of how ineffective traditional models of professional development, such as the one-shot workshop are, newer models that support teacher learning have emerged. The question then becomes what does a successful model of PD require? As Dewey (1897) suggested of adults teaching children, it is important that teachers not impose their ideas on the learners but that they instead become part of the community of learners. There is one model that takes into consideration the five previously described conceptions of teacher learning actualized in a communal social context. This model of PD is teacher-directed, utilizes teacher knowledge, allows for the social construction of knowledge, is sustained and ongoing and provides opportunities for teachers to work as practitioners. By incorporating all the components that support teacher learning this model known as the Professional Learning Community supports sustainable change. Studies show that professional learning communities (PLCs) are more effective at developing teacher knowledge and skills than the traditional workshop
What follows is a review of the literature that describes characteristics of effective communities as well as evidence of their credibility as an improved model of PD.

The key purpose of PLCs is to enhance teachers as professionals for the benefit of students (Stoll et al., 2006). It is now widely accepted that PLCs support school improvement by promoting student achievement (Ferger & Arruda, 2008; Richter, 2011; Vescio et al., 2008; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Kooy, 2012; Hipp et al., 2003; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2007). Some argue that PLCs increase more authentic pedagogy and enhance student academic achievement (Louis & Marks, 1998; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Establishing and maintaining learning communities, provides time for the reconstructed pedagogical knowledge and practice through professional collaboration, which positively impacts student success.

There are many versions and definitions of professional learning communities. This variability is illustrated through the distinction between those occurring on-site as communities of practice and those occurring off-site as communities of learning (Kooy, 2009). This distinction exemplifies how PLCs are capable of reconstructing teacher knowledge and practice in a variety of settings for different purposes. To truly understand how these communities function, it is necessary to examine the literature, which describes elements and characteristics of effective PLCs.

Literature reviews highlight motifs in how to create professional learning communities. In a review of 405 sources related to PLCs, Schunk & Mullen (1999) identified the following three meta-themes: leadership, organization, and culture. In the review by Vescio et al. (2008) the characteristics that help create changes in teaching culture were grouped into the following four categories: collaboration, a focus on student
learning, teacher authority, and continuous teacher learning. Within these broad categories are more specifically identified characteristics necessary for PLCs. The five key characteristic or features that reoccur in the literature are: 1. Shared values/visions; 2. collective responsibility; 3. reflective personal inquiry; 4. collaboration, and 5. when group, as well as individual learning is promoted (Hord, 2004; Louis et al., 1995; Little 2006). Further, Stoll et al. (2006) adds these three elements: trust, support, and respect between members and inclusive membership. Lists of characteristics reveal how to create effective communities but they also suggest the complexity involved in establishing successful PLCs.

With the abundance of research on this newer form of PD, researchers identify other characteristics including making teaching practices public, shared values, and reflexive dialogue as common and necessary in learning communities (Hipp, et al., 2003; OME, 2007; The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2008). Additionally, certain environmental conditions are also noted as favourable when initiating PLCs: shared authority in leadership; staff who are flexible, collegial, cooperative, reflexive, who take on initiatives, and who “feel obliged to acquire competencies, and to be accountable to their peers” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p.56). With a plethora of essential components required to ensure the success of PLCs, it is clear that creating effective professional learning communities is complex and challenging work.

As this model is founded upon a social constructivist approach to learning, rather than having a single presenter with silent observers in PLCs everyone in the community is encouraged to consistently participate in the collective dialogue as their knowledge is seen as an important commodity. Collaborative models of PD highlight the importance of learning communities where educators are given the chance to discuss, try, reflect and co-construct knowledge in authentic ways (Borko & Putman, 1998; Perry, Walton, &
Calder, 1999 Whittaker & Young, 2002; Stoll et al., 2006). This model helps individual knowledge develop as members share ideas, experiences, and questions. Due to the social dimension inherent to this form of PD, PLCs are complex making the development of knowledge additive and recursive (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). As members talk, individual and collective knowledge changes, develops, and deepens. This model of professional development makes learning transformative rather than simply developing or transmissive (Webster-Wright, 2009). PLCs support the concept of teacher learning as socially constructed within a framework of ongoing and sustainable learning.

Another emerging element revealed in the literature relates to how membership is decided. Traditional models did not take membership into consideration because they assumed common content was enough to promote teacher development. However, when forming these types of communities one must also take into account similarities in membership so that the learning is self-directed, situated, and relevant. Some teacher may see community membership as implying opportunity but there are also those who will see it as an obligation at the same time (Stein, 1998). For this reason it is best when teachers want to be part of the community. The challenge is that PLCs, which are situated in schools, are fluid and always changing as group membership and needs/focus change (Stoll et al., 2006). Although it is not easy to effectively group teachers into communities in the school setting, the ways in which groups are determined is extremely important. One study found that teachers want to be in communities with members from the same grade levels as they find the work more relevant to their everyday teaching making them more motivated to be part of the discussion (Owston, 2008). While the choice of group membership might not always be an option, when teachers feel the PD is relevant to their practice they are more likely to
act as contributing members of the group making the PD more successful.

There is an increasing amount of research that shows the positive impact on student achievement as a result of teacher learning through professional learning communities. It is now clear that professional learning communities are critical to student achievement as they support students’ success (Kooy, 2009). Research has increasingly supported the claim that this model of supporting teacher development does in fact contribute to the improvement of teacher instruction and school reform (Little, 2001). For over a decade some researchers have argued that professional learning communities are the most powerful model of PD reform (Borko, 1997).

There is evidence to substantiate the argument that PLCs can support school reform. In a study conducted in Chicago they found that students from schools with strong professional communities, with shared norms, where teachers frequently share, reflect and discuss, were four times more likely to improve academically than schools with weaker professional communities (Lewis, 2002). Further, Dufour and Eaker (1998) have stated that:

The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability for school personnel to function as professional learning communities. (p.xi)

Based on the premise that teacher-learning needs to be ongoing and sustainable, models like PLCs are a powerful vehicle for the type of PD that supports systemic change. For this type of change to occur certain elements need to exist. Andy Hargreaves (2003a in Hartnell-Young 2009) suggests that PLCs are most effective in schools where there are “high capacity teachers in high-capacity systems.” (p.4) If PLCs support teacher learning by intelligently applying the concepts of learning then it follows that this model of PD has the ability to motivate teachers and give them the drive and
Looking at the literature related to professional learning communities through the lens of conceptions of teacher learning it appears that PLCs are a powerful approach to PD. PLCs allow for teacher-directed learning that honours individual teacher knowledge through social constructive processes. Through ongoing and sustained learning opportunities with the support of their colleagues, this approach to professional learning enables teachers to reconstruct their pedagogical knowledge and practices which consequently creates the kind of development capable of positively impacting upon student success.

**How the Research Informs my Study**

Reviewing the literature supports my understanding of the historical and political context of traditional professional development and why these models prevail. An examination of the literature helps to account for why large-scale organizations adopted and continue to use, to a large extent, traditional methods like workshops, seminars and PA/PD days. Using these methods made it is easy for organizations to say they “delivered” PD to entire staff in just a few hours. However, my own experiences coupled with a growing body of research shows how ineffective traditional methods are regardless of their time or cost efficiency. Teachers learning needs to reflect the changing world and new knowledge related to student learning to support student needs. If the traditional models do not work then a better method of supporting teacher and student learning is necessary.

It is evident that the research supports a form of PD that is teacher-directed, social, ongoing, sustained over time, and has meaning that reaches beyond teacher learning into reconstructed pedagogical knowledge and practice. As traditional methods
fail to acknowledge these elements it is not surprising that they do not work to support teacher, and thus student learning. Thus, the literature reveals learning communities as an improved approach to the professional development of teachers with concepts of teacher learning forming the foundation.

The review of the literature describes a more effective way to successfully support teacher learning and does so by recommending a multitude of characteristics and elements that must be present to support the successful creation and continuation of professional learning communities. I intend to emulate the format and attributes of learning communities as a way to facilitate the professional development of my colleagues at my school. These attributes will form part of the criteria by which I assess my ability to facilitate learning communities as an alternative approach to traditional professional development models.

The research informs my study as it supports my desire to examine alternative forms of teacher learning within the public school system in Ontario. It is important to distinguish professional learning communities as an effective vehicle for professional learning but within this approach there are multitudes of ways in which teachers can work together. One example of how groups of people can work together is through the communities of practice (COP) framework where teachers engage in joint work (Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiller, 1997). Knowing that the work we do in our school’s learning communities can take many forms including joint work, helps form my developing understanding of how nontraditional models can exist in multiple ways within schools. Understanding the complexity of social elements related to professional learning communicates will require that I acknowledge and analyze how participating and facilitating forms of PLCs impact on my and other teachers’ professional development.
The research informs my study in yet another way. If teacher knowledge is respected then it should be respected in the way research is conducted. There is importance to studying the way teachers learn and this research is even more powerful when practicing teachers conduct studies and share their findings. When teachers read research conducted by their colleagues the findings are legitimized in the eyes of other educators (Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster & Cobb, 1995). I aim to delve into my experiences to share my thoughts, feelings and beliefs as they relate to the possibility for teachers to collaboratively learn in social environments of their own making.

The literature reviewed in this study provides a general framework for understanding how teachers learn best to support their students' success. By gaining a better understanding of concepts of teacher learning it is clear to see how conducting professional learning via learning communities within the public educational setting can create systemic change. Understanding how to create, establish, implement and maintain these communities may help reconstruct professional knowledge and pedagogy promoting greater student success.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter I lay out the methodological framework of the study. First I give an overview of the study and proceed to explain my decisions to apply the qualitative approach of critically reflecting on my practice in a naturalistic setting. Next, as this a reflection on practice, I situate myself in the research to make explicit the impact of my overlapping roles as both the researcher and the researched. With candour I share my past adult learning and facilitation experiences that influence my study of the facilitation of teacher learning. I proceed to describe the ethical considerations related to participation in this study and conclude with a detailed explanation of what constitutes as data; how the data was collected, and the approaches used to analyze the data in this study.

Study Overview

Context and Duration

Due to ethical considerations, as are described in section 3.5, the students, staff, school, and school board will remain anonymous throughout this study. For this reason, in this section I site only general characteristics to frame and contextualize my reflection on practice. My study took place within an Ontario elementary public school with a diverse linguistic and cultural student population. The overwhelming majority of students are from first-generation Canadian working class families where both the parents and students are English Language Learners. The families that form the school community are fairly transient. Less than one third of the students who enroll upon entering Kindergarten will graduate from the school. The other two-thirds transfer into the school from other schools districts or relocate and register at other nearby schools within the same school district.
In terms of the teaching staff, while there is diversity with regards to race, religion and socio-economic status, almost all staff members speak English as their first language. With the exception of those on maternity leaves, about a third of the teaching staff has worked at the school for more than five years. There are a core group of teachers who have worked at the school since its inception and do not intend to leave until they retire from teaching. The number of years of experience among the teachers ranges from those completing their first Long Term Occasional teaching contract to those in their last year of teaching prior to retirement.

My work facilitating PD at this particular elementary school spans the four-year period from September of 2010 to this current school year, and will continue into next year. Due to ethical considerations, the focus for this study relates only to the professional development that took place over a three-month period between April and June of the 2011/2012 school-year. All of my raw data was collected during April and May and analyzed concurrently, and consecutively into the 2012 summer. My reflection is based on the planning and discussions that took place when administrators and groups of teachers met for professional development. The school administration pre-established the day of the week and the period when the groups could meet based on when the administration felt they could easily schedule professional development in the school day. Groups of teachers were thus able to meet three times in a row every Wednesday for a sixty-minute block of time in the instructional day.

In consultation with the administration I helped determine the composition of each group. The groups were comprised of myself, two administrators, and between four to six teachers. While each teacher received and completed a survey to help me identify their teaching strengths, needs, and goals, each group was predominately established based on similar teaching assignments. Further, details related to how
individuals were organized into groups, when and where groups met, and what transpired during these professional development opportunities are explained in greater depth in chapters four and five.

Previous Related Research

Prior to the formal data collection for this study, which took place in the spring of the 2011/2012 school year, I completed other investigations related to the professional learning opportunities, which I facilitated at my school. Throughout the completion of my Masters of Arts degree I carried out two other research studies based on my work with professional development. In one study I analyzed an interview I conducted on a colleague of mine who was also a facilitator of professional learning at the school. In the second study I gathered and analyzed field notes, cross-referencing them with those of another colleague. Neither of these studies was in-depth but themes, questions, and issues surfaced prompting me to want to further investigate PD, laying the groundwork for this study.

These prior investigations coupled with requests by members of my school district that I share my experiences supporting teacher learning propelled me to complete this study. In so doing, I seek to deepen my understanding of this role and the work conducted in professional learning communities in the public school system. I feel that my academic and professional experiences provide me with a strong foundation to approach and analyze my data.

Methodology
As this is a reflection on practice, a positivist quantitative data collection aimed at generating replicable outcomes is neither appropriate nor desirable. Rather, due to the nature of this study I apply a qualitative approach. As is true of professional learning in the realm of education, “certain fields are so complex that they can be addressed adequately only if they are viewed and researched from a variety of paradigmatic perspectives” (Donmoyer, 2008, p.3). The interactions that took place in each professional learning community along with the duplicity of my role as member and facilitator are so multifaceted that I feel a qualitative approach to my research is essential. The qualitative paradigm provides the opportunity to capture detailed reflections that describe the multiple perspectives and interpretations, which exist when facilitating and participating in professional learning communities within educational contexts. Taking each of these components into consideration makes reflecting on my practice as a facilitator of PLCs complex. As is next described, within the qualitative paradigm I apply a critical interpretive inquiry within a naturalistic setting.

i. Naturalistic inquiry. One common element to qualitative studies is that they often transpire in natural settings (McMillan, 2000). Schools are complex and dynamic institutions. Like the people who comprise them, schools are in essence living and breathing organisms in a continuous state of flux. As there are a matrix of factors simultaneously at play when adults work together in the school setting I apply a naturalistic inquiry to approach my reflection.

A naturalistic inquiry is helpful when trying to understand professional learning. The benefits of conducting some studies within the natural setting from which they occur is that these settings provide authenticity (Owen, 2008). Like most professional learning communities the PLCs in my study are situated in the natural setting of an elementary school where school-led professional development for elementary teachers primarily
occurs. To determine practices that support professional development in the public school system, it is essential to observe educators learning together in schools and the true-to-life interactions that take place within this context. A qualitative approach of a natural inquiry lends itself to the investigation of PLCs, which are grounded in interacting social contexts.

ii. Critical research. Facilitating and learning in PLCs subsumes social experiences. When dealing with social experiences, it is necessary to apply qualitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). According to Carspecken (2008) critical research is characterized by a belief in the socially constructed nature of knowledge and engagement in self-reflectivity. A reflection on practice based on professional development anchored in a social constructivist theory of learning, aligns with a critical inquiry. Researchers use a critical lens as way to promote collective or social positive change. In this vein I apply a critical lens when collecting and analyzing my data, aspiring to move society away from positivistic conceptions of truth and towards a type of emancipation as it relates to teacher education.

Fearing that my experiences and knowledge will fall into an inaccessible vacuum, I write this thesis in hopes that it may promote positive social change. While the work we do as professionals is often challenging and privatized I hope the work I do as a member-facilitator allows me to, “move persons and communities to action” (Denzin, 2008, p. 318) to improve student success through improved teaching. Applying a critical lens to this study may bridge the theoretical with the practical elements through an introspection that connects ideas, thoughts, and concepts to research. Perhaps then, this process may service both my professional and personal needs along with the needs of other educators.
iii. Interpretive Inquiry. Functioning as both the researcher and the researched, reflecting on my practice makes it impossible to critically research my experiences without interpreting them. Reflecting on my practice requires that I present myself as the researched but also the researcher through which the entire study is interpreted. An interpretive approach makes transparent that I am the author of this reflection and that the data and my analysis and findings are seen through me. It is my lens through which I experience professional learning and facilitation and it is through this same lens that you as a reader look with me.

Throughout this study I apply an interpretive lens in the natural school setting to derive an accurate means of analyzing my experiences as a facilitator of professional learning communities. I chose this approach to allow for an in-depth analysis of my thoughts, feelings, and actions, to improve my practice. Like any method, subjective qualitative research has limitations. However, in this context I feel that restricting my research to a reflection is the best way to accurately investigate Professional Learning Communities with authenticity and honesty. As the researcher and researched, reflection requires candor that is extremely challenging, if not impossible to derive using other methods. I intend to glean truths that may otherwise remain buried by documenting personal experiences applying raw and candid methodology in hopes that these truths may resonate with others.

iv. A reflection-on-practice. The idea of grassroots research derived from work originating from those located inside groups excites me. As discussed in the preceding chapter, teacher knowledge is publicized by teacher-researchers as a commodity, which compels me to contribute what I can, myself- my experiences, my thoughts, and my feelings. My current role as an elementary teacher and facilitator of the professional learning at my school makes me uniquely situated. As such I have the opportunity to
reflect on both the experiences of one who participates and one who facilitates professional learning in the public school setting. My dual role provides me with insights into these two different positions making my study as a reflection on practice complex, nonlinear, and filled with tensions.

The impetus for using a reflection-on-practice to research teacher professional learning is a lack of existing research conducted by teachers. More specifically, there does not yet exist research conducted by Canadian elementary school teachers who are both facilitators of, and participants in, professional learning. As an educator and researcher I find tensions exist between theory and practice. Like most educators I am weary of books, articles, and workshops, which attempt to support my teaching practice by those who have never stepped into my classroom. How can authors and presenters who know neither mine nor my students’ needs and consequently those of my colleagues and administrators support me? It is powerful and extremely provocative to learn from educators in authentic contexts by dialoging about how they practice their art. I choose to open myself and make my experiences and practice public through the use of reflection to extend the discourse related to teacher professional learning.

Reflecting on one’s practice is an increasingly prevalent approach used by practitioners, like teachers, who desire to understand how to become more professionally competent. When teachers reflect on their own pedagogical practices, knowledge, and beliefs, it is possible to achieve what Cochran-Smith (2005) calls the *unifying perspective*, which occurs when teacher educators act as researchers. This approach is further legitimized by the increasing number of mainstream journals that publish teachers’ reflections of their practices. This qualitative method, which values teacher knowledge and relates to teacher professional development, perfectly aligns with the aims and goals of my study. Further, through reflection I seek to make public
the inner world of teacher experience, which emerges from their practice (Adler, 1993). When subjectivity is explicitly addressed, professional reflections are capable of transforming local, personal, and private knowledge into public and generalized knowledge.

I use a reflection-on-practice as a methodological approach. As described earlier, Schön’s idea of reflective practice is founded in Dewey’s concepts around inquiry. Reflection is a powerful method to collect and understand professional practices. One element that is always present in reflection is retrospection criticism where one looks back to determine the intent of one’s actions. However my primary purpose is to use prospective reflection to help me understand how to plan to ensure greater success the next time a group meets, enhancing my ability to facilitate. As Schön (1960) states, “the usual function of prospective criticism is to criticize projected action in order to enable the agent to decide what to do” (p.481). In this way reflections are no longer mementos of past thoughts and feelings but a vehicle to help practitioners determine what they ought to do in the future. Weighing possible future options of what could be done or said prior to PD could potentially lead to a better course of action, and as a consequence more competent facilitation.

In order to gain from prospective criticism I need to share my story, forming something similar to a narrative when reflecting on my practice. To share my story I use the variety of data described in the previous section including my self-generated field notes, based on conversations, agendas, and reflections. Although there is always potential for bias and unconscious screening when creating reflections there is a level of honesty when self-representing that does not exist when trying to reinvent and recreate the ideas, thoughts and feelings of others. If I am aware and willing, I can honestly attest
to what I was thinking and doing and articulate why thus creating a window into my personal professional practice.

As such, reflection supports my desire to delve into, and reflect upon, my actions to better understand my role in either nurturing or impeding the professional learning that occurs as a result of my facilitation. Perhaps this investigation will uncover effective approaches to facilitation that allow for professional learning that truly promotes greater student success. Thus my study may act as a model or a guide for other educators who wish to study their own experience as a way to understand how to best support the professional development of those they work with.

**Methodology and Facilitation**

As this is an interpretive inquiry using a reflection-on-practice I needed to situate myself in this study. Although my desire is to use what Schön (1960) calls prospective criticism, I make explicit my appreciation of retrospection as a major component of reflection, thus making it necessary to share my prior experiences as they form my biases and beliefs that influence this reflection-on-practice. I now know that the way I approach teacher learning is supported by research. Non-traditional learning included social construction of knowledge; capitalizing on participant knowledge and experiences; opportunities to attempt new techniques with others as well as opportunities to try new practices independently with group support, and chances to for people to share their experiences. These non-traditional methods come into tension when applied in the public school system, as perhaps they would in many professionally settings. My biases towards facilitating using non-traditional methods in the school setting are problematic at times. For example, while I appreciate traditional elements of PD like agendas and end goals I am also an advocate for side and divergent conversations, as well as people vocalizing
their ideas no matter how “wrong” they may be in relation to the “intended” targeted goal.

Independent of whether these methods might be supportive of teacher learning, when I first proposed their use there was resistance from administration and participants. When I suggested or requested that staff have time to discuss what was being taught I was told that I did not know how PD was done because I was young and new to the profession. The approaches I suggested were apparently insufficient because they were different from what everyone was familiar with. Administration wanted information given to staff in a timely fashion and staff wanted what they always did, to passively receive the information in a timely manner so the meeting would end faster and they could leave.

Creating what I thought were engaging learning opportunities that included doing the work and working with others, were not as easily accepted in formal settings with teachers, as they were with young adults in informal settings. I value talking as a method of thinking for it helps to know what participants understand to facilitate their learning. Encouraging people to share their knowledge in an open dialogue is in opposition to traditional PD. Open dialoguing takes much more time and requires mastery to facilitate. While it is much harder to approach PD with these biases I continue to apply these methods because I believe they are better at supporting teacher learning and these approaches are supported by research.

**Challenges of Facilitating Non-Traditional Professional Development**

The first hurdle when facilitating a non-traditional form of teacher learning is proving to teachers that this PD is different from the traditional form they dislike but are accustomed to. Simply discussing professional development with teachers can be a
negative experiences as many are used to PD that typically assumes a deficit in the way they teach. This assumption places many teachers, particularly seasoned teachers, on the defensive resulting in an unwillingness to consider changing their pedagogy as a result of PD. It is challenging to engage in PD that honours teacher acquired knowledge and is genuinely supportive of emerging practices.

Another one of my challenges facilitating teacher PD is negotiating social interactions. Discussions are inherently and deeply personal, and are riddled with the intellectual, political, and emotional perspectives/lenses/experiences of each person entering the interaction. Positive professional dialogues are a means by which people authentically understand, while trying to be understood by, one another. Although individuals enter the same space they do so with varying knowledge, desires and motives which impede mutual understanding. Professional learning can inspire positive and productive social change through social interaction but it is not always simple to facilitate these interactions. Facilitation is necessary to navigate and negotiate through multiple, often incongruent, agendas.

Further, as teachers possess a range of knowledge on any topic, I find it tricky to collaboratively work with colleagues in the leadership role of facilitator. Adult learners possess rich and varied knowledge along with well-established beliefs and practices. I am not always sure how to frame my knowledge with what my colleagues know and/or need in a collective context. The benefit of conducting relevant PD with practicing teachers is that they have the desire and ability to instantly try these new approaches each day, determining what does or does not work for them and their students. However, this is only possible if teachers possess the desire to try new methods and/or resources; some people find it exciting to experiment while others are resistant, or even
in complete opposition, to change. Teachers’ differing professional needs make facilitating complex.

Supporting learning through talking means that I need to set aside time and provide a space where everyone can comfortably connect and share on a professional as well as a personal and emotional level. However, some people are uncomfortable with sharing or listening to others share. Certain individuals may feel their time is better spent teaching as opposed to listening to their colleagues, preferring to leave a PLC with a new resource. In an effort to give voice to all participants, some members in the community may feel the conversation is not moving along quickly enough or that it lacks focus. Creating a space and time for dialogue requires organization and skill. It is hard for me to facilitate because of tensions between giving voice to members and sticking to an agenda. Attempting to bring the dialogue back to a focus or agenda is unnerving, and without formal training I am sometimes at a loss of how to re-focus the group’s discussion. Facilitating teacher learning is thus like taking powerful ideas striking us from multiple sources and harnessing them into a single comprehensive intellectual current.

**Support with Facilitation**

I am still unclear as to what effective facilitation looks like in traditional settings when applying non-traditional professional development models. My facilitation methods remain biased by values that include teacher-directed learning through inquiry and co-constructing learning by sharing misconceptions and challenges as well as successful strategies that grow our collective understanding. These biases prompt me to create non-traditional learning opportunities using the informal and formal learning of my previous experiences.
In my current role, the school board provides me with additional PD to create capacity within the system. This is accomplished by giving facilitators like myself chances to attend information sessions where educational leaders along with those in specialized academic fields give presentations regarding new initiatives. These opportunities are not given to the rest of the staff at my school, placing teacher leaders and facilitators on the inside track of board and school initiatives. Obtaining advanced professional development creates capacity by supporting my leadership role as facilitator because I have current knowledge. Before any other teacher I develop an emergent understanding of our school focus and help set out our learning agenda. Receiving PD that none of my colleagues have, unintentionally and unavoidably challenges my desire for equal membership within my school’s PLCs. Performing the two roles of leader/facilitator and equal group member is complex as my professional learning is crucial to supporting the learning of other teachers but encumbers equal participation and membership as there exists an imbalance of knowledge. With the impossibility of unraveling these roles, I acknowledge them as conflicting creating tension that depicts a true and complete picture of my experiences.

With the tensions between my emergent understanding and biases of how to facilitate teacher professional development I continue to learn how to facilitate by working with colleagues. In my current role I receive traditional formal training on how to mentor and to some degree facilitate teacher learning. Yet, my understanding of how to support teacher learning is not a result of the PD offered to teacher leaders through one-day workshops delivered by experienced and formally trained facilitators, or by those who have seemingly little more facilitation experience than I. Rather, the best way my school board and administration can support my learning of how to support teacher professional development is through the opportunities they give me to support teacher
learning. That is learning as I perform my duties as a facilitator. For the past three years, I learned this role by doing this role. I am fortunate to have the support of my administrators and a growing number of colleagues who believe in my methods and are willing to get messy with me in an effort to learn. Further, having the support of my school board to study teacher professional development through the completion of this thesis is increasing my understanding and ability to facilitate.

**Ethics**

As this is a Reflection-on-Practice, and I am in essence the sole participant, my research required limited ethical protocols. However, as my work directly involves the interactions that occurred with fellow teachers, which took place during the school day on school property, I was required to obtain approval from both my school district and the University of Toronto to conduct this study. Obtaining approval requires that I maintain high ethical standards throughout the implementation and summation of my findings. Prior to the commencement of my study, I needed to create an approved Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) and have each participant review and sign it if they were comfortable participating in this project. Prior to presenting my colleagues with the consent form I spoke with each person about my research and what and why I wanted to investigate the work we were doing together.

The Informed Consent Form helped each member clearly understand the reasons I was conducting the study as well as their role and rights as a participant. The process of obtaining consent provided transparency to all those involved. Through a written format, each participant knew explicitly what type of data I was collecting, and most importantly, knew their rights with respect to my study. Their consent allowed me to gather and utilize data derived through the agendas I created for the time we met
together, the notes I took from our meetings, as well as my reflections based on what transpired during, and as a result of, the PLCs.

As a side note, I was humbled and taken aback by my participants’ level of support and genuine interest and excitement about being part of this study. Each staff member, including my administrators, readily signed the consent form. They were interested to learn the purpose and methodological approaches of my study and asked if they could write their own reflections, give documented feedback and even offered for me to interview them. They were excited by my research. These kinds of teacher reactions illustrate how willing and truly eager educators are to participate in research. My colleagues communicated their enthusiasm about participating hoping my research might improve their teaching practices by giving them greater control over their professional development.

As a consequence of the rigid standards and ethical guidelines required, each member of the professional learning community was assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity. No identifying characteristics of the school board, school or any member of the community, other than myself, are given. Additionally, I am prevented from using the ideas or words of other members. For this reason all quotations are solely from my notes and are a reflection of only my thoughts and feelings. As I continue to work in learning communities at the same school I ensure that no names or identifiable features of any members of the community were divulged in any of my field notes.

As this study is reflection-on-practice there is an ethical need to balance the candor with which I willing share my experiences, with anonymity. At first, these parameters felt restrictive because I was banned from revealing any identifying information about the school or staff members. However, when I began writing memos, I felt a sense of liberation and ease to truly share personal thoughts and feelings.
Applying a reflective approach with these ethical boundaries ensured control over the text to provide a high degree of confidentiality and privacy. Choosing to reflect on my practice ethically requires that I willingly take the greatest risk. I fear that what I may divulge may offend some people with whom I work. Taking the greatest risk means that I may stand to gain the most in my quest to understand how to best support teacher learning.

Risk is always involved when applying a reflection-on-practice as a methodology as it necessitates publicly sharing one’s private thoughts and feelings in an extremely public way. This potential risk is even greater when the experiences are directly related to professional interactions with colleagues. Despite this personal and professional risk I believe this is the best way to deepen my understanding of how to support teacher learning. Making my private world public provides rich and complex data to analyze but this is only one impetus for a reflection-on-practice. The second rational for applying this method is the potential to connect my work to the work of others as well as broader discourses (Pinnegar & Bullough, 2001). I hope that what I share will be part of the larger discourse related to genuine and practical means by which educators participate, organize and lead their own professional learning.

**Data Collection**

Independent of the paradigm and its set of assumptions, all research requires data (Donmoyer, 2008). While there are different ways of collecting information or data, “for qualitative researchers, the term data most often is associated with words.” (Firmin, 2008, p.1) Some ways of collecting information associated with words include interviews, fieldnotes, and memos. To capitalize on the use of reflecting on my practice I chose to log and store my thoughts, feelings and ideas associated with the interactions
that took place right after each meeting. The data was collected through written and typed notes related to PD meetings. I chose to use field notes that include agendas, notes I took during the professional learning communities, and memos in the form of lengthy reflections as my main form of data collection.

The first set of data I collected were field notes derived from anecdotal observations I made during the pre-meetings I had with administration. The Friday prior to each week’s PLC we met to establish the focus of the group’s work based on where the group left off the last time we met. During these conversations I took notes to help. The discussions in preparation for each group included topics such as: which group would meet and why; planning the framework for the direction of the discussion based on our school goals or foci; the physical set-up of the space, the resources needed, and so forth. From these notes I created an agenda for the next PD session.

My second set of data came in the form of notes, which were like meeting minutes. I took these notes while the professional learning communities took place. Typically the first meeting’s notes included how I set up the space and the establishment of group norms like mutual learning and leading. Taking notes while facilitating was challenging but worth the effort as it enabled me to capture overarching topics and elements of the interactions in real time. When each group met I took notes on a laptop or in a small netbook. While taking notes I made every effort to document observations rather than editorializing events, which occurred during the conversations in each PLC. Whenever possible I projected my computer screen to make my notes accessible to the entire group as I typed. These notes were comments, questions, issues, and potential, sharing resources, strategies and teaching techniques.

While I initially projected my notes on a screen to create transparency this method inadvertently helped make my note taking more objective as I knew all members
could read what I documented allowing for greater objectivity as compared with my reflections founded upon subjective thoughts, feelings and questions arising after each professional learning community. These notes made emerging themes more easily detectable to both myself and the other group members. In one group the issue of how to assess voice in student writing arose again and again making it clear that the group wanted to work on how to help students develop voice in their writing. This group went on to create learning opportunities (lessons) along with assessments and evaluations related directly to this particular curriculum expectation.

My third set of data, memos written in my reflections, was the most time consuming and arduous of the data I collected. By memos I mean, “when researchers take note of personal, conceptual, or theoretical ideas or reflections that come to mind as they collect and analyze the data” (van den Hoonaard, 2008, p.1). I made a concerted effort to write my reflections within the 24 hours of each PLC meeting. I created my reflections the evening after each professional learning community met as a record of what I observed, felt, and thought. I found that if I waited too long after the meeting, I was less likely to recall the details and particulars of the conversations and interactions. Creating these reflections with memos of what I thought was happening, questions that arose and connections to current research was taxing. It took time and focus to document everything I could remember from a one hour interaction between approximately eight people not to mention my related thoughts and feelings. There were always certain feelings and thoughts that jumped out that I was desperate to capture.

The considerable amount of time required for this method yielded definite benefits. During the process of reflecting, I came to appreciate that some of the details I initially assumed were inconsequential held great importance. At first I created a table with a row for the date and one column to capture events, thoughts, feelings and
interactions. I promptly modified the way in which I formatted my reflection by adding an additional column beside these reflections notes. In the second column I extended my reflections by making connections between overarching themes I noticed in the first column (see Appendix B). Rather than simply focusing on the interactions that stood out I made a concerted effort to recall and include even those details that seemed inconsequential so as not to leave anything out.

This attention to detail provided thorough notes that revealed themes that may have otherwise remained uncovered. For example, after memoing the third time, I noticed that I reflected a great deal on the logistical elements of facilitation as opposed to the content of the discussions. The content of my reflections include the logistics of planning and organizing the PLCs as well as the natural occurrences and consequences of this research. As is discussed in the next chapter including every detail I could recall revealed the effect that the set-up of the physical space has on the ease of social interactions revealed itself as an essential element of facilitating teacher learning. Reflections that contain as much detail as possible provided a bounty of information to analyze.

**Data Analysis**

I used a variety of qualitative information collection tools in order to triangulate the data through cross-referencing the agendas with the notes taken during the PLCs along with my reflections as a way to provide greater validity of the analysis and findings. As will be described in the *Findings* section, cross-referencing the data from my fieldnotes with the data from my reflections derived authentically complex and rich data to analyze. Having three forms of data to triangulate added a layer of complexity to my research and
analysis making it possible to ascertain which themes emerged, repeated and were thus, most powerful and significant.

In order to conduct an analysis I chose to code my data. As, “coding facilitates the development of themes,” (Ayres, 2008, p.1) I organized and sorted my data to search for or disconfirm pre-established interpretations while allowing new interpretations to reveal themselves. I did this by searching for words, phrases and concepts that arose multiple times. When reading, re-reading and scanning the data, certain words and concepts which related to my research question emerged, which I made note of as possible themes (Kvale, 1996). I then used a combination of highlighting relevant sections as well as employing the find and replace function through my word processor, to locate specific words or words I thought might connect to certain motifs.

Initially many of the themes I tested were either too broad or too specific. To determine which themes were the most important I examined how frequently these reoccurring ideas or concepts were referred to. I also noted the importance of these ideas determined by whether they were short notes or included in a longer segment of text. Those themes, which arose most frequently as well as those with the most explanation, lead me to understand that these concepts/ideas were important to the analysis of the data. This process was time consuming but it allowed me to, “refine the codes to include more relevant categories,” (van den Hoonoord, 2008, p.2). By conducting multiple scans of the data, robust themes related to my research question slowly emerged.

Reflections on Methods Used
While there are many benefits to applying qualitative approaches to my study there are also drawbacks. The drawbacks to qualitative methodology relate to validity and reliability. Issues regarding the validity and reliability of qualitative methodology often make traditional researchers disregard and discredit qualitative teacher research because the findings are hard to generalize. Gathering data in a natural setting creates the capacity to provide a genuine lens through which to understand teacher-learner communities in the reality of an actual school setting but this approach makes it challenging to generalize to other situations.

Additionally, honestly reflecting on one’s practice is complex. The shortcoming of a reflection on practice is its challenge for different practitioners to use it across different settings. Subjectivity— the element that makes this approach authentic and useful can be its greatest limitation. Reflecting on one’s pedagogy relies on the ‘truth’ of the individual conducting the research. If the person performing the study is not forthcoming or aware of their own biases then the data and ensuing results lack any validity and reliability even for the individual conducting the reflection.

However, issues related to validity and reliability are of little concern in this study for my aim is to delve into my own experiences to learn how I may best facilitate teacher professional development. As Schön, Drake & Miller (1984) articulately explain regarding reflection-in-action,

- this method of experiment does not involve a search for general propositions applicable to similar cases. Here, the inquirer treats each episode of intervention as a unique case. Nevertheless, he or she aims at the reflective transfer of learning from one unique episode of reflection-in-action to others. Rather like a good
medical clinician, he or she seeks to build up a usable repertoire of unique cases (p. 31).

Applying the process of reflections in an honest manner allows practitioners like myself to use our experiences to help us better prepare and deal with other professional situations as they occur. Certain fields of study are not reproducible and so neither are the methods by which we research them.

Qualitative research is different than quantitative research and should be evaluated differently. As Butler-Kisber (2008) affirms, “in qualitative work, different criteria must be used for assessing the quality of the work” (Butler-Kisber, 2008, p.4). She goes on to suggest that the quality of qualitative research should be based on the criterion of: plausibility, transparency, reflexivity and utility. Throughout my entire study from the data collection to the analysis and sharing my findings I continually strive to make sure that my experiences and actions make sense, that I am completely honest throughout this reflective practice and that I share my findings in a way that are useful to others. While writing this thesis I reflexively assess my research keeping these criterion in mind.

**Conclusions**

The qualitative paradigm that allows for a critical interpretive naturalistic inquiry through a reflection on practice takes into consideration the overlapping interactions which occur when adults learn together in non-traditional ways. The reflective process allows for a detailed and honest account of facilitating and being a member of teacher professional learning. The qualitative methods I apply to this study may support my work while having the potential to abet other practitioners who facilitate professional development. These methods, approaches and lenses allow for rich data collection and analysis derived from
reflections as an analysis of my personal experiences working with colleagues to support our collective professional development. I hope that readers will see some of themselves in my experiences, challenges and successes.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This analysis of my data is done through an interpretive lens via a reflection-on-practice. Through an examination of my data I hope to better understand ways to effectively facilitate teacher professional development. I aim to make my research an honest reflection of my experiences and set forth my findings in practical terms to make them as accessible as possible. Sharing what I gleaned from my experiences learning with and supporting teachers I hope to add to the discourse on professional development with practical applications. The major findings pivot around ways I tried to create, establish, and sustain professional learning communities in the public school setting.

Overview of Themes

At the outset of my research I sought to investigate professional learning communities as an alternative form of professional development. Within a PLC framework I examined the role of facilitator-as-member while disentangling which qualities and characteristics are attributable to effective facilitation. My field notes included observations, thoughts, and feelings about what transpired each time a group met. Rather than relying on memory, throughout this study I compared my pre-meeting notes with my agendas and reflections to see if there was consistency between each form of data. Subsequently, the triangulation of my data using a reflexive process provided rich information to analyze. The in-depth examination of my data, obtained by coding words and concepts written about at length and reoccurring across the three forms of data collection, reveal five overlapping themes, catalogued into four meta-themes. The findings obtained through an analysis of the meta-themes: logistics/physical set-up, facilitation, relationships/power, and professional development follow.
Logistics

To my surprise the most pervasive theme was the logistics of setting up each professional learning community. Even though the literature highlights the importance of creating a space for social learning through inquiry, prior to analyzing my data I had little appreciation of how pivotal logistics were to facilitating professional development. As the findings from this theme are so dense it is necessary to discuss them in four sub-themes: scheduling and forming groups; time; creating transparency, and physical set-up.

i. Scheduling and forming groups. The first logistical issue when applying a non-traditional method of professional learning like a PLC was determining when to schedule PD. The school administration had determined a way to support teacher learning within the instructional day. However, the challenge to coordinating professional learning in most elementary schools is that there is a large number of staff and a limited amount of time for people to meet. Wanting every staff member to have an equal opportunity to participate in some sort of PD, I along with my administrators, attempted to coordinate a schedule that ensured every teacher could participate in professional learning. As there were many people and only few weeks left in the year we needed to decide whether to provide staff with variety, but unrelated, PD experiences or have the same people meet multiple times to participate in a more in-depth form of PD like a PLC. Ensuring that every teacher participated in a full cycle of learning by taking part in a short-version of a PLC before the end of the year was the best option. With only three months remaining we found a way to meet with each group three times prior to the end of the school year. After much discussion we chose to have the same group of teachers meet three weeks in a row to provide time for members to think about, try, and reflect on what was discussed without losing momentum between meetings.
Through careful planning and the use of funding for professional development, myself and five teachers met each Wednesday for sixty minutes. Additionally, one, if not both, administrators participated in each group. As a result of emerging concepts around teacher learning we coordinated PD where teachers met more than once. In my notes taken during a pre-meeting I write, “Group A May 9-introduction and planning time, May 16- go and see the lesson, May 23\textsuperscript{rd} – discuss how the lesson went and strategies for success” (May 4, 2012). As part of the learning cycle we felt the best use of this time was to have teachers collaboratively plan, observe and try in order to discuss and reflect on the selected strategy or lesson. With my administrators’ consent I settled on having each group meet three times in a row to provide enough time to accomplish all this work. This schedule allowed for every teacher to participate in non-traditional professional learning by the end of the year.

Once we had a schedule of when groups met and how many people could meet at the same time, we next needed to establish group membership. One tool that helped determine groupings was a PD survey I gave each teacher in September. This survey was confidential and voluntary but it provided the administrator and me a better understanding of what topics the staff felt they wanted to learn more about (See Appendix C). To align PD for groups of teachers I asked that each person complete and rank order their top three desired topics, one as being the most desired.

As an aside, this tool made it possible to create a school-wide focus as well as smaller group foci for the entire school year. Consequently, throughout the instructional year we worked on many areas which teachers felt they needed/wanted to learn more about. These topics were seamlessly integrated and reiterated in staff, division, PA/PD days and our PLCs. Further, throughout the school year in our professional learning
communities we applied different types of collaborative learning cycles to support teachers with the professional development they requested. To coordinate groups at the beginning of March I met with my administrators to discuss which teachers would be in which groups and when each group would meet. Having tried a variety of alternative groupings in the past, we agreed with the literature that it was best to have the people who taught the same grade with one or two teachers who supported that grade form a group. For example, one group was comprised of four teachers who taught two successive primary grades and the teacher who taught their students The Arts and the Media strand of Language Arts. I found it was easier to continue the work we were currently doing throughout the school with teachers teaching the same curriculum to the same students. Just as it was simpler to teach camp staff the equally relevant topic of first aid, so too was it easier to support primary teachers’ inquiry of techniques specific for teaching primary students. With a schedule of who was meeting when, I set out to plan how groups would engage in collaborative learning.

**ii. Time.** As touched upon in the last section when scheduling groups there are major constraints due to time. The change from traditional PD that provided a three-hour workshop or one hour of a monthly meeting is vastly different from teacher learning through Professional Learning Communities. The adoption of this form of PD is apparent as school districts now designate money for development to take place within the instructional day. This funding allows schools to pay for occasional teachers to cover teachers’ classrooms for anywhere from one period to entire blocks of days. However, there is not sufficient money to have groups meet for the amounts of time some researchers believe is necessary. Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley (2007) found that, “Studies that had greater than 14 hours of professional development showed a positive and significant effect on student achievement from professional development”
While providing this many hours is easy in the structure of post-secondary courses and Additional Qualification Courses it is not viable for every teacher on staff to receive this amount of in-school release time. If teachers attend one staff meeting a month that includes professional development for an hour then teachers still receive less than the minimum amount of PD needed to effect change.

The issue of time is prevalent throughout my data as seen in the ways I planned and facilitated each PLC. My pre-meeting notes were littered with references to issues with time particularly when due to organizational issues we only planned to meet with one group twice. In discussions with my administrators I confessed, “the need for more time [to meet] with the next groups; we needed time for the most important part to discussion what we learned and [in addition, these] teachers asked to meet again” (April 20, 2012). Not having enough time to delve into our learning cased me stress. When the administration and I met the following Friday I noted, “after speaking with my admin and explaining that research shows that an essential step to learning is the chance to reflect we decided that it would be worthwhile for the group to meet again to continue and extend the conversation” (April 11, 2012). I knew that like the other teachers, I needed more time to consolidate my learning through discussion but in order to do this we needed more time together. In the end, meeting with each group a third time proved invaluable.

Time was mentioned on more than a dozen occasions in my reflections. On May 9, 2012 I wrote about, “compromising between moving on and allowing everyone to talk”, “issue with timing (wanting to see the entire activity but needing to head back to begin our discussion).” The importance of being organized to save time also arose when I realized that I needed to have, “resources ready to save time” (April 18, 2012). On May 23, 2012 I reflected upon how, “the limitation of time, limits the depth of work possible.”
While I honestly appreciated every minute I had to support teacher learning, this theme revealed that one of the greatest hurdles to delivering in-depth PD is the finite amount of time provided for educators to learn together. “Being conscious of the time (this is always the biggest issue with any PLC) I had to plow ahead and ask that we begin to complete a planner that would help us organize our lesson)” (April 4, 2012). The learning we did was of great value but I feel that having fourteen or more hours to meet would have further increased the degree to which the PD impacted on teacher practices and consequently student achievement.

iii. Transparency. To counterbalance the limited amount of time allotted, one effective strategy I used to make every second count was creating transparency by sharing and following an agenda. During my first year facilitating I noticed that effective PD required immediate and clear communication. I liked knowing the intended purpose as to why I was there and what and how I was going to learn. The simplest way to accomplish this is by providing participants with an agenda. Although agendas are formal and may seem rigid, I believe the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. In the past when I attended PD where there was no agenda I felt uneasy and “out of the loop” and I was not the only one who complained. There are advantages of creating and making agendas available to every participant such as providing a learning goal, which in turn makes the learning focused and transparent (see Appendix D). Additionally, as a facilitator, making an agenda available creates more accountability to keep on topic and try to solidify the group’s understanding of the intended content within the established time.

The agendas were created in partial collaboration with the teachers in each PLC. For example, the PD surveys completed by members of the first group showed an overwhelming desire to learn more about assessment and evaluation. At the top of the
agenda I created for this group I wrote the learning intention as, “To build a common understanding of how to plan, implement and, assess/evaluate.” Through every professional learning opportunity I helped facilitate I made a concerted effort to remain transparent modeling the effective teaching practices the staff were already familiar with. By regularly stating this goal I made it clear that I was honouring what the group members wanted to learn about as well as promising to focus on this topic for the next sixty minutes.

Each agenda clearly laid out a plan of what we were going to do and how. As the PD functioned as an inquiry the members and I, along with the administration, worked together to complete chosen task. My agendas included structured timing for subtasks like, “1:45-1:55 Planning/diagnostic” but although I planned and facilitated allowing for this particular task to take fifteen minutes I was always prepared for it to take anywhere from five to thirty minutes to complete. Further, by creating structure everyone knew from the onset that they were passively receiving information but instead were responsible to investigate and find a solution to a pedagogical problem they had in their own classrooms. Teachers knew ahead of time what we were doing, why, and about how much time we had to implement each task to complete the learning cycle.

The agendas I created were representative of common goals in PLCs as they included the topics the participants wanted to discuss as a result of their survey responses, or were open-ended to provide a chance for the community to determine or alter the topic and focus. Facilitating using a pre-established agenda is a traditional method of teacher PD. However, displaying an open-ended agenda for everyone to see, which is representative of the group’s needs, with the flexibility to alter it as we were going along transforms “the agenda” into a non-traditional tool. Rather than functioning as a series of steps teachers witnessed a presenter completing, agendas created in this
way can act as road maps that sketch out possible routes for teacher learning. Publicly sharing an agenda that includes participants' needs promotes inquiry that is authentically driven by staff.

**Physical Set-up**

The most pervasive and initially surprising theme to emerge from my research relates to my focus on how to physically set-up the space where the professional learning communities met. An analysis of this sub-theme reveals how mutually independent physical elements are to creating emotionally and intellectually safe spaces for members to learn together. Just as is the case when I support student learning, I realized that the way I set-up the PD space altered how people interacted and thus, the effectiveness of the PD. Effectively setting-up a room can diminish power inequalities and foster community. Furthermore, a room’s arrangement establishes a focal point, provides or prevents space for eating and note taking and determines if and what kinds of interactions may ensue. My research reveals that to establish such an environment the physical space must adhere to certain guidelines. The guidelines that follow are fairly specific but are practical strategies I wish I had prior to attempting to create a PLC.

Both my pre-meeting notes and reflections speak of the very basic logistical element of how furniture is placed. My experiences reveal that when members faced one direction, such as towards a whiteboard, their focus and attention was on the visual space as opposed to the people in the room. Creating a focal point that prevents people from interacting can unintentionally transform the professional learning into a workshop or presentation model giving the power, focus and voice solely to the person presenting. In my first reflections related to the group that met on April 4th I wrote, “I made sure that there were enough chairs and that everyone could see each other (sort of a circle
formation...).” Just as it is good pedagogical practice when teaching students, an effective layout for PD allows adult learners to speak to one another. Each learning community was comprised of five to eight people. To ensure members were physically part of the group I chose to sit everyone in a circular formation. With this seating arrangement there was no longer a “front” of the room to gaze upon a single person presenting.

My desire for everyone to sit in a circle inadvertently produced another logistical issue. Wanting to maintain transparency, I struggled with how to display the agenda along with my notes. I tried to project the agenda and notes from a laptop onto a white surface for everyone to view. However, the simple act of projecting images for the group to see was not a simple endeavour,

I set up a laptop with a projector (in hopes that I could project the work that we were doing and everyone could see/work collaboratively this way). [I projected] onto a wall instead of the whiteboard, as I had done in the past feeling that it was more visible, but it made it so that members’ backs were to the projected image and it was uncomfortable for them…this time instead I projected on a far wall so everyone could see [the image] without having to turn around or have the projection light in their eyes- the downfall of this was that it was much harder to read on the bumpy surface of the wall and it was too small because I could not push the projector far enough away from the wall to enlarge the image. To type I needed to turn my back on the entire group. I will not be doing this again but I really do need to figure out another way to make this possible....?? (April 4, 2012)

When put into practice something as seemingly simple as using technology to make PD accessible and transparent requires much planning and foresight.
Before each time a group met I changed the seating configuration along with how I projected and shared the agenda and “minutes”. I placed the chairs in an open square or circle with the projector at the opposite side of the opening. About a month later I found a solution,

This time I made sure to project onto the whiteboard so everyone could see and I also made sure there were no chairs where it would be difficult for people to see or where people would get in the way of the image. I had the planner template both projected and smaller examples spread out so that [teachers] could see. (May 2, 2012)

If displaying a screened image is necessary, I noticed that a preferred seating arrangement is a horseshoe or open square or circle where I as the facilitator am sitting with the group. I found this configuration worked best as everyone could see the screen while participating in the group discussion. Further, in conjunction with having a virtual image displayed I learned that people also like to have a hardcopy so they can jot notes down. As we collaborated, teachers took it upon themselves to work on the templates either independently or with the person beside them. With time to do their own thinking and planning they had more to share. This increase in participation might partially be a result of members having hardcopies on which to work their ideas through, providing them with an entry point for participation and a way to support their colleagues’ learning by sharing their ideas.

The impetus for taking and projecting notes was to decrease distractions. I noticed that when I gave members a hardcopy of the agenda the focus shifted from people participating in the discussion to writing as much as they could. Consequently, “I brought a laptop with me so that I could sit at the table with everyone else while taking notes which I told people I would send them so they would not need to write [and] rather
[could] be part of the discussion” (April 11, 2012). Once members could see the notes I was taking and that they would receive them by email, they stopped writing and instantly they began to authentically engage in professional dialogue. Projecting our collective work created and sustained a common focus. I believe members felt more in control and engaged in their learning because they could see what I scribed and because they had an identical organizer to work on.

   i. Resources. Another logistical element that commonly arises when planning any professional development opportunity is determining ahead of time the resources and materials that may be needed. This theme arose most often when groups met for the first time when I noticed that it is, “super important to have the right resources there for teachers to use in order to engage in the work” (April 4, 2012). I realized this because when I was unprepared, “teachers asked if I had a copy of the curriculum {which I did not} and (not wanting to interfere with the discussion I volunteered to go [to the library to get a few copies]).” Even with good planning there were times when people wanted to quickly get something from their classrooms. Disadvantages of needing to scurry to get resources is explained in my reflection from May 2, “the challenge of not having resources right at our fingertips is that when a teacher leaves to get something the conversation continues without them and when they return they might be lost and decision have often changed”. Not having the necessary resources made it challenging to move ahead as the learning lacked focus when people were absent.

   Having most of the things people need on-hand requires the facilitator to spend more time and effort but the benefit is that the time spent together is more productive. At a subsequent PLC, “I also made sure that I had a few copies of the Language curriculum document as I knew from last time that people wanted to look at [the expectation] in context (to the grade, the overall expectation and the curriculum in
If the curriculum functions as our guide to teaching than as a facilitator I need to make these resources accessible in PLCs. On April 25, 2012 I reflected on the benefits of being organized with the right resources and materials, “having resources ready saves time and makes things run more smoothly.” With the right resources PLCs run more easily as they establish a shared vision of the work, and as collective responsibility ensue the quality of the learning increases.

Resources also act as sources of information that can help establish common understanding and shared vision and value of the work. I note that it is “helpful to bring in resources that [support teachers to see] the big picture but also show how independent of what grade you are teaching it is helpful to see how the expectations change as well as their similarities [between grades]” (May 2, 2012). In this instance having the right resources enabled me to better articulate a concept that would otherwise been hard to explain.

The logistics meta-theme exemplifies the number of details facilitators need to take into account in order to provide the best possible environment for collaborative work. Scheduling the time for teachers to meet in groups with similar needs in similar contexts makes PD more effective. Additionally, transparency and teacher-directed learning is possible through the creation of agendas that encourage members to take professional responsibility for the PD they participate in. Establishing spaces that are conducive for professionals to work together requires fostering group discussions that produce collective work. It is easier for people to work efficiently when they have the right resources and materials to help clarify and explain concepts, give examples, and inspire thinking. My notes reveal my emerging understanding of how to approach these logistical elements to promote engagement and collective responsibility of collaborative work.
Facilitation

Underlying every part of this analysis as it is seen though the lens of a facilitator is the motif of facilitation. By analyzing my data I hope to understand in what ways I help or hinder my colleagues’ learning. This analysis shows that two major requirements of facilitation are: logistical planning and promoting productive social interactions. When looking through my pre-meeting notes, agendas, and reflections two sub-themes emerged, related to how I aid or impede professional learning. The first relates to my developing skills where I feel I had some facilitation success providing PD that was teacher-driven, collaborative and somewhat transformational with the time allotted. Second, I discuss my challenges with facilitation that include negotiating challenging social dynamics and leading the group to quickly establish a clear focus for the work. I use prospective criticism when analyzing these themes to determine better ways to effectively facilitate professional development in the future.

i. Teacher-directed. Within the theme of facilitation, my findings show that I supported PD to optimize engagement by providing teachers with control over their learning. Learning is teacher-directed when teachers play an active role in determining the method and/or content of the PD they receive. I surveyed teachers individually and I also asked them the first time each group met what they were working on with their students that they felt their students needed more help with. My pre-meeting notes show that when I met with the first group we discussed the content as well as the format by which they wanted to learn. Eventually we settled on a form of collaborative work where we would end up learning by watching someone teach what we collaboratively planned. My notes, agendas and reflections also show that I continually asked teachers what PD
they felt could support their teaching. I feel that having teachers determine the format and content made the work relevant and useful.

I realized that having a similar structure made it easier to transfer to each PLC independent of the grade or curriculum focus. The main learning goal for the PLCs was how to create a critical learning opportunity to assess group work through effective planning. Understanding teacher and student needs allowed me to connect this PD to what members were currently teaching their students. I chose to use a lesson organizer the staff was familiar with to drive our planning. Utilizing a well-known organizer made it easier to embed novel ideas into practices I knew were established among participants. For example in one group we worked on how to assess group work as students completed a critical task related to making inferences when reading. In this lesson we also included learning goals and the chance to co-create success criteria with students. I chose to maintain the same method of planning using the same template, and the same cycle of teaching, observing than discussing. This type of consistency allowed me to more easily facilitate different Professional Learning Communities with different foci. The same PD approach using pedagogical practices of transparent teaching, group work and ways to assess was possible whether groups focused on teaching students how to infer when reading, create voice when writing, add money amounts, or hone their research skills.

I also tried to create “hooks” for members to grasp onto novel concepts by connecting them to their prior knowledge. Providing an entry point into the learning for each individual teacher was not easy as it required that I have some understanding of each member’s professional knowledge. I had learned a bit about what members already knew by working alongside them for over five years. This knowledge made it possible for me to effectively link and help teachers make sense of novel concepts. For
example, I associated the idea of creating more intellectually demanding learning experiences in different ways for different teachers. For some I drew parallels to this inquiry with their understanding of critical thinking while for other I connected it with their prior knowledge of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Recognizing teacher knowledge provides insight into what members know enabling me to effectively support the professional development of my colleagues.

**ii. Collaborative work.** Another key role of facilitating PD in a professional learning community is ensuring collaborative work. An analysis of my data shows that I promoted group work and accountability by providing an organizer for the group to complete. As previously mentioned, teachers were familiar with the planning template. There were some sections that like “big ideas” that were difficult to complete. At these times I found it helpful to have the group look at the templates completed by other PLCs,

> This time we were actually using the template from the group prior to this one to give us a concrete, strong, sample to work [from and as a result everyone seemed]; much calmer and there was less side conversation making it easier to facilitate (May 2, 2012)

Perhaps having models made it easier for members to collaboratively complete the template related to the group’s focus because they saw how the work could be organized. Other PLCs generalized the model to their particular topic, curriculum expectation, grade, materials and strategies. Using a template supported collective work. I noted that when the group worked on the organizer, all divergent conversations ceased and the discussion quickly focused on completing each section of the planner. Facilitating PD by using an organizer for the group to collectively complete promoted focused collaborative work.
iii. **Transformational professional development.** A final way I feel my facilitation positively impacted on professional development is that I strove for teacher learning to impact on pedagogical practices. I created accountability by including an expectation that with support, the teachers would attempt what they learned. I needed a way for teachers to walk away from professional development and into their classrooms with the confidence to try new approaches and strategies. One way I tried to accomplish this was by having in my agendas, “a section that includes something like ‘next steps’ or ‘homework” (April 4, 2012). The transparency of explicitly asking teachers to try new approaches made our learning into an inquiry rather than a passive experience of obtaining information. Having observed the lesson taught during the second time we met, teachers were asked to try it in their own classrooms. The next time we met people discussed the observed lesson but, having taught it themselves, they also returned with questions, strategies and suggestions for the rest of the group. I feel that having teachers attempt the work in a supportive environment made it more likely that they might embed new learning into their practices.

**Facilitation Challenges**

I had success facilitating in terms of understanding the participants, aligning the learning to their prior knowledge and needs, creating a way to work collaboratively and attempting to make the PD transformative. My findings also reveal two areas of challenge with regards to facilitating teacher learning. While this was the exception and not the rule, there were instances working with particular professional learning communities when I feel I had difficulty maintaining a collegial and supportive environment by negotiating challenging social dynamics as well as taking the lead to
establish a clear focus in a timely manner. The caveat to this analysis is that these challenges did not occur often or pervade every group. However, as I believe a great facilitator should be able to support the learning of any teacher or group of teachers, I feel an analysis of these challenges will support my desire to facilitate teacher professional development with ease.

*i. Negotiating challenging social dynamics.* PLCs, as non-traditional forms of PD, require social construction of knowledge through collaborative work. As such, I needed to create an environment where people felt safe to participate and volunteer to try out new ideas in their classroom with their students. In terms of establishing a respectful environment I explain, “as we have been doing collaborative work using this structure since the beginning of the year I did not need to reintroduce group norms but feel that they are fairly well established at this point in time.” (April 4, 2012) To facilitate a productive work dynamic, the first time a PLC met I introduced a set of group norms to create a collegial working environment. Additionally, in my reflections I noticed that I always welcomed everyone and concluded by thanking every member for their contributions.

These norms were typically easy to maintain except for the last time groups met. As part of this particular learning model the third time a group met we discussed our observations of student work based on the lesson we planned together. Collecting and sharing objective observations was new to almost all the teachers making this process challenging. When we discussed how our lesson went I noted that many teachers shared observations about the teaching rather than the student learning as was asked. While I observed that, “most of [a particular] group found it easy to share observations without evaluating [their colleagues] “ (May 30, 2012), this was not always the case. There were many instances when colleagues began assessing each other’s teaching
rather than student learning. As a consequence, the people who taught the lesson wanted to defend why they did what they did.

When teachers began to assess each other I needed to reinforce the fact that we were not and could not evaluate the teacher who attempted our lesson. To prevent members from feeling judged and defensive I explicitly “explained how we share...[and] that we all had to make sure not to analyze or editorialize our observations of student learning, (May 9, 2012). At another time I stated that we were not focusing on the teaching but on planning and on the way the students approached the work we gave them.

Reminding teacher about how to make discussions respectful and safe made me feel uncomfortable at times. I felt that when I “jumped in” to stop people from inferring and evaluating, some members might have become hesitant to share as readily. Perhaps I was not explicit enough and should have modeled or perhaps as practitioners we are so accustomed to assessing and evaluating that is hard not to evaluate every element in the teaching environment. Either way I found facilitating professional development that is non-evaluative somewhat challenging. As a facilitator I realized that negotiating potentially uncomfortable or unproductive interactions is necessary and can benefit members as we learn together. In this same meeting I note, At one point...I had to redirect the discussion back to students only (this was a good thing as it made the rest of the conversation more comfortable and less about those specific volunteers who had chosen to teach our lesson) (May 9, 2012).

Redirecting is a complex facilitation technique. When I took the time to explain, give an example or model PD was more effective. Leading the discussion this way made it easier for people to share only their observations of the students aiding our collective
learning about how our lesson helped or could be improved upon to support student success.

When looking at my notes there are many instances prior to meetings and after meetings when I voiced my frustrations with not knowing how to better negotiate social interactions. Once these issues arose I found facilitating hard because I lacked the skills to navigate unproductive social exchanges, which I feel were compounded by time constraints and pre-established power dynamics. However, this issue was easily circumvented by modeling how to share objective observations about student learning so that other members could safely participate in the group’s learning.

ii. Taking the lead to find a focus. The other great challenge when facilitating teacher learning is establishing focus especially when PD is teacher-directed. Facilitating non-traditional PD is challenging because it requires the person leading the PD establish a focus in a timely manner so the work can begin. My notes reveal that this issue occurred most often the first time a group came together and when I felt groups of people did not want to work together. In one instance I found it particularly challenging to work with a group where everyone was teaching something different with no foreseeable common ground. While I and other members were trying to move the discussion towards determining a specific topic or issue I looked at silent members and noticed, “there was body language like crossed arms and legs and the occasional rolling of the eyes” (May 16, 2012) when people spoke. Not knowing how to change people’s feelings that produced such behaviours filled the learning environment with tension. Eventually when I was able to get everyone to participate, rather than selecting a focus for professional learning the PLC became a venting session. I found it hard to make the conversation more productive or help find a common focus.
After much struggle, I decided to re-introduce a previously discussed issue the group had not yet referred to. The issue related to classroom management during literacy, “this group (which had met before for another type of learning cycle earlier in the year) had talked about what to do with students during Literacy when… [the teacher wanted] to conference or do guided reading” (May 16, 2012). As this issue was not solved the last time we met, I thought this topic might still be of interest to the group. When I introduced this idea as a potential focus for our work, it received resistance and there was blatant disregard for an attempt to come up with a solution. I was relieved when one teacher stepped forward asking for help with this issue as it related to their classroom. The members came together to support their colleague with a problem they too were dealing with. While finding a common focus makes the work relevant to everyone, lacking a focus can be the greatest detriment to collaborative work. Challenging interactions can be worthwhile when they result in the kind of professional learning that brings into question current practices positively affecting pedagogy.

Another dilemma I initially faced was quickly establishing focus the first time a group met, “I tried to get everyone’s attention (people were chatting and having conversations mostly with the person sitting beside them)” (April 29, 2012). With the limited amount of time we had together it was hard to get everything accomplished when I had trouble getting the group to begin on time. I eventually grasped that the major issue was that people came late, and because we are waiting for people to arrive, those present began to talk with one another. While I did so inconsistently in my reflections I write,

rather than stopping and waiting for everyone I have realized that it is better to begin in order to respect everyone’s time [because] otherwise teachers who do come on time get frustrated with the fact that they made
that effort [to be on time when instead they] could be back in class
teaching
and I go on to say that,
I also find that starting right away makes it clear that the expectation is
that we are meeting at the set time. The people who come late then find
themselves trying to catch up to a conversation that is well underway”
(April 19, 2012).

As a facilitator I want everyone included in the dialogue but I also need to establish and
adhere to guidelines including a start time. Those who came late needed to catch-up to
the conversation. This was a better alternative to a postponed or non-existent
discussion. I remained torn as I wanted time for people to come in and chat to further
foster a sense of community before we began but found that it was best to start right
away even if not everyone was there as we all felt that our limited amount of time
together was valuable and wanted to take advantage of every minute.

By analyzing my data I understand that negotiating social interactions and
determining focus are two areas of facilitation I want to work on to further support
teacher learning. The struggles I encountered trying to facilitate non-traditional PD direct
me towards the areas I need to address in order to improve professionally. Analyzing my
experiences through a reflection-on-practice serves the purpose of highlighting
professional next steps to better perform in this role as a way to support my colleagues.

**Relationships and Power**

The theme of *relationships/power* pervades each of the previously analyzed themes. It
is complex as it inherently overlaps with all the other themes and in particular with the
theme of *power*. At the heart of my study was my desire to determine if it is possible to
facilitate the learning of a group of my colleagues while simultaneously working along
side them in an attempt to learn with them as an equal member. Was I inside or outside
the communities I attempted to form? In traditional professional development there is
clear delineation between the role of presenter and that of attendee. In Professional
Learning Communities this is not the case.

When I started facilitating my initial concern was taking on a role that straddles
teacher and administrator. This dual role was most apparent when I met with the school
administration, to determine who would be meeting when, how many times and how
frequently. Unlike all the other people in the PLCs I knew the logic behind why people
were selected to work together as well as why these particular dates worked best for
each group to meet. I felt like playing a role in deciding these logistical elements put me
in a different position than the other members of the PLCs who were told when they
were meeting and with whom.

As mentioned previously, I experienced the greatest amount of emotional and
intellectual tension when I felt I needed to step in and act as the facilitator to negotiate
the dialogue. In one situation, due to time constraints I found myself, “compromising
between moving on and allowing everyone to talk (May 9, 2012). Simply the idea that I
“allowed” people to talk exemplifies the power that I, as a facilitator, had over who
participated, as well as the direction and length of the discussion.

Adding another layer to the power dynamics that arose when groups of people
socially interacted is the power that exists within and between group members. On May
16 I ask, “how can I facilitate in a way that allows everyone’s voice to be heard, even
those who are aggressive and silence others, without me silencing them?” I go on to
inquire, “how do you equalize power relationships that exist beyond or outside of the
PLC?” Issues of power reside in every interaction, be it between a teacher-facilitator and
administration, a facilitator and a member or two members. Acknowledging and trying to minimize power dynamics is a challenging but necessary element to effective facilitation.

When it comes to professional learning communities relationships are at the core of success. PD is more productive when facilitators take into consideration relationship-building to form positive relationships between members. My data reveals a few advantages of forming positive and trusting relationships with those in PLCs. Such relationships were easier for me to nurture as I facilitate the learning of those I have worked with on a daily basis for the past five years. People with whom I had established trusting relationships felt comfortable approaching me outside the PLCs to talk and were more supportive during the PLCs. There were many instances when teachers stepped in to explain an idea, come up with a solution or volunteer to help beyond the time we spent working in the professional learning community. Forming trusting, respectful relationships is challenging in any professional environment. Helping members form and maintain positive relationships outside the PLC might be beyond the role of the facilitator, however, what a facilitator does have control over are the relationships they form with those whose learning they are supporting. The type of PD I facilitated is founded on social learning opportunities, and thus, positive relationships lay the groundwork for valuable professional development.

**Professional Development**

As this section is focused on reflection-on-practice I limit the analysis of my data to the theme of professional development as it relates to my role as a teacher-facilitator. My data show that I placed the success of my facilitation on to what degree teachers learned something new and were likely to try it in their own practices. While there are a
plethora of things I still need to learn and focus on this is an overview of a few facilitation methods I feel helped me support teacher PD.

A great deal of my facilitation occurred prior to when the groups met to receive PD. I focused a lot of my attention on the logistical elements and eventually found some promising strategies. In my reflections I explain the “importance of having a common view of the work being conducted so that everyone has the ‘pen’ [by seeing] the group’s collaborative work” (April 4, 2012). I realized that if I wanted to have every on the same page that I literally needed to make sure there was one page we could collectively share our work on. The process of taking many ideas to create one product required people to explicitly articulate what they were thinking. Providing the structure so that colleagues could think through professional processes with one another proved invaluable.

An emerging understanding from my notes was about knowing when to ask for help or accept the help that was offered. Does facilitation mean carrying out all the administrative roles or could I give other members jobs to do? At one point I noticed that, “I typically ‘scribe’ but I think that I should ask other members to volunteer do this job to share the ‘pen’”. However when a member offered to type I declined their offer as I felt it would take them away from the group discussion. As taking on certain roles as a facilitator makes me feel separate from the group I wanted to avoid other people feeling this same way. Perhaps if I accepted help from other members or asked for help I might have felt like more of an equal member and other people would feel greater responsibility for the work. Later on I accepted and encouraged other members’ leadership. When a member had an idea or resource they wanted to show with the rest of the group I asked them to share it at the following meeting. These teachers enthusiastically shared positively changing the group dynamic.
Another facilitation skill I learned about was how to create a greater balance between facilitator and member. In my reflections I write about my concerns with members believing I was always the one in control or had all the answers. At first I was consistently the center of the conversation, one person spoke directly to me and expected me to respond before the next person spoke. I wanted equality and sought ways to shift these assumed roles and power dynamics. I eventually found a few ways to minimize the focus on me. First, if the group was not sitting in a circular formation I learned that it helped if I sat at the edge of the group. There was also a benefit to decreasing eye contact with the person speaking as, “I noticed that members looked at each other and not just at me” prompting more people to participate. Further, once people were sharing as a group and there was momentum to the conversation, I tried to participate less. I learned that more people shared and the conversation was more natural if I grew silent, or shared as much or less than any other member. The consequence was that people shared more and I only needed to speak up to redirect or respond if someone directly asked me a question, for clarification or my opinion.

Another related element to facilitating PD that I learned was how to generate conversation where other members took on the role of expert in the community. In order to do this I found it beneficial to prompt discussions by asking rather than by telling,

I have found it useful to sometimes challenge thinking by stating something that is ‘wrong’) once I do this I find that other group members are often likely to take over whether it is because I have made a mistake and it’s ok or if it gives them the confidence to say what they think/feel/know I am not sure. (April 4, 2012)

I learned that asking questions or showing uncertainty is a powerful way to harness teacher knowledge. This strategy helped some members engage and participate in the
collective dialogue regularly affirming my belief that when given the chance teachers have a wealth of knowledge and expertise to share.

Summary

Initially my concern was that I did not collect enough data to conduct an in-depth analysis of my experiences. However, once I began to sort and code my research I noticed that there were in fact too many themes and examples to discuss in detail. Thus, I chose only to consider the most prevalent themes that emerged through my analysis. Each theme overlapped the next and I needed to demarcate the ways they were the same and the elements that separated them. Dominant themes were selected as they appeared repeatedly across all three forms of data collection as well as the frequency and length I wrote about them in my notes. While every theme is in fact an analysis of my professional development as a facilitator, I delineated my major findings into logistics, facilitation, relationships and my personal professional development. The data showed that while I continue to struggle facilitating the social interactions optimal for productivity, I am often able to plan in a way that engages teachers in potentially transformative ways. I feel my findings accurately reflect the complex overlapping and multifaceted components at play when facilitating teacher learning.
Chapter 5: Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

Overview of the Study
Throughout this research I sought to determine if I could facilitate professional learning communities while participating as a member. The findings of my research point to truths about whether the PD I facilitated constitute what are called “professional learning communities,” as well as my membership within these communities and the ways I aided and impeded teacher-learning as a result of my facilitation. I then proceed to discuss the implications and limitations of my findings. Finally, I suggest ways I may be supported as a facilitator in the future, as well as ways to support the professional development of educators in general.

Was I facilitating professional learning communities?
I approached my research as an inquiry into whether the form of professional learning I facilitated was in fact a professional learning community. The literature review helped me appreciate that I was not leading the traditional one-shot workshop model but that my approach to teacher learning did in fact include many elements of effective professional development. When I analyzed my data every aspect of teacher of effective PD, with the exception of one, appeared in the work I did as a facilitator. The PD I facilitated was teacher-directed, utilized teacher knowledge, was socially constructed knowledge and provided opportunities for teacher to try what they learned. However, the PD cannot truly be called sustained or ongoing.

Although groups met more than once, meeting three times for a total of three hours does not, by definition, make our work sustained or ongoing. While the research
shows a minimum of fourteen hours to effect changes to teacher practices that impact on student achievement, this was implausible in the context of my research. Even if I was able to begin the professional learning communities from the start of the school year, we could have only met once a week for an hour roughly 64 times (omitting the summer, holidays and special events preventing PD certain weeks). As teachers need to meet in groups this time is cut proportionately. Thus, five teachers meeting once, requires five hours. Accordingly in my case, to allow for the necessary fourteen hours of PD we could have only had two groups, ten people in total, participate in truly sustained and ongoing PD. Not only is it financially not feasible to release every teacher for this amount of time, thus making PD inequitable, but I also believe that most teachers would not want to be away from their students for that many hours of the instructional day.

While more time together might have had more of an impact I feel fortunate that we had the opportunities we did to come together once a week to collaboratively inquire into our professional practices.

While the PD I facilitated might not be considered sustained or ongoing our work created community beyond the time we met as PLCs. Once teachers opened their classroom doors to one another I witnessed and was a part of what I call “hallway discussions”; these are organic discussions that occur between teachers before or after school and during lunch, recesses and preparation time. Increased collaboration outside of the PLCs shows non-traditional PD as a potentially powerful agent of professional development and more importantly, as a means to establish and strengthen teacher collaboration.

I also uncovered to what degree I facilitated PLCs by comparing the themes in my data with the elements that define a Professional Learning Community. While there is no single agreed upon definition of the term, the elements that appear to be essential
to any PLC include: 1. Shared values/visions; 2. Collective responsibility; 3. Reflective personal inquiry; 4. Collaboration, and 5. Group, as well as individual learning (Hord, 2004; Louis et al., 1995; Little 2006). By using these as criteria to evaluate the work I did facilitating PD I realize that some groups did indeed function as Professional Learning Communities.

My intention was to create learning environments where people could collaboratively learn together and in some instances the PD I facilitated included the five components indicative of a PLC. My reflection-on-practice shows that I successfully had all elements at play in some groups but failed to establish shared values, collaboration and responsibility in others. These three components relate to creating community where all members want to do the same work for the same purpose. Power relations and personality clashes will exist among members of a learning community (Malone & Smith, 2010). Thus, my greatest challenge was supporting the learning of professionals who I felt had different and divergent values and visions and who I felt did not value the PD I was attempting to facilitate. Perhaps with more time and greater experience I might have been able to facilitate in a way that helped establish these elements making each group a professional learning community rather than a community of learners or a group of teachers forced to learn together.

**Being inside/outside a PLC**

To determine to what degree I was a member of the learning communities I facilitated I look at only the groups I deemed as professional learning communities. The theme of facilitation reveals tensions between the roles of membership and leadership. Through my findings I conclude that while there were times I functioned and was perhaps
accepted as an equal member as I facilitated my colleagues’ learning, for the most part I was recognized as more of a leader than an equal participant.

Organizing and running each session separated me from the rest of the members especially at the beginning and the ending of each meeting. Unlike the other participants, it was my job to establish focus, when our time together began I could not sit around and talk about non-PD related topics. Trying to get everyone focused on the work at hand by introducing the agenda I created made me unlike any group member. Additionally, at the end of each meeting I needed to make sure to wrap things up, summarize our learning, assign members with different roles and responsibilities and explain what we were going to do the next time we met.

The only times I felt like I slipped into the role of equal member was when focused discussions were underway. During these instances I did not need to have command over the topic, pace or organization but rather, joined in by asking questions and sharing my ideas and experiences. When participants took the lead, came up solutions and answered each other’s questions I felt like an equal member. It is unclear whether at these times other members perceived me, if only momentarily, as an equal participant or if I simply felt I was. Even if I was not always inside the group, trying to function as a member allowed other teachers the opportunity to lead and facilitate the PD by sharing knowledge, struggles and successes with their colleagues.

My experiences show that it is not actually possible to function as an equal member participating in the professional development you are simultaneously facilitating. These roles are not perpetually in opposition but there are times when they are distinct and not always completely overlap. I think the ability to be inside and a part of the community is greater when groups of people work well together making the
collaborative work easier to facilitate. Or, perhaps effective facilitation skills actually result in less need to “facilitate” making greater group membership possible.

**Implications for Practice**

As discussed in the preceding section the data show many ways my facilitation impacted on teacher professional development. As an emerging facilitator the data shows that although I struggled to negotiate challenging social dynamics and determine a clear focus with certain groups, overall I was successful at providing PD that was teacher-driven, collaborative and somewhat transformational even within the short time allotted. Reflecting on my accomplishments and failures sheds light on my professional growth in the role of teacher-facilitator. With this knowledge, I determine what I would do differently as well as what I could do to build on this work at my school.

**Application- A Retrospective Criticism**

The analysis of my work reveals alternative ways I would approach the role of teacher-facilitator in the future (Table 1.1). The first thing I would do differently is to distribute leadership among all members of the community using two approaches. The first approach could be to assign or have members volunteer to take on certain leadership roles. These roles could include a note-taker, a person that keeps the group on track, a time manager, a resources and materials person and so on. Second, I could support learning while establishing community by working alongside one or two people from the group outside of the PLC so that we could facilitate the learning of community together. By providing more leadership I think members would increasingly feel responsible for their learning and I could take on more of a participant role during the time the group came together.
The second change is that I would initiate professional learning communities in September and promote sustained and ongoing learning by meeting with each PLC regularly. Additionally, to support learning I would align and connect our work into all other forms of PD at a school such as: PD sessions, meetings, PA/PD days, memos, school district initiatives, as well as connecting teachers with learning related to our focus beyond the school. Creating multiple, repeated opportunities for teachers to learn together in a variety of ways may function to transform professional practices reflecting in improved student achievement.

While PD is vital and should be accessible to all practitioners, forming communities is challenging work that can impact on teacher learning. Like all learning communities, those established in school environments require a socially conducive atmosphere where work can be done with comfortable collaboration and critical friends (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). However, such collaboration and ‘friendship’ is often not possible. Perhaps if teachers chose to participate, then comfortable collaboration with critical friends could be more easily established. Sometimes it is counterproductive to require participation and this was revealed in my findings, “researchers who have studied the process of forming a community have found that it is often slow and fraught with conflicts, silences, and misunderstandings” (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p.50). When members of a community do not get along or are not willing to actively participate in PLCs, solutions included removing those individuals from the community and even from the school or the profession altogether (Stein, 1998). It is for this reason that I would like the experience of facilitating PD to those interested in facilitating the learning of a group of professionals who voluntarily choose to work together in a PLC, outside of instructional time, focusing on a topic of their choosing.


Reflecting-on-Practice

Utilizing a reflection-on-practice was a powerful way to investigate my role as a facilitator. The practice of recording and reflecting directly after a PLC impacted on my ability to facilitate in two ways. First, the process of reflecting grew into part of my professional practice so that I reflected after but also while I facilitated. Second, reflecting on my work while studying conceptions of teacher learning and facilitation allowed me to apply what I was reading and reflect on my actions based on what I had just ascertained from the literature. The concurrent practice of learning, trying, and reflecting altered the way I facilitated. I now have a more solidified understanding of conceptions of teacher learning. Further, I appreciate how alternative approaches to traditional PD, like the Professional Learning Community, can support transformational teacher learning.

As a result of applying the methodological approach of a reflection-on-practice I also identified ways I may be supported in this role in the future. One possibility is to create teacher-facilitators PLCs. As I am the only one in this role at my school, and I believe that learning is socially constructed, it could be beneficial to communicate and learn with and from other facilitators. It would provide a means to share our experiences and work together to support teacher learning and further enhance my facilitation practices. Perhaps these Professional learning communities for facilitators could first be established face-to-face with those facilitators who work at nearby schools. Once the community is established the “conversation” regarding issues, concerns and strategies could continue either outside of instructional time in person or online.

It is also supportive if I, as a teacher-facilitator, continue to receive time to meet with administration. While I labeled these interactions with my administration as pre-
meetings they occurred throughout the time I facilitated groups. I realize now that as the three of us consistently met with the common goal of determining ways to support we were functioning in fact like our own professional learning community. When we met I made suggestions, asked for support and each of us contributed to the discussion. During our meetings I felt like I had the chance to function as a member to determine what next steps were necessary to support the learning of others. In addition, meeting with my school administrators also helped me reflect on my practice to prepare for future PLCs. Our meetings gave me the opportunity to reflect on my thinking and solidify certain ideas while questioning and changing others. Seeking my administrators’ counsel by collaboratively discussing how previous meetings went and ways to plan for and approach upcoming PLCs helped me succeed in this role. Thus, the continued opportunity to meet with my administrators on a regular basis is one way to build on my work at my school.

**Limitations**

As this is a reflection-on-practice the greatest limitation to this thesis is that it accounts for only my experiences. Due to the nature of my study, ethical protocol limited my research to sharing only my own thoughts, feelings, and ideas as they related to my role facilitating teacher learning. I feel that while this approach provided an honest and in-depth account of my experienced, that including the voices of my colleagues and administration would add other layers to this discussion. There were many teachers who approached me to ask if they could write something for me to include or if they could be interviewed. Their desire to be a part of the research indicates to me that many teachers want their experiences documented and shared. Having previously conducted other research at my school related to PLCs I know the value of including my colleagues in my
research. Interviewing and cross-referencing my notes with colleagues gives me great insight into facilitation and professional development.

Additionally, as this investigation was solely focused on my experiences there are issues of generalization. While qualitative research approaches do not take a traditional perspective on generalizability, I understand that my research accounts reflect only the PD, occurring at one school working with these particular groups of educators who teach a particular student body. Others may glean something by reading my findings but my data do not directly account for the experiences of other teacher-facilitators at other schools and thus, may or may not, resonate with other school districts or between provinces and countries.

The third limitation relates to the length of time I conducted my research and gathered my data. Although I have facilitated PD for four years, for this thesis I used data collected only over a two-month period. While the data was rich enough to complete a thorough analysis it does not reveal the entire story of how I began this particular year and the issues and successes that occurred prior to the data collection or those since. A detailed description of the entire process from the beginning of the year until the end might give a clearer picture of the ways relationships and collaborative work evolve throughout the course of year-long PLCs.

**Next Steps**

The research I initially embarked upon has led to more questions than answers. My role as a teacher-facilitator is important as I support my colleagues while developing my own professional pedagogy. As I deem my abilities as *emergent*, I suggest a few steps I can take to build upon the work I do at my school (Table 1.1). I believe a next step is to find PD about facilitation so I can further develop my skills in this area to better foster
effective PLCs. Further research could explore ways for member-facilitators to balance roles and power related to membership and leadership. As mentioned earlier, it might be worthwhile to see the impact of having a rotation of distributed leadership based on members’ volunteering and/or their ability and expertise. Finally, the ways members relate to each other professionally and personally are complex. Understanding how to organize communities through a more in-depth assessment of social dynamics may help facilitators determine why some PLCs function only as groups of people forced to work towards a common goal versus communities of people who form productive professional relationships. With these supports in place, along with the chance to continue working in the role of teacher-facilitator again, I feel I can build on my work supporting teacher professional development at my school.

~ At the end of the day I felt more assured that I was heading in the right direction, that I was fortunate to support my colleagues with job-embedded PD time and, am aware that there is always more work to do~
### Facilitating Non-Traditional PD Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logistics</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Facilitation</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1. determine a schedule  
-when can groups meet  
-how many people can meet  
-where groups will meet | 1. Get to know the participants  
2. Find ways to work together before the PLC begins to establish a rapport | Determine:  
1. a way to learn the needs to the participants prior to organizing the PD (use an informal survey, interview, take a poll etc.)  
2. patterns between the needs of participants | 1. Obtain training related to facilitation and the topic of professional development |
| 2. Determine group composition  
-which people will work best together based on similar interests or needs | 3. Learn what topics or areas might be of interest to the participants  
4. Form trusting and respectful relationships | 2. Research different strategies, methods and resources to support your understanding of the content |
| 3. Create an agenda/structure for the time together | 5. Openly share the reasons for doing the work | 3. Learn about the context for the PD -the school community -the students -student achievement data -previous PD -school and system foci |
| 4. Set up the physical space  
-furniture placement  
-seating arrangement  
-tools like technology  
-resources and materials | 6. Try to learn about relationships and power dynamics that exist between groups members | 4. Find colleagues and experts to support your work in this role |
| -Provide transparent and explicit intentions  
-Ensure all members feel comfortable to participate | 7. Plan ways to negotiate challenging situations before they arise | 5. Know who to seek counsel from |
| -Set collaborative group norms  
-If needed change the seating arrangement to support the work  
-Provide a way for people to work individually and collaboratively  
-Have a clock or timer for everyone to see  
-Provide flexibility with the exact | -Ask for teacher input  
-Help establish a clear and focused goal (if not already established prior to the first time the group meets)  
-Provide agendas, writing materials, organizers and anything else participants need  
-Ask for members to volunteer to take on certain roles (note-taker, back on topic, materials and resources, | -Learn with the group  
-Find ways to locate answers quickly when needed (i.e. internet) |
| **During** | | | |
| 1. Set collaborative group norms  
-If needed change the seating arrangement to support the work  
-Provide a way for people to work individually and collaboratively  
-Have a clock or timer for everyone to see  
-Provide flexibility with the exact | 1. Provide transparent and explicit intentions  
2. Ensure all members feel comfortable to participate  
3. Be aware of the imbalance of power of members including facilitator-member and administrator-teacher dynamics | 1. Ask for teacher input  
2. Help establish a clear and focused goal (if not already established prior to the first time the group meets)  
3. Provide agendas, writing materials, organizers and anything else participants need |
| After | 1. Collect all resources (if necessary)  
|       | 2. Clean up or return the space to its original form  
|       | 3. Save all documents and email any information or shared work to group members | 1. Speak to any members privately if necessary (ask for feedback, help them on the next step, thank them for their leadership, ask what you can do to make them feel more comfortable to participate next time etc.)  
|       | 2. Connect with administration to see how the PLC ran | 1. Reflect on the PLC as soon after as possible - keep notes about: what occurred, things needed for next time; as well as success and challenges  
|       | 1. Realize that it is normal for things not to go exactly as planned | 2. Understand that you will always feel the need for more time  
|       | 3. Prepare to do a lot of work between the times groups meet: - researching - finding resources - working with teachers outside the PLCs - collaborating with colleagues and administration |
References


Ontario Ministry of Education. (2005). Education for all: The report of the expert panel on literacy and numeracy instruction for students with special education needs, kindergarten to grade 6., *Ontario Education*.


Schön, D. A. (1975). Deutero-learning in organizations: Learning for increased
effectiveness. Organizational Dynamics, 4, 2-16.


Appendix A (Consent Forms)

INFORMED CONSENT FORM - CTL Masters Thesis

Thank you for offering to participate in this project. This letter explains what is involved so you can make an informed decision about taking part. My name is Lindsey Atkins and I am conducting research as part of my thesis with OISE/UT at the University of Toronto called:

**Being on the Inside of a Professional Learning Community: A Self-Study**

My thesis is designed to examine my personal experiences being both a facilitator and member of our Literacy Support Teams, also known as professional learning communities (PLCs), as a way to possibly improve my facilitation to better support the work we do together. My interest is in how groups of educators work together through the process of discussing, planning, trying and reflecting on our pedagogy to development student success. Focusing on my experiences as a facilitator-member, I intend to analyze my reflections of our agendas and discussions to develop a deeper understanding of how facilitation methods help and hinder the process of supporting the implementation and sustained use of teacher practices which promote student literacy through professional learning communities.

This study will take place during the months of April and May during our LST/PLC periods that occur for 60 minutes on Wednesday during period 5. Participating in this study is limited to your attendance of these meetings. You are not required to do any work beyond that which has already been established in our LST periods. The data I intend to collect include our agendas, the notes taken during our meetings and self-created reflections, which I will write after each meeting. Your own name, the real names of other people and places will be replaced with pseudonyms and any identifying information will be omitted to protect your confidentiality. You will be invited to review and edit the field notes from the PLCs in which you were involved by: omitting sections you may feel uncomfortable with sharing; omitting sections you feel incorrectly represent what was thought/felt; and by adding information you feel clarifies or extends thoughts and/or feelings.

There is a small risk that you may feel uncomfortable or become upset when working in our professional learning communities.

Before you agree to participate in this study I would like to reassure you that as a participant in this project you have several very definite rights:

- First, your participation in this study is entirely voluntary.
- You are free to refuse to answer any questions.
- You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.
- Excerpts (though no direct quotes) from our meetings may be included in published accounts, but under no circumstances will your real name or identifying circumstances be included.

I would like to express my appreciation for your participation in this project. Should you have any questions you are welcome to contact me at or my Thesis advisor;

[Signature] (Signature)

[Printed name] (Printed name)

(Date) (Date)

(Facilitator: keep signed copy; leave unsigned copy with participant)
Appendix B (Reflections- Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>April 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- this is the third time we met as a group</td>
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<tr>
<td>- we met in order to continue our discussion as we had to stop in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>middle of some really good deep discussion revolving around practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>and reflecting on our own practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>- we met as a group and although not everyone came right on time</td>
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<tr>
<td>- I brought the notes that I had typed from our last meeting so that we</td>
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<tr>
<td>could continue the work and said that that was what we had planned to</td>
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<tr>
<td>do today based on talking to group members after our last meeting and</td>
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<tr>
<td>people feeling like the conversation had just begun</td>
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<tr>
<td>- I also asked those who were there if they felt that two periods were</td>
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<tr>
<td>enough to complete this kind of cycle or if it needed to be three</td>
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<tr>
<td>based on what had happened in our group—people said they felt three</td>
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<tr>
<td>times was good</td>
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<tr>
<td>- There was a joke about this being the last time we were hopefully</td>
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<tr>
<td>going to meet as everyone is super busy and it feels like being out</td>
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<tr>
<td>of the classroom is taxing at this time of year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I was reading off the observations that we had made and stopped to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ask the group if I should read one at a time and we could discuss</td>
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<tr>
<td>each one or if I should read them all- people said one at a time</td>
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<tr>
<td>- I proceeded to read the next one and stated that this topic was</td>
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<tr>
<td>actually brought up again and again throughout our previous</td>
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<tr>
<td>discussion (the topic was around grouping students for group work)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- This became our first major topic of conversation and it seemed that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everyone was engaged as people looked at each other as they spoke and</td>
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<tr>
<td>every single person contributed and there were even</td>
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<tr>
<td>-met in the same room but this time I brought a small netbook to record</td>
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<td>our discussion which I would than email to everyone after our meeting</td>
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<td>-I did not bring in the projector as I wanted the conversation to centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>around the people talking</td>
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<tr>
<td>-I happened to sit at the corner of the table as I needed to use an</td>
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<tr>
<td>extension cord and this actually seemed to help as I was not at the</td>
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<tr>
<td>centre of the conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-I also had only the one copy of our conversation as I had tried to find</td>
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<tr>
<td>it prior to the meeting and could only locate the hard copy (a teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>asked for it and I explained that I would find the electronic version</td>
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<tr>
<td>but that I could read out and summarize the repeating themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>-sometimes group start late due to the fact that teachers cover each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other’s classes in order to attend, - many teachers meet with the</td>
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<tr>
<td>covering teacher to quickly explain what is going on so this eats into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group time</td>
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<tr>
<td>-rather than stopping and waiting for everyone I have realized that it is</td>
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<tr>
<td>better to begin in order to respect everyone’s time and teachers who</td>
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<tr>
<td>do come on time otherwise get frustrated with the fact that they</td>
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<td>made that effort and could be back in class getting things done</td>
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<tr>
<td>-I also find that starting right away makes it clear that the expectation</td>
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<td>is that we are meeting at the set time and some people who then come</td>
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<td>late are in the middle of an</td>
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</table>
times when people had to stop and let another member continue as they had cut them off (people jumping right into the conversation in mid-sentence)

MAIN POINTS
- people sharing challenges and solutions
- more than one solution being offered when people had already tried a certain technique or believed it would not work with their particular group
- I did not speak that much but when I did at one point it was to link our discussion to the Growing Success document to show that what we thought was important is represented in the reporting process. I stated that I had never thought about this and that this was new to me and really interesting-
- I really did feel like a member more than a facilitator for most of this meeting) 
- challenges with members talking over each other and the issue of dominant voices

already fairly well underway conversation

Themes
- people not wanting to participate in PLCs (the way we do them) because it means time away from their students
- people not arriving on time might indicate not caring or chaos in scheduling and having people to cover teacher’s classrooms
- shows the specific challenge of conducting ‘in house’ PD for teachers
- asked for teacher input around the processes
- putting up notes as a form of continuation and to get us back on the same page from last time
Appendix C (PD Survey)  
Professional Learning Community – Literacy Survey

In order to best support you professionally and to create communities we would love to know which areas you would like to have professional development in.

Please complete the survey and return it to my mailbox by Monday September 19, 2011.

Thanks,
Lindsey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area/Topic</th>
<th>Professional development desired</th>
<th>I feel confident in this area</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PM Benchmark</td>
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<td>DRA</td>
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<td>Assessment</td>
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<td>Reporting</td>
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<td>Lesson Development</td>
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<td>Unit Planning</td>
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<td>Curriculum (understanding)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Big Ideas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cross-curricular/integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELL and Special Ed support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies, skills, tactics, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
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</table>

Teacher: ___________________  Grade: __________        Rm.:_____
Appendix D (PLC Agenda)

Name: ____________________                        April 25, 2012 & May 3, 2012

Group B:
Working together through a Learning Cycle

Learning Intention:
To build a common understanding of how to plan, implement and, assess/evaluate

1:10 Welcome to a new cycle

1:15-1:25
Introduce the framework for our planning and the process

1:25-1:45
Determining a Focus – Using ____’s class- Reading
How will we make this a critical task?
What curriculum expectations will it address?
Will the focus be cross-curricular/thematic?
How will we assess the work students do?

1:45-1:55
Planning/diagnostic
1.9

1:55-2:00
Resources

2:00-2:05
Who will be teaching the lesson?