SEARCHING OUT LOUD TOGETHER:
REFLECTIONS FROM A FACULTY LEARNING CIRCLE

by

Jacqueline Elizabeth Macchione

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Jacqueline Elizabeth Macchione 2014
SEARCHING OUT LOUD TOGETHER: REFLECTIONS FROM A TEACHING CIRCLE

Jacqueline Macchione

Master of Arts
Curriculum, Teaching & Learning
University of Toronto

2014

Abstract

This qualitative study explored the experiences and reflections of nine part-time and newly hired College educators who agreed to participate in the development of a Faculty Learning Circle. A collective case study methodology was used to explore the emergent themes, responses and experiences of the participants who engaged with the FLC over the course of a year. Data was obtained by audio-recording the FLC sessions, participant reflections, as well as a group exit interview. The findings indicated that the FLC was an effective vehicle for sustained and meaningful informal professional development. The FLC allowed participants to explore their professional identities, garner peer support within a collegial community, and numerous opportunities to collaborate for professional learning that had benefits both within and outside the classroom. As a result, this thesis offers insights for both faculty and College administrators into the advantages of a collaborative, peer-led approach to professional development.
Acknowledgements

I would like to firstly thank my supervisor, mentor and friend, Dr. Mary Kooy for believing in me and this research even before I did. Mary was the first person in my graduate school experience to grab me by the hand, look me in the eyes, and tell me what I was about to embark on was not only important to the field of education but also meaningful. Mary, your cheerful enthusiasm, devoted support, patience, and love for teaching is not only inspiring but kept me going, especially when I had moments of doubt. Without your knowledge, expertise and sound guidance, I don’t know how I would have ever reached this very important achievement in my life. Thank you.

Secondly, I would like to thank my husband, Corbin, for being my rock in times of stress and anxiety, my sounding board when I needed to vent, my proof-reader for every research paper leading up to this Master’s Thesis, my unwavering encourager and most importantly, my best friend who never once doubted me or my abilities during this long and arduous process. Corbin, I love you and am so blessed to have you with me on this journey (in good times and during hardships). Our commitment to each other has grounded me when I thought I would never see the light at the end of the tunnel. Thank you for never giving up on me.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my loving parents, Rose and Vince Macchione for providing me the opportunity to complete both my undergraduate and graduate work while providing me the financial, and more importantly, the emotional supports I needed. From a very young age, you both instilled a passion for learning and the value of working hard to accomplish anything that my heart desired. I can’t
express how much your parenting has shaped the woman I am today. I hope that I make you both proud; and know that none of this would ever have been possible without your love, guidance, support and encouragement.

I would like to recognize and express my deepest appreciation for two of my mentors Susan Toews and Susan Heximer, who believed in me from the very start of this journey. I hope you both know how pivotal you were in my return to academia. You embody many of the professional aspects of what I hope to achieve as I continue on my career path. Your kind words, encouragement, and support throughout the years has been what made this process possible and I hope that you know you are both the strongest women I have ever had the honor of calling my dear friends.

I would also like to thank my countless friends and family members who were not only my cheerleaders during this process, but were also extremely patient with me when phone calls were not returned or invitations for outings were declined due to my work and school commitments. Thank you to my in-laws, Tisch and Wayne, my cousins, Melissa & Paul Macchione, my brother and sister Zac and Reena Barker and my dear friends Cassie Whitlam, Jeff Comber, Danah & Blair Raymondo, Grace Chantiam, Katie Gibson, Christine Stecko, Melissa Slater, Christine Ovcaric, Jay Moirana, Lenny Chantiam, Nicole & Marc Genesse, Claire Bouche and Dan Balm. At many countless points during this process you have all supported and encouraged me, made me smile and laugh, reminded me that value of taking breaks and enjoying all that life has to offer. I sincerely thank you for aiding in keeping (or restoring) my sanity during times of stress.
And lastly, this thesis is dedicated to my fellow teachers who took part in this research. My sincerest gratitude to each of you for your dedication and commitment to seeing this project through to its completion. You have been, and continue to be a source of encouragement, inspiration, and motivation. Thank you for reminding me that teaching is “messy” but the best career that I am extremely fortunate to have. You all renew the fire for what I do every day. Without passionate individuals such as you, this research would never have been possible.

Thank you luminaries… this paper is dedicated to you.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ............................................................................................... vi

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study ................................................................. 1
  1.1 Overview .................................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Context: My Educational Narrative ......................................................... 2
  1.3 Becoming a Teacher .................................................................................. 3
  1.4 Background: The College Context ............................................................ 6
  1.5 Professional Development for College Educators ..................................... 8
  1.6 Exploring options to traditional PD ......................................................... 9
  1.7 Faculty Teaching & Learning Circles ......................................................... 12
  1.8 Research Questions .................................................................................. 13
  1.9 Significance of the Study .......................................................................... 14
  1.10 Structure of the Thesis .......................................................................... 15

Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations & Literature Review ............................... 16
  2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................. 16
  2.2 Theoretical Framework of the study ....................................................... 16
  2.3 Literature Review ..................................................................................... 17
  2.4 Strategies to aid in Professional Growth ............................................... 22
  2.5 Summary & Conclusion .......................................................................... 29

Chapter 3: Methodology ................................................................................. 30
  3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................. 30
  3.2 Research Questions .................................................................................. 30
  3.3 Research Design: Frameworks & Approaches ........................................ 30
  3.4 Participants ............................................................................................. 32
  3.5 Faculty Learning Circles ......................................................................... 35
     Table 1: Summary of Faculty Learning Circle Meetings ......................... 37
  3.6 Data Collection & Stages of Analysis ..................................................... 38
  3.7 Triangulation ........................................................................................... 39
  3.8 Confidentiality ........................................................................................ 39
  3.9 Ethical Review ........................................................................................ 40
  3.10 Summary ............................................................................................... 40

Chapter 4: Findings ......................................................................................... 42
  4.1 Introduction ............................................................................................. 42
  4.2 Results of the study ................................................................................ 42
     Table 2: Peer Observation Set up ............................................................... 63
  4.3 Summary ................................................................................................. 73

Chapter 5: Interpretations & Discussion ......................................................... 74
  5.1 Introduction ............................................................................................. 74
  5.2 Analysis ................................................................................................... 75
  5.3 Implications for Faculty ......................................................................... 79
  5.4 Implications for Administrators & Colleges ........................................... 80
  5.5 Limitations ............................................................................................. 81
5.6 Future Directions .......................................................... 82
5.7 Final Reflections and Summary ....................................... 83
References ........................................................................ 85
Appendices ........................................................................ 90
  Appendix A: Information Letter ......................................... 90
  Appendix B: Sample FLC Letter ......................................... 92
  Appendix C: Group Exit Interview Questions ..................... 93
  Appendix D: Consent Form ............................................... 95
  Appendix E: Guiding Questions for Meeting ....................... 96
Chapter One:

Introduction to the Study

The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it. We grow by trial and error, to be sure—but our willingness to try, and fail, as individuals is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks. (Palmer, 1998, p. 144)

1.1 Overview

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the experiences and reflections of a group of 9 part-time and newly hired College teachers who volunteered to participate in the development of a Faculty Learning Circle. A Faculty Learning Circle (FLC) is a peer-led type of informal professional development where a small group of faculty work together over a period of at least a semester to uncover and address questions and concerns about teaching and learning (Hutchins, 1996). These informal groups provide a unique opportunity for connection among faculty members across disciplines, departments and/or Colleges. The main goals of these groups are to promote scholarly teaching (teaching informed by research-based and learner-centered models), support individual and/or collaborative projects around teaching and learning, enhance student learning through the application of insights gained from participation in an FLC, and to encourage reflection and dialogue around teaching and learning. (Cox, 2004). These groups are unlike the more formal professional development models that are seen in higher education institutions as they create opportunities to develop in sustained and meaningful ways with colleagues as opposed to learning from other experts in a more isolating forum such as a conference, seminar or workshop. As the scope and landscape
of the Canadian College system continues to change, so too must the professional
development opportunities that exist for faculty.

1.2 Context: My educational narrative

Individuals become knowledgeable by reflecting and making meaning out of their own experiences (Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow, 1991). Thus, sharing my own personal narrative is important in coming to understand how I came to this research. My journey into the teaching profession unfolded over a series of seemingly unrelated events that upon deep reflection, aligned to guide me to the career path that I continue to follow, even as I embarked on this research. As Cranton (2001) writes, “if we do not know who we are as human beings, it is very difficult to know who we are as teachers” (p.6). I begin my reflections with memories of being a student and my experiences with teachers. As a student, I was drawn towards and excelled in both English and History courses, yet was never strong academically in Mathematics. In grade 10, my math teacher told me, “You are just not good at math”, and advised me to drop the course. These words were devastating to me as a young woman developing self-confidence and self-efficacy in formal education. Instead of looking at ways of supporting a struggling student, she made me feel incompetent. She told me I did not need math for my intended career path.

I persisted along an academic trajectory however, and entered University now faced with the harsh reality that I did, in fact, need math and would have to take Calculus if I wanted to receive my B.A. in Psychology. I took Calculus my first semester and failed. I took it again in the summer and failed again. Again, I persisted, determined to achieve this credit. The following term I made an appointment with the
professor and voiced my determination, as well as my struggles. The first meeting with Dr. Moore showed how certain individuals come into our lives at the exact moment we need them. Dr. Moore ended that initial meeting by administering a math assessment quiz. He placed my math literacy at elementary grade level. I was not shocked, but felt perhaps my aspirations of achieving a Psychology degree were an overextension for me. He volunteered to tutor me once a week for the entire semester. He gave me no promises, but said he would work just as hard as I would. Each week, we met, and he taught me simple fractions to derivatives. I ultimately received an A in the Calculus course and dedicated my Undergraduate dissertation to him. This was the first moment I realized the profound impact a teacher could have on a student.

1.3 Becoming a Teacher

After years of training adults in a corporate setting, working as an employment counsellor for at-risk and homeless youth, and job developing for adults with mental health and addiction histories, my journey took a dramatic turn when I was hired on as a part-time College instructor. I accepted a position teaching Introduction to Psychology for a preparatory program that prepares students for diploma programs in the Social and Community Services fields. With no formal pre-service College teacher training, and as many new teachers do, I remember reflecting on some of my experiences as a student, and planned to embody many of the aspects of the excellent teachers who had had a positive impact on my own development. I accepted the position mid-December and the course started in January.

A few weeks prior to the first day of class, I received a course outline as well as a textbook and little else. I remember thinking, “Is this it?” “Where do I begin when
planning a course?” “How will I engage students with the material?” These early concerns would only be the beginning of many questions surrounding teaching and learning that would pervade my mind as I ventured into this career. Being new to the College, I didn’t know many others whom I felt I could discuss these issues with; however, I was fortunate to have an informal mentor who aided me in my first year with the support of my Chair. Yet, what I really felt I needed was an opportunity to discuss these issues with other educators in a more sustained way.

My first course went successfully; I conveyed my love and passion for Psychology while designing some unique and creative learning experiences for my students. I discovered a new passion, a passion for teaching. However, with no formal teacher training, I was hungry for opportunities for professional development. I saw my role as a College educator as a developing one in which I had much to learn. I knew that in order to maintain teaching contracts at the College, I would have to develop new skills and expand my knowledge of teaching and learning. I attended every PD workshop offered by the College in my first year. I enrolled at conferences where I listened to experts discuss pedagogy, curriculum and classroom management strategies. Yet I left these opportunities with more questions than answers. I lacked opportunities for any meaningful follow-up discussions with other teachers. I was thirsty; I wanted to find answers to my questions but I felt I may be taking a political risk by ‘outing’ myself as someone without the knowledge or expertise on what to do within the classroom, or more specifically, on how to teach.

This persistent and niggling sense of doubt drove me to enroll in a Masters program at OISE with the goal of pursuing additional knowledge of education,
specifically of teaching. The first course I took was a wonderful experience meeting with a small group of educators each week to talk about teaching in a meaningful way, and challenge each other’s assumptions while reflecting on our classroom practices. I started to question why there weren’t more opportunities for this type of collegial dialogue within the College I worked for. After a few semesters of being both graduate student and educator part-time, I enrolled in Mary Kooy’s graduate course *Communities of Learning: Teachers Constructing Professional Knowledge*. It was during this course that I was able to develop and discuss my ideas of professional development needs for part-time and newly hired College educators such as myself. I began critically evaluating what was currently offered for the professional development needs of this group of College educators and what gaps existed. With support for my academic and professional interests, Dr. Kooy suggested I undertake this as a Master’s thesis to explore further. Through our discussions, I articulated some of my concerns that arose through my experiences within the College system. I wanted to be an advocate for change, but struggled with how to move forward given the areas of opportunity I saw within the system I worked for. In addition, I felt a strong need to move beyond what I thought I knew about teaching and learning and challenge my tacit assumptions. I wanted to examine what forms of professional development would satisfy my pronounced thirst for knowledge around teaching and learning.

I currently work in a department at a College that prepares and assesses students for post-secondary readiness while valuing and promoting accessible education for all adults. Our adult students come from varied backgrounds, abilities, and often present unique learning needs. Within this department, I work for a program that teaches
students about the importance of social advocacy and community building. I engage in the current research with the same intent and mission. I am interested in how to better support college educators, not only for their own personal and professional growth, but also for improved student outcomes. This line of research signifies a reconceptualization of professional development within Canadian Community Colleges. Consequently, there is a need to study where and how faculty members who identify as wanting to focus on professional growth have opportunities to do so in ways that are meaningful and relevant to the work they do both inside and outside the classroom.

1.4 Background: The College Context

Within Community Colleges, most faculty prepare students for workforce entry; therefore, some of the faculty are hired on the basis of their status as experts in a certain subject area or field. The rationale for hiring professionals is that students will not only gain the necessary theoretical background for their chosen fields, but will also benefit from having someone who is current in the field to complement the academics. In other words, College educators come from various backgrounds and are appointed typically for expertise in a specific content area, albeit displaying vast differences in teaching experience, education and pedagogical styles. Therefore, understanding strategies for instruction, working with curriculum, understanding the systems and standards of the academic institution, best practices and classroom management can be a formidable challenge for this group of educators. As Bakutes (1998) notes, many faculty members in higher education have content expertise, but limited knowledge about teaching. Increasingly, College-level teaching calls for a significant shift in the role of teachers
from content experts who can impart knowledge to students, to facilitators of the learning process (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

In addition to challenges around varying degrees of pedagogical knowledge, there are significant changes occurring within the Canadian College system that make professional development a high priority for faculty. Firstly, there is well-documented agreement that College faculty face isolation within their profession (Oucault, 2000; Grubb, 1999; Thirolf, 2013). Secondly, an increasing number of part-time faculty are being hired by community colleges. This trend is echoed across North American Colleges (Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Grubb, 1999; Gappa, Austin & Trice, 2007). As teaching is described above as a solitary profession, this becomes a more pressing issue for the part-time faculty member who may be working at more than one institution so that their remuneration amounts to full-time work or work within their primary industry. This leaves little time for connecting with colleagues or feeling a sense of community within the institution, and few opportunities for meaningful professional development. Secondly, the student demographics are changing. According to a Canadian Colleges report (2013), the increased diversity of the student demographics across Canadian Colleges includes increases in international students, non-direct/mature students, second-career students, students with a diagnosed disability, and first generation students (students whose parent(s) have not attended a post-secondary institution). The changing nature and scope of student demographics in higher education requires that educators reevaluate approaches to teaching and learning in order to provide effective and supportive learning environments. Lastly, there are vast ongoing shifts in the technology being utilized in the College setting. Colleges continue to invest in new
technologies to offer a variety of alternative course delivery models, such as on-line and blended learning courses, in order to reach more students in the most cost effective manner (Bates, 2010). In addition, on-line tools such as course management systems pose another obstacle for College faculty to learn mastery in the current context.

Therefore, the question that arises from these issues is how does College faculty achieve meaningful professional growth as adult educators, and not simply as subject experts? And what types of professional development supports are needed and available to assist this large group of educators in their line of work?

1.5 Professional Development for College Educators

Professional development opportunities that exist within higher education often involve many of the top-down models that are seen in other educational institutions. These include summer institutes, seminars, conferences, and workshops where faculty can learn from another “expert” on pertinent issues around teaching and learning (Murray, 1999). Yet, many of these opportunities tend to provide participants little application, virtually no opportunities for ongoing dialogue or follow-up and can be readily decontextualized from everyday practice. This is important to highlight as the research on professional development has concluded that teachers need time to absorb, discuss, and practice new knowledge (Garet, Porter, Andrew & Desimone, 2001). These more traditional models of professional development by and large do not result in transformative learning or growth for the educator. A shift from looking at professional development as singular events to ongoing professional growth and learning is essential for College educators. Research suggests that activities that effectively support teachers’ learning need to be sustained and intensive, rather than brief and sporadic
Therefore, there needs to be a reconceptualization of the PD that occurs within higher education, a shift from one-time workshops to a more sustained and ongoing collegial dialogue (Fisher, 2006; Kooy 2006).

Collegiality amongst College educators is fundamental to collaborative learning and growth. Working at the College can be a solitary activity, especially for part-time educators who teach on varied schedules, who lack opportunities for collegial discussion with peers and may feel disconnected from their department or the larger institution. This is important to highlight as part-time College educators represent a growing number of faculty within higher education (Gappa, Austin & Trice, 2007). Faculty often speak of ‘working in silos’, which speaks to the isolation they feel in their work. However, as Parker (1998) stresses, “If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft” (p. 141). Weimer (2010) agrees that colleagues can be valuable collaborators in the growth process; however, she cautions that there appears to be a lack of collegiality within Colleges. This may in part be due to the lack of job security felt by part-time faculty, which in turn leads to a competitive environment, inhibiting collegiality amongst educators. The problem lies in how these collegial environments can be created as well as how these environments can be used to promote professional development opportunities for College educators.

1.6 Exploring alternatives to traditional Professional Development

As my first few years of working in the College progressed and with my graduate work underway, I began to explore what types of professional development would be
meaningful for newly hired and part-time faculty in my area. I felt this was important for a few key reasons. Firstly, there was a large proportion of part-time faculty in our department; I was thus privy to hearing from others like myself the struggles and challenges that they face. As a part-time College educator, there are a few added challenges distinguishing this group from more seasoned, full-time faculty. These include insecurity around work contracts from semester to semester, feeling a sense of disconnectedness within their programs as well as the larger institution due to the piecemeal work that is offered, isolation, and most notably, limited experience with meaningful professional development to assist in developing a professional identity and improving teaching practices. All of this with a dearth of spaces for support from peers who struggle with similar issues.

Secondly, working in an Access department, many of our students face compounded struggles, as they are in transition. They may come to the College and into the classroom with issues around mental health concerns, learning disabilities, living below the poverty line, past trauma and/or uncertainty of career path. Dealing with all of these challenges can add to the pressure that a part-time College educator feels in working with students of such diverse backgrounds and abilities. Therefore, the professional development opportunities needed in this area involve looking at not only teaching and learning, but also at how to deal with challenging and sensitive student issues that impact College educators on many levels - intellectually, mentally and emotionally.

For one of my courses at OISE, I explored the professional development needs of faculty by interviewing two instructors who were fairly new to the College. Their responses were aligned with my own beliefs regarding traditional professional
development. These two individuals stressed the lack of professional development that suited their specific needs. They also identified the need for more collaboration in their work, learning from and with others. They both stated that having time to do this was a struggle. This was highlighted by one of the interviewees as she struggled to make balance between her time at the College, her other part-time job in her field and her family life. Both teachers stated that they also would appreciate a safe space to share their questions, concerns and ideas.

I explored the possibility of mentorship opportunities as I had been reading about the importance of collaboration, yet was not satisfied. I felt that this still was not the answer that those in my situation needed. Mentorship opportunities proved difficult to find at the College, and I wanted to identify professional development opportunities where the learning was reciprocal, instead of just learning from another with more teaching expertise as was the case with the mentorship models that existed.

At OISE, I was hearing many stories from my peers working in primary and secondary education around Professional Learning Communities (PLG’s). Professional Learning Communities were typically organized by groups of teachers who work on a curriculum project over the school year or semester. It is an opportunity to learn from one another and work toward a common goal. Teachers I spoke with mentioned how these opportunities also awarded them time to simply discuss issues that arose around teaching and learning and fostered feelings of being supported by colleagues. I felt that there had to be something in which College educators could engage that offered some of the benefits of this form of collaborative group structure.
Around this time, I was also reading about more democratic models of professional development such as the Great Teachers Movement (GTM). This approach to professional development that focuses on promoting productive discussions among teachers by tapping into the collective wisdom, creativity, and expertise of participants interested me and I wanted to utilize this framework in the development of a teacher learning group.

1.7 Faculty Teaching & Learning Circles

Learning with and from colleagues is one way educators can shift from being passive recipients of knowledge to playing an active role in their professional growth and development. One method of shifting from passivity to a more collaborative and active role in professional development is by using a Teaching & Learning Circle model. This model is discussed by various names in the literature - Teaching Circle (TC); Professional Circle (PC); Faculty Learning Group (FLG); Faculty Learning Community (FLC); Faculty Professional Learning Community (FPLC). These groups may feature some differences in the activities employed, types of members (cohort-based or topic-based), or structure, yet what they all share in common is the aim of enhancing professional learning, fostering collegiality and engendering a sense of community within a group of teachers.

Discussing teaching, or pedagogy is not a new phenomenon; there is a rich history of the use of Teaching and Learning Circles in the North American Higher Education system (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). A teaching and learning circle is defined as “a small group of faculty who make a commitment to work together over a period of at least a semester to address questions and concerns about the particulars of
their teaching and their students’ learning” (Hutchings, 1996). These learning groups have varied uses, depending on the particular needs of the group of educators involved. One common theme, however, is that the main goal is to promote meaningful dialogue with colleagues by engaging in conversations about the scholarship of teaching and learning, enhancing teacher practice and providing a forum for professional development. One benefit of this model of professional development is that Teaching and Learning Circles are ongoing and collaborative, providing a forum for colleagues to develop deeper or revised meanings of teaching and learning. Teachers are able to learn by reflecting on practice in collaboration with others. Support comes from a group of peers rather than from a higher status mentor or from professional staff developers. In other words, the support comes from working with colleagues.

1.8 Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does membership in a Faculty Learning Circle influence and shape teacher identity?

2. In what ways does a Faculty Learning Circle contribute to a sense of community among teachers?

3. How does participating in a Faculty Learning Circle act as a vehicle for professional learning that benefits both College educators and their students?

4. What factors are most influential in organizing and maintaining a successful Faculty Learning Circle?
My goal was that by investigating these questions, I would be able to add the small sample of literature available and add some valuable insights that may be a springboard for a larger discussion around how to support educators within Canadian Community Colleges.

1.9 Significance of the Study

This study aims to highlight the importance of peer support and teacher collaboration vis-à-vis a Faculty Learning Circle as a vehicle for professional growth and development for part-time and newly hired faculty in the College sector. Research in this area is limited, thus, adding to the literature has the potential to facilitate improvement of teaching practices as well as support College educators to effectively engage, motivate and teach a broad spectrum of adult learners within the College setting. This study is significant because the experiences of these participants may provide administrators and College educators insights into the benefits of using Faculty Learning Circles as informal professional development sites for faculty. Much has been written for American higher education institutions; however, there are differences between us and our counterparts in the South. The Canadian literature suggests that there needs to be more exploration on this topic. Fisher (2006) concludes in his paper:

numerous opportunities currently exist for scholarly research into the appropriateness of criteria currently used to measure effective college teaching, the development of pre-service training programs to prepare aspirants to the profession of college teaching, and the re-conceptualization of professional development programs in the development of communities of scholars. Such research could contribute to the development of a scholarship of college teaching which has current value and application for students, faculty, and administrators amid the challenges and changes sweeping through the classrooms and boardrooms of today’s community colleges. (p. 69)
As the nature of our economic landscape continues to change, more and more Colleges are becoming legitimate sites of research on teaching and learning. This paper makes a valuable contribution to research related into the impacts of informal professional development opportunities for College educators.

1.10 Structure of the Thesis

This chapter focused on an introduction to the current work as well as its research questions. Chapter Two focuses on a review of the literature surrounding professional development for College faculty and various methods of achieving professional growth, as well as deeper exploration of Teaching & Learning Circles. I will also indicate some of the theoretical frameworks that have shaped this research. Chapter Three will describe the research methodology used. Chapter Four will present my findings to the research questions, and the final chapter will include a discussion of the findings as well as recommendations and suggestions for future implications of the research.
Chapter Two:

Theoretical Foundations & Literature Review

2.1 Introduction
This chapter will identify the theoretical foundations that guided and shaped this research as well as include a review of the literature, which will explore the scholarly writings on the topics related to professional development opportunities for faculty. I will focus on specific methods and professional development strategies relevant to College faculty. The history of Teaching and Learning Circles will be explored. And lastly, I will describe how this research informs my study.

2.2 Theoretical Framework of the Study
A theoretical framework provides a broad explanation of the relationships between concepts. In essence, it provides the backbone of the thesis. The paradigms that informed and guided this research are situated in theories of adult learning and development.

Constructivist Learning Theory
Constructivism is a philosophical explanation of the nature of learning. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that individual development is advanced in the broader social context through goal directed activities. Dialectical constructivism assumes that knowledge derives from interactions between persons and their environments. As a research paradigm, constructivism is described as “an act of enquiry beginning with issues and concerns of participants and unfolding through a dialectical of iteration, analysis, critique, reiteration, reanalysis, and so on that ultimately leads to constructing a model or concept” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 128). For purposes of this study, I
begin with the assumption that professional learning and growth have the potential to emerge when faculty engage with others in meaningful and sustained ways.

**Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning occurs when an individual has reflected on assumptions or expectations about what will occur, has found these assumptions to be faulty, and has revised them (Cranton, 1996). Mezirow (1991) defines transformative learning as the “process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting on these new understandings” (p.167). Adult educators refer to transformative learning when critical reflection motivates faculty to change their beliefs and behaviors (Weimer, 2010). The educator who engages in self-directed, reflective and potentially transformative learning promotes the same with learners and therefore will be an agent of change, as “transformative learning is by definition concerned with social change” (Cranton, 1996, p. 141). Thus, within this research I will be working under the assumption that faculty who engage in activities that promote critical self-awareness have the potential to promote the same within their students.

**2.3 Literature Review**

This literature review provides an overview of the scholarly writings on College teaching, professional development and an exploration of faculty teaching and learning circles. In this chapter, I will explore the current research in the area of College
teachers’ professional development and draw attention to the limited literature available regarding this topic.

**College Teaching**

Faculty within community colleges are responsible for preparing students for workforce entry. Many are considered experts in their subject areas as they have come from a vast array of academic or industry settings of their specialization. As such, many faculty in higher education have content knowledge and expertise, but limited knowledge about teaching and learning (Bakutes, 1998). In addition, Huber (1998) suggests “Community college faculty stand out from many of their professorial colleagues not only because of the size and diversity of their sector of higher education, but also because teaching - far more than research or service - is at the heart of their profession” (As cited in Outcalt, 2000: Huber, 1998, p. 12). This truth sets the stage for a unique challenge as College faculty display vast differences in teaching experience, teacher training and pedagogical styles. Therefore, understanding strategies for instruction, working with curriculum, understanding the systems and standards of the College system, best practices and classroom management are important aspects of professional development for this group of educators.

**Professional Development**

‘To develop’ suggests to learn and to change for the better (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Professional development (PD) has been defined as the varied programs or activities in which educators participate to obtain knowledge, skills and/or qualifications. Feiman-Nemser (2001), defines professional development as:

…the actual activities which teachers engage in- their time and place, content and pedagogy, sponsorship and purpose. Professional development also refers to
the learning that may occur when teachers participate in those activities. From this perspective, professional development means transformations in teachers’ knowledge, understandings, skills, and commitments, in what they know and what they are able to do in individuals practice as well as in their shared responsibilities (p. 1038).

Professional development can serve diverse purposes: professional growth and career advancement, pedagogical improvement, support for technological, curriculum and/or program changes. In order to serve these varied purposes, professional development can consist of more formal methods such as coursework, conference attendance, workshops delivered by experts, seminars or institutes and formal communities of practice. Professional development can also involve more informal methods such as reflection, inquiry, reading professional literature or sharing knowledge with colleagues.

*Professional Development for College Faculty*

Schulman (1987) found that the knowledge needed for teaching involves content knowledge (knowledge of the subject matter being taught), pedagogical knowledge (knowledge of how to teach in general terms) and lastly, pedagogical content knowledge (knowledge of how to teach that is specific to what is being taught). Pedagogical content knowledge includes how to structure and represent materials for teaching, an understanding of common misconceptions and conceptions learners have surrounding the learning, difficulties learners may have understanding particular content as well as knowledge of specific strategies to meet students’ diverse needs. Professional development opportunities for College educators tend to provide information only on the latter of these three tenants. However, professional development should also include opportunities for educators to reflect and assess their underlying assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning. Due to the changing trends being observed within
colleges (specifically changing student demographics and the use of new technologies), faculty need to engage in professional development that promotes both professional and personal growth.

**Challenges to PD for College Educators**

Menges (1999) argues that the efficacy of various professional development opportunities is especially important as community colleges continue to depend on large cohorts of part-time faculty. Yet, minimal research exists that defines specific practices for implementing effective professional development opportunities that target this group of educators. Furthermore, Cranton (1998) states that most College faculty are left to their own devices when it comes to professional development around teaching and learning. This is of particular significance as there is no mandated formal pre-service College teacher training as there is for primary and secondary school teachers. This is a challenge for many faculty when there is an explicit institutional philosophy in academia that values excellence in teaching and learning. As Cranton (1998) posits:

> Without the opportunity to learn about teaching, faculty tend to use the same, traditional methods that they experienced as students. Thus, they present information through lectures, give demonstrations of technical skills, and evaluate learning with multiple choice tests. Such methods are indeed effective in certain disciples and circumstances, but probably do not foster the higher learning and critical thinking that are among the goals of education. (p. ix)

Thus, many college faculty members are left to seek out professional development opportunities that are organized by faculty developers or professional development programs within their own institutions. Cranton (1998) argues that within Canadian Colleges, these programs do exist; however many are underfunded or understaffed, and any comprehensive or systematic approach to enhance the quality of College teaching is
rare. The literature suggests that there is still a reliance on one-stop workshops, yet what appears to be needed is more opportunities for sustained and meaningful dialogue with colleagues (Garet, Porter, Andrew & Desimone, 2001). In addition, these professional development programs and workshops offered by faculty development offices are not normally organized to accommodate the working patterns of part-time faculty (Blackwell, Channell & Williams, 2010).

**Professional Development and Teacher Identity**

Professional development is related to individuals’ professional identities (Harris & Muijs, 2005). The literature emphasizes the importance of forming a professional identity around effective teaching practices (Alsup, 2006). Research suggests it may in fact be the backbone to effective teaching, yet much of this research has been done with pre-service teacher training programs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) or primary and secondary teachers, not college faculty - in particular part-time college faculty (Thirolf, 2012).

Sachs (2005) suggests that understanding teacher identity is central to professional growth:

> Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (Sachs, 2005, p. 15)

Yet, as Black & Cessna (2002) suggest, “In too many contexts, there is little room to acknowledge deficiencies or gaps in knowledge without great risk, not only to our careers but perhaps to our own personal identities” (p.1). Research into the area of
teacher identity formation and professional development opportunities for College faculty is currently non-existent.

2.4 Strategies to aid in Professional Growth

Teacher Reflection

Teacher reflection as a form of professional growth and development has deep-seated roots in the history of education and in educational theory. These roots were developed in the philosophical traditions of Pragmatism as expressed by John Dewey. Dewey defined reflection as the “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion which it tends” (Dewey, 1993, p.9). Thus, our knowledge is a process in which reality is constantly changing. Reflection "converts action that is merely appetitive, blind, and impulsive into intelligent action" (Dewey, 1933, p. 17)

Reflective practitioners are in a continual process of framing and reframing the complex problems that come up in their craft and modifying their actions accordingly (Schon, 1983). This is achieved by two processes, “reflection-on-action” and “reflection in action”. The former occurs when we deliberately reframe occurrences from past events, and the latter is a more active form of reflection, whereby reflection occurs simultaneously with action. According to Schon (1983), the ‘reflective practitioner’ engages with his or her experience in ways that turn it into meaningful knowledge. For teachers, this may mean analyzing the structures within which they work and how they fit within them. This meaningful knowledge can lead to professional growth as it is then applied in the service of improved teaching practices.

More recently, educational researchers have shifted their framework, and have
begun to look at reflection through a more critical lens. Critical reflection is described as a cognitive activity during which one carefully considers the impact of one’s actions on others, and provides a rationale, taking into account the social, cultural and/or political forces at work in the event (Hatton & Smith, 1994). Critical reflection for teachers therefore involves identifying reasons for the decisions that affect their practice, which take into account the broader historical, social and/or political contexts in which we work. Thus, culture and context become means through which teachers can analyze practice. Critical self-reflection embodies two separate processes: Firstly, critical inquiry, which is the examination of ethical, political and moral dimensions and their impact on our teaching practices and secondly, self-reflection, a deep examination of personal and professional beliefs (Larrivee, 2000). Considering reflection through a critical lens assists educators in devising processes that they can use to enhance both teaching and learning. Brookfield (1995) argues that there are various reasons why learning to adopt critically reflective practices is important. Firstly, it helps teachers take informed actions, actions that can be explained not only to others but also to ourselves. Therefore, this process helps in teacher self-understanding. Secondly, it helps develop a rationale for practice. It is goal-directed thinking, which assists educators in understanding of the how and why of what we do.

Collaboration

Professional development that focuses on peer-driven faculty support is one area gaining much attention in higher education (Boud, 1999; Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2007, Sullivan, Buckle, Nicky & Atkinson, 2012). According to Olsen and Ashton-Jones (1992), “becoming a colleague in an academic discipline involves acquiring
certain discipline-specific ways of thinking, of looking at the world, of talking and writing, and of interacting with colleagues, that is of indwelling in academic communities” (p.114). Faculty who discuss challenges, share ‘best practices’, and are open to feedback from their peers are more equipped to deal effectively with situations both inside and outside the classroom. Working collaboratively with peers allows faculty to troubleshoot and discuss effective methods that have worked within their classroom, as well as provide constructive feedback to their peers. Done in isolation, there can be no measures to assess growth (Larrivee, 2000). Shulman (2004) states that collaboration is a marriage of insufficiencies in a particular form of social interaction: “there are difficult intellectual and professional challenges that are nearly impossible to accomplish alone, but are readily addressed in the company of others” (p. 24). Collaboration allows us to deepen our understanding of a concept, feeling or thought. Collaboration is important because it “creates a collective professional confidence that allows teachers to interact more confidently and assertively (Harris & Muijs, 2005, p. 61). Collaboration among teachers improves the quality of student learning by improving the quality of teaching (Harris & Muijs, 2005). Teacher collaboration encourages risk taking, testing new or different teaching methods and can promote a collective professional confidence. Yet, resistance to share and engage in dialogue is one issue that is expressed frequently in the literature; as Osterman and Kottkamp (2004), note “to engage in the reflective process, individuals need to be confident that discussions of problems and feelings will not be interpreted as incompetence or weakness” (p. 69). Therefore, there is an increasing need to build a culture of sharing and openness where faculty feel safe and confident in this process. In attempting to
create an environment of sharing, Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) suggest the following 6 principles for faculty to acknowledge:

- Everyone needs professional growth opportunities
- All professionals want to improve
- All professionals can learn
- People can change
- People need and want information on their own performance. All professionals are capable of assuming responsibility for their own professional growth and development
- Collaboration enriches professional development

Working within a culture of learning and growth is of the essence when attempting to engage in collaborative discourse and inquiry. Collaborative inquiry allows college faculty to reveal assumptions about teaching and learning and provide opportunities to ask questions that provoke deep thinking and analysis (Weimer, 2010). Weimer (2010) also suggests that our colleagues can support professional growth by working together in mutually beneficial activities such as creating a new assignment, quiz or test, teaching linked courses, team teaching or engaging in classroom observations. According to Weimer (2010), engaging in collaboration with colleagues “not only creates a whole new level of pedagogical awareness; it motivates greater attention to details, which increases the likelihood of success. It makes implementing changes a shared adventure, often bringing new life to teaching in other courses as well (p. 117).
A Framework for Teacher Reflection & Collaboration

A growing body of work is investigating how teachers interact and learn in collaborative groups and what it means to be a community. Lave and Wegner’s (1991) work on situated learning and communities of practice describes a framework for teacher learning. The authors argue that learning develops from experience and social interactions. Learning in communities of practice occurs in the context of social relationships with other members of the community who have similar or parallel issues and concerns. Wenger (1998) further posits that the pervasive nature of communities of practice, as well as the fact that they are informal has left little interest in their investigation by researchers. In addition, Hindin, Morocco, Mott & Aguilar (2007) suggest that the field of educational research lacks a clear definition and criteria for “communities of practice” and “teacher community”. Much of the research has focused on the evolution of these groups and how they impact teachers’ knowledge and practice.

Faculty Teaching & Learning Circles

A Learning Circle is an interactive, participatory structure for organizing a group. The goals of learning circles are to build, share and express knowledge through a democratic process of dialogue and reflection around issues and challenges (Riel, 2013). Learning Circles are one way faculty can drive their own professional development by taking ownership of the process. These groups also go by the name of Teaching Circles in the literature. At the end of the 20th century, these groups were promoted by the American Association for Higher Education as a part of its larger project on peer review of teaching (Hutchings, 1996). Teaching Circles are defined as “a small group of educators who meet regularly to discuss teaching and learning” (Blackwell, Channel & Williams,
2010). These groups provide participants an opportunity to share ideas and examples of good practice as well as seek advice on and problem solve around teacher challenges. Therefore, Teaching Circles are a vehicle for professional development and provide a useful support network, particularly for newer faculty (ibid, 2010).

A similar model of professional development that has incorporated elements of reflection, collaborative inquiry and community building are Faculty Learning Communities (also referred to as Faculty Professional Learning Communities (FPLC) in the literature). Cox (2004) defines a Faculty Learning Community as “a cross disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide teacher development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building” (Cox, 2004, p.8). These groups serve to enhance teaching and learning and are considered innovative as methods to meet the increasing demands of the institution, including increasing student demographic changes and inadequate resources for professional development (Ward & Selvester, 2011; Ouctalt, 200). Cox (2004) suggests that Faculty Learning Communities fall into two categories: cohort-based and topic-based. A cohort-based FLC is focused on a particular group of faculty, for example, part-time faculty, mid-career or seasoned faculty. Their specific and identified needs drive the design and implementation of this community of educators. A topic-based FLC is designed to address a specific teaching and learning need, issue or opportunity. Faculty Learning Communities are more intensive and provide a more formalized structure than Teaching and Learning Circles and typically require
participants to produce written reports of their work or to conduct a formal assessment at the end of the project (Cox, 2004). This is in contrast to Teaching and Learning Circles, which tend to be more informal and their focus more general, such as to encourage reflective dialogue around student learning in order to enhance teaching (Blackwell, Channel & Williams, 2010).

Quinlan (1998) suggests in her research with FLC’s, the most successful ones were those that were ‘grassroots’ initiatives that were led and ‘owned’ by faculty themselves. “Collaborations would not happen without the dedicated, voluntary leadership of a few professors” (p. 46). The author goes on to suggest how discussions are stimulating and foster engagement when they focus on specifics related to teaching and learning rather than on generalities or abstractions and when they encourage faculty to provide rationales for what they do.

Although these groups operate differently in format and structure depending on the institution and local conditions in which they occur (Quinlan, 1996), the goals of a Faculty Learning Circle or Community is to establish a community of support and resources for faculty who want to unpack challenges with respect to teaching and learning. Participants meet to describe their particular challenges, discuss the issues underlying them and share approaches to address them. According to Marshall (2008), “both forms, however, have many of the same objectives, including building a sense of community, creating a shared understanding of pedagogical goals among the teachers who participate, engaging individual teachers in critical reflection, and fostering intellectual interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning” (p. 414).
The limitations of the current studies on these forms of professional development include a lack of discussion on personal growth and teacher identity formation, lack of research in the Canadian College context, no analysis on the democratic methods that may aid in their success, and no exploration of circles that develop more organically in nature.

2.5 Summary & Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the theoretical frameworks that guide this research, and reviewed the literature surrounding the importance and functions of professional development for educators, with specific attention to College faculty as well as the available literature on Faculty Learning Circles and Communities.

It is evident that due to the absence of available research on Faculty Learning Circles within the Canadian College context, the current study may further understanding of the implications an FLC may have on part-time and newly-hired College educators.
Chapter Three:
Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the details of and rationale for the research methodology and methods used for this study. In this chapter, I outline the research design, the sampling process, the process of data collection, the stages of data analysis, the establishment of triangulation and confidentiality procedures. In addition, I discuss the ethical considerations relevant to this research.

3.2 Research Questions

1. How does membership in a Faculty Learning Circle influence and shape teacher identity?

2. In what ways does a Faculty Learning Circle contribute to a sense of community among teachers?

3. How does participating in a Faculty Learning Circle act as a vehicle for professional learning that benefits both College educators and their students?

4. What factors are most influential in organizing and maintaining a successful Faculty Learning Circle?

3.3 Research Design: Frameworks & Approaches

The study used a qualitative design to explore the above questions. Qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’” (Sherman and Webb, 1988, p.7). The key philosophical assumption underpinning qualitative research is the view that reality is constructed by individuals
interacting with their social worlds. For this research project, a collective case study methodology combining narrative and phenomenological approaches was selected to explore the themes, responses and experiences of the eight participants and myself (research participant) engaged in a faculty learning circle over the course of one year.

**Case Study**

A case study methodology attempts to describe and explain a phenomenon in a real-life situation as clearly, honestly and holistically (from both the perspectives of the researcher and the participants) as possible with the goals of improving a situation or certain aspects of it (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Mason (2002) posits that the case study approach allows researchers to understand intricately interwoven parts of complex narratives and practices, offers the opportunity to organize data around themes and places great emphasis on context. I used this methodology because the purpose of my research was to provide a rich and detailed description of the ideas, feelings and experiences of part-time and newly-hired College educators who engaged in a Faculty Learning Circle.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a school of philosophical thought that suggests that there is an essence to shared experience. According to Van Manen (1990) it is an exploration of the ‘essence of lived experience’. The goal of a phenomenological study is to describe the subjective experiences of the participants and the meaning of that experience from their perspective, and to “arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced” (Merriam, 1998, p. 159). This aligns with the goals of this study’s research questions as they deal
specifically with understanding and making meaning of the participants’ experiences in the FLC.

**Narrative**

Narrative is an essential practice in many disciplines and is gaining popularity as a framework to understand or gain new insights into a phenomenon. The main assertion of narrative inquiry within educational research is that “humans are story telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2; Kooy, 2006). Through the sharing of personal stories with others, we are able to study our lived experience. For example, Parker (1993) suggests that by sharing stories of our teaching careers (in particular stories of the great teachers who set us on this path) we can learn a great deal about the shape of “good teaching” and begin to develop community. Narrative analysis recognizes the extent to which the stories we share can provide insight into our lived experiences. As Trimmer (1997) suggests, “We need to tell our teaching stories if we are to understand our teaching lives” (xv). In addition, analysis of narrative data requires that we are able to detect main themes or key points that emerge from these stories. As this research focuses on investigating participants’ rich and lived experiences within the Faculty Learning Circle, a narrative approach was appropriate to the investigation of the research questions.

**3.4 Participants**

I recruited participants within my own Division at a large urban community college in Ontario based on their willingness to join in the formation of a Faculty Learning Circle. Announcements were made at two Divisional and School meetings and interested faculty contacted me via email. All interested participants were emailed an
introductory letter (see Appendix A) and asked to email me back in order to receive a consent form to participate in the research. Participants were purposefully selected based on employment status (part-time or newly-hired) as well as interest in participating in a Faculty Learning Circle as a vehicle for their own professional development. Employment status was of particular interest to me as I wanted to investigate the impacts of participating in an FLC for newly hired or part-time faculty who may have no or limited experience with this form of professional development. I was able to recruit faculty that met this criteria from across four Programs housed by the one Division. This was important, as I wanted to gather individuals from different locations in order to hear a breadth of experiences from participants of varying backgrounds. Eight participants volunteered. The following is a brief description of each participant along with his or her initial expectations in joining the Faculty Learning Circle (FLC):

**Abigail** is a science teacher with 2.5 years of College teaching experience. Abigail has taught at other higher education institutions in Ontario as well as working in her field of specialty for over 4 years. Her interest in joining the FLC was to gain community and security as a contract professor. She wanted to learn about different teaching philosophies, to validate her own teaching experience and to gain peer mentors.

**Beth** has taught in a range of fields, but focuses her time at the College teaching communications. She has been teaching at the College as a full-time professor for less than a year and has worked in higher education for 3.5 years. She has worked in the secondary school setting as well as a private tutor. Her initial expectations and hopes in
becoming a member of the FLC were to provide the group a space to problem solve around teaching challenges.

_**Candice**_ has been a part-time College professor for 5 years and teaches communications. She came to the College after being involved in literacy in a community setting for over 15 years. Her hope in joining the FLC was to improve in the work that she does. Specifically, she wanted to learn best practices, gain concrete tools to use in her work and have some of her assumptions around teaching and learning exposed and adjusted.

_**Kevin**_ has been teaching as a part-time mathematics professor for 7 years. He was an entrepreneur and ran his own business prior to working at the College. He was interested in joining the FLC to discuss issues around college teaching with a group of faculty similar in age to himself.

_**Elias**_ has been working at the College as a Communications professor for less than one year. In addition to working at the College, Elias is also completing graduate work at an Ontario University. He was a high school teacher prior to working at the College. He volunteered for this group firstly out of curiosity. He wanted to know what a Faculty Learning Circle might look like and what kind of dialogue it would generate. He also mentioned that he felt as though he did not have a voice in his department. He was hoping that the FLC would be a good avenue to see his colleagues in a different light.

_**Frankie**_ has been a part-time College professor for 4 years. She teaches courses in the social sciences. She worked in the community in her field prior to teaching at the College. She has also gone back to pursue graduate studies and does so on a part-time basis. Her initial interest in joining the FLC was to build a strong support network with
her colleagues, to have a forum to share frustrations, challenges and questions related to teaching and learning and to understand her role in a group setting.

**Latisha** has taught at the College as a part-time communications professor for 4 years, prior to that working in the community. Her initial expectations in joining the FLC were to have a space to learn from other practitioners, as well as a safe space to express frustrations, fears and failures.

**Joey** has been a part-time professor for four years. She teaches courses in Social Sciences and Liberal Arts. She has worked in her industry for 5 years. Her initial expectations in participating in the FLC was to have the opportunity to share resources and debrief with colleagues.

**Ingrid** has been teaching at the College as a part-time Science instructor for 2 years. Along with teaching part-time, she also has her own business in her area of specialty. Her initial reasons for joining the FLC were to develop closer relationships with her colleagues. She expressed feeling disconnected from the members of her faculty as a part-time instructor who has another job in her industry.

### 3.5 Faculty Learning Circles

Ten FLC meetings took place throughout the duration of the research project, with one additional meeting for semi-structured group exit interviews. These meetings were approximately 2 hours in length and occurred every 4 weeks. During the first meeting, participant expectations were discussed and group norms were established. Participants expressed a desire to hold the meetings in a relaxed, casual and off-site location and elected to meet at the residences of two of the participants’ homes, who both had spaces that would accommodate the group. The meeting times and location were negotiated
with the participants and occurred in the late afternoons or early evenings. Table 1 outlines the meetings. Light refreshments and snacks were available each meeting; these were contributed by members themselves. Prior to every meeting, an agenda was sent out to each member via email that consisted of a check-in question, a discussion theme, discussion/guiding questions and any administrative issues (such as time and locations for next meeting, reminders to email me with any ideas for themes for the following meeting etc.), as well any additional materials such as scholarly articles or relevant teacher research relating to that month’s theme. (see Appendix B for sample). Meetings were facilitated by myself (participant researcher); however, the group generated themes and topics. After each meeting, participants had the option of emailing me any further reflections on their experiences during the last session and questions, concerns or challenges that were emerging (if any). Based on the feedback from the participants after the first meeting, the FLC always started with a check-in where we went around the circle and had the opportunity to bring to the group any specific triumphs or challenges (personal or professional) that we wished to share.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 1</td>
<td>July 19, 2012 4-6pm</td>
<td>Kevin, Latisha, Beth, Elias, Candice, Frankie, Abigail</td>
<td>Overview of FLC Guidelines &amp; Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 2</td>
<td>Aug 2, 2012 7-9pm</td>
<td>Kevin, Ingrid, Frankie, Abigail, Latisha, Beth, Elias, Candice</td>
<td>Sharing our Stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 3</td>
<td>September 20, 2012 4-6pm</td>
<td>Joey, Kevin, Ingrid, Frankie, Latisha, Beth, Elias, Candice</td>
<td>Sharing our Stories Part II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 4</td>
<td>October 18, 2012 4-6pm</td>
<td>Joey, Abigail, Kevin, Ingrid, Frankie, Latisha, Beth, Elias, Candice</td>
<td>Teacher Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 5</td>
<td>November 15, 2012 4-6pm</td>
<td>Joey, Kevin, Frankie, Latisha, Beth, Elias, Candice</td>
<td>Colleagues as Collaborators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 6</td>
<td>December 20, 2012 4:30-6:15 &amp; 6:15-10pm</td>
<td>Joey, Candice, Kevin, Ingrid, Frankie, Latisha, Beth, Elias</td>
<td>Teaching &amp; Learning in Higher Education Holiday Pot-luck (immediately after FLC meeting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 7</td>
<td>January 22, 2012 3-5pm</td>
<td>Joey, Kevin, Ingrid, Frankie, Latisha, Beth, Elias</td>
<td>“Keeping teaching fresh”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 8</td>
<td>February 19, 2013 3-5pm</td>
<td>Joey, Frankie, Latisha, Beth, Elias, Candice</td>
<td>Student Assessment &amp; Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 10</td>
<td>April 19, 2013 7-9pm</td>
<td>Joey, Kevin, Ingrid, Frankie, Latisha, Beth, Elias, Candice</td>
<td>Reflections on Teaching Philosophies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.6 Data collection & Stages of Analysis

Data was collected for this research project in four ways. First, each FLC session was audiotaped. These audiotaped recordings were downloaded to my secured laptop and labeled by date, time and session number. Second, I took note of any main themes that were discussed during the session and expansive field notes were made directly after each meeting to reflect on my own experiences within the group. After these notes were finished, I listened to the audio recording of the session recording the themes that emerged along with direct quotes from individual members. This was completed on a MS Excel spreadsheet that was encrypted and locked on my laptop. Participants were also able to email additional reflections on each meeting, which were reviewed with all main themes were highlighted and stored in a file on a locked and encrypted laptop. Lastly, after the final session of the year, participants were invited via email to a group exit interview to discuss questions related to the research questions posed in this thesis. Participants were emailed the interview questions prior to the meeting in order to be able to reflect and write their responses. (See Appendix C). Participants were asked to bring their written responses and share what they wished with the group as we reviewed and reflected upon the questions. I collected the written responses after the interview. The group exit interview was audiotaped, and reviewed by the researcher in order to collect the themes that emerged from participant responses.

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data (Merriam, 1998). This involves consolidating, reducing and interpreting the experiences of participants in order to make meaning and create an understanding of the phenomenon being studied.
The first step in this process was to listen to the audio taped sessions, highlight key ideas and transcribe the direct quotes of participants. Once I had collected all the data (key ideas during each FLC meeting, participant reflections, researcher field notes and exit interview responses), I began to explore what broad and recurring categories and themes emerged by deep exploration and analysis of the data sets. This lent itself to identifying subcategories that I was able to place under one or more themes. At this stage of analysis, robust themes began to emerge. Finally, I was able to place these categories and subcategories under the research question to which they responded.

**3.7 Triangulation**

Triangulation is one way that a qualitative study strengthens the reliability as well as the internal validity of the study (Merriam, 1998). In this case, triangulation was accomplished by generating and analyzing all four sources of data (audiotape, field notes, participant reflections and semi-structured interviews). In addition, member-checking was accomplished by allowing participants access to the data at various times throughout the research process. For example, participants were provided with copies of their own reflections to review. I highlighted all comments I wished to use for the purposes of this thesis and clarified any comments that needed further explanation. In addition, during the writing process, participants were provided copies of the thesis drafts to review.

**3.8 Confidentiality**

Numerous measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of participants and to establish trust. This was key to this study in particular, as I was both facilitator and participant in the Faculty Learning Circles. After agreeing to participate in this research
project, participants signed a letter of consent (See Appendix D), which acknowledged that each one had read and understood the measures to ensure confidentiality that were stated in the introductory letter. Pseudonyms have been used for each participant. In addition, participants were able to review direct quotes that were to be used for the thesis, to ensure they were comfortable that none of the given information explicitly identified them.

3.9 Ethical review

As this study involved the use of human participants, specific ethical issues needed to be addressed, such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Research approval was required from both my own institution as well as OISE. Prior to the start of this research, I submitted an Ethics Review Protocol Submission Form for Supervised Researchers with all the required documentation to the University of Toronto’s REB as well as a similar application package to the IRB at our College. Careful consideration of these ethical issues was paramount for the purposes of ensuring the privacy of each participant. I also completed the Tri-council policy statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE) as part of the requirements of the IRB at the College. I was granted permission from both institutions after they reviewed my applications and was able to commence recruiting participants.

3.10 Summary

In this chapter, I provided a sketch of the research design, as well as the rationale for the approaches used through a qualitative lens. In addition, a discussion of the sample and process of data collection was included. Finally, processes to ensure confidentiality as
well as ethical considerations were discussed. The next chapter will present my findings.
Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction

This qualitative study investigated the impacts of a Faculty Learning Circle on participants, specifically on their experiences of and reflections on this type of informal professional development. This chapter will unpack the wealth of data collected throughout and after the study. The findings are grouped by research questions.

4.2 Results of the Study

Research Question One: How does membership in a Faculty Learning Circle influence teacher identity?

Theme: Reflection on teaching and teaching practices

Participants’ responses overwhelmingly illuminated that being involved in the Faculty Learning Circle provided ample opportunities to reflect and thoroughly investigate their existences as teachers. Specifically, participants highlighted how the FLC provided opportunities to probe who they were as teachers as well as how to frame their teaching practices to others. This opportunity was important to members as these reflections allowed them to become more in tune with their sense of self and how identity influences their behaviours as teachers and their relations with others. This was also a major element identified as lacking in their professional lives, which many members commented on this during the first meeting. ‘No time for reflection’ was a common theme emphasized when discussing their need for and barriers to professional development. The FLC provided the space and forum for participants to reflect and provided a unique opportunity for the group to relate to one another, creating a strong
foundation of trust and security that would prove necessary for the success of this group.

**Sharing Narratives**

“I realized more about who I was as a teacher, which I was not expecting to do—and some of the perceptions were a shift”.

~Candice~

During the first meeting, participants who did not know one another were introduced, guidelines for discussion were established, group norms were developed and members shared their expectations and explained their interest in joining a Faculty Learning Circle. During the course of sharing their expectations for the FLC, members shared how they would like to hear about each of the participants’ journey into becoming a college educator. Group members felt this would be a good way to get to know one another on a deeper and more intimate level and serve as a way to reflect on their own identities as teachers. The participants of the FLC decided to use the following two meetings to allow each member to share their own autobiography as it pertained to becoming a college educator. Prior to the second meeting, participants were asked to reflect on their narrative of entering the teaching profession. (See Appendix E for guiding questions for Meetings 2 & 3).

A few key themes emerged from the collegial dialogue around sharing personal narratives. First, by sharing personal stories, members of the FLC were able to revisit their own reasons for entering this profession. One common element that emerged in each of the FLC member’s stories during those early meetings was the importance of mentors in their career trajectory and how these individuals shaped who they are as
teachers. For many participants, this was an opportunity to reflect and share personal experiences with individuals who have made significant impacts on their professional lives. Frankie highlighted this in discussing one of her first mentors and how this individual impacts her identity and role as an educator:

there are so many students that have been told they can’t do something, or they haven’t had the opportunity and their confidence is really low… that’s why I reflect on my own story and remember how important it is to have someone to believe in you and someone to take the time. That’s what a teacher does.

Similarly all group members were able to revisit defining moments within their own narratives that were significant markers of their identities as teachers. This would be a common thread for all participants who went on to share their journeys into the teaching profession and it appeared to have a profound impact on how each member viewed themselves. After speaking to her own narrative and how her past experiences have shaped her journey into teaching adults, Candice had this enlightening revelation:

It just evolved so naturally…there was always this facilitator role in me where I could set up a space and help people feel safe in it, and give people tools that they could use to flourish and do their own thing…Wow…when I realized that I could jockey myself into a position where people would pay me money to do [what I love] it was like winning the lottery…a little fire started burning in my chest…. I spent a lot of time feeling like I was outside of systems; [working at the College] was the first time where I felt I was able to do what I am naturally good at, combined with what I care about.
After sharing her narrative, Candice reflected on how the process of sharing her autobiography resulted in unanticipated memories of events that were brought to the forefront of her mind:

That was weird… just telling your biography about your job as a story like that is interesting, as there are so many more parts to it, but just the stuff that tends to stick out as important is interesting to reflect upon.

In addition to this, members were able to disclose very candid and personal confessions regarding who they are as teachers while sharing these stories. As Latisha expressed in her own reflections on her journey into College teaching:

You are a leader when you are teaching…. It’s hard to talk about these things we are talking about…now I am worried that I don’t know how to play the game very well.

This was a very emotional moment, where Latisha was able to begin to unpack her beliefs about who she felt teachers should be and her candid doubts in response to her identity and efficacy as a professional.

A fourth common theme was how each participant reflected upon and discussed their passions and gained insight into their own teaching methods and practices. This allowed the group to bond in ways that otherwise may not have been possible. In her exit interview, Beth expressed how she felt comfortable sharing personal stories, which in turn helped to strengthen professional ties. Many participants focused on their passion for teaching and for their subject matter, which aided them in the process of becoming a College educator. As Candice shared with the group while sharing her narrative: “I
really love grammar. I love words. I really love what people can find when they start writing and reading”. Hearing stories from others was impactful to members, as expressed by Kevin, who stated in his exit interview: “I found it very surprising and encouraging to be in the company of people that are so passionate about their field”.

What emerged as significant to members of the FLC upon later reflection on these early meetings was how sharing these stories impacted their own perceptions of not just themselves but also the affective dimension of how they view themselves in a teaching role. As Abigail reflected, “I always walked away (from the meetings) feeling good…it seems that there is a great demand for authentic teachers today and we are all responding to the call”.

In addition, as participants shared their stories, resonant commonalities appeared in significant ways. Candice shared her views as a part-time faculty member during her check-in for meeting 4. As she was reflecting on two of the other participants’ narratives that were shared during the previous FLC:

It shifted something so profound in me because as soon as you said that everything in my body, every cell in my body said ‘yeah, me too! That’s how I feel too! And so instead of focusing on a strategic or careerist way of considering the future, I got to reconnect with why I do what I do, and how that’s connected to my meaning in life and who I am…and wow, has that ever made me feel more present and more available to delight and I have just been so great since that moment…
As many of the FLC members stated in their exit interviews, this was the first time being in a private and intimate setting, sharing their own story of pursuing a teaching career. They were able to open up in small yet very significant ways, which allowed for deep reflection on their own identities as teachers.

*Cognitive Reframing of our Teaching & Educational Philosophies*

“*I hadn’t thought about how a teacher evolves in practice before*”

~ Abigail ~

The development of the FLC allowed participants opportunities to uncover, explore and reassess their own assumptions about teaching and learning, and in some cases identify alternative ways of viewing components that are vital to their practice. As Frankie reflected after the last FLC meeting:

> We talked about our everyday practice and then we ended up moving on to purposes of education…I don’t think we could have reversed this process; we needed to explore, expand and unpack our ideas and assumptions prior to framing these within the larger picture.

This was agreed upon by all members of the FLC during the exit interviews and resonated particularly with Kevin, who felt that the FLC helped with stepping back and looking at the “big picture” of what we do as teachers and what teaching is. He stated that this was extremely helpful to him as a part-time faculty member.

One example of this was during the sixth meeting, where participants were responding to a reading that I had provided as an introduction to our theme of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education. Candice shared her reflections on the article with the group:
My talkback to this article is that it is another vision of education as that which leads to a job, that we are put on this earth to have a job and it dismisses some very old fashioned and squishy sentiments that I might have about how we [as teachers] are here to repair peoples’ hearts and fold them in community and give them a safe space to get their self-esteem back, after so many years of bad learning. [The article] is saying teaching has to evolve so it can respond to marketing systems, financial systems, scientific systems, technological systems, but where then is a critique of those systems? This is what I have been grappling with- the differences between access education and competitive education. This is extremely important for me as an educator because I am preparing students for competitive education in an access education environment.

What emerged from this dialogue was a fruitful discussion and unpacking of the purposes of education as well as challenges with the curriculum. As Elias commented, “I agree with what you are talking about, we need to teach critical thinking- how do you critique the systems that enable some and disable others?” Joey agreed, adding: “and sometimes you as a teacher use the Socratic method for that because it’s about asking people questions and generating dialogue”.

Changing the ways we viewed teaching and learning by hearing others perspectives or allowing the unpacking of our beliefs about teaching and learning, knowledge, the purposes of a College education, and human motivation was a significant accomplishment of the study. For some participants, this was an unexpected outcome of joining the FLC. As Candice elaborated:
There were times when I was forced to articulate how I do something or why I made certain choices; in so doing, I had to think these things through more clearly for myself, galvanizing and clarifying good practices.

**Research Question Two: In what ways does a Faculty Learning Circle contribute to a sense of community among teachers?**

“I feel I am part of a teaching team as opposed to just an individual”

~Abigail~

**Theme: Peer Support and Feedback**

Having support and feedback from other members of the FLC not only allowed for genuine and rich dialogue, it also served a more personal purpose. Based on the reflections from participants, it appeared to aid in the mental health and emotional wellness of participants. This was an unexpected result of the development of the Faculty Learning Circle that was evident upon analysis of the data. Participants felt that the support they received from other members, in terms of addressing concerns around teaching and learning, dealing with conflict and providing suggestions and alternatives were all possible based on the safety that they felt within this community. This was more than a group of teachers; we had created a space where we could engage in meaningful discourse around topics and issues that was not “top-down” or hierarchical; rather, it was truly dynamic and lateral.

**Having a safe space to voice needs and concerns around teaching and learning**

One of the strongest themes to emerge from this research was the overwhelming consensus amongst members of the FLC that this group provided a safe platform to voice needs and concerns and an opportunity to be genuinely heard. This was evident at the first meeting when participants were asked to share their motivations and
explanations of their interest in volunteering to join. As each participant shared their responses to this question, commonalities emerged:

- Limited time made to reflect as teachers
- Interest in learning from others
- Interest in sharing teaching strategies and ideas with others and getting feedback on these practices
- Interest in the opportunity to make connections with other faculty due to the isolation felt within the profession
- Ways to develop strategies to achieve work/life balance

Based on these common interests and motivations, participants voiced that they felt we were all “coming from the same place”. These common concerns and interests were what helped build the sense of true community this group identified upon reflection on their participation in the FLC. In many ways, these shared commonalities acted as the glue that bonded this group of teachers together. In her exit interview, one participant reflected on how membership in this group aided in creating a sense of community:

I always had a fear of not knowing who was a ‘safe’ person to ask genuine questions about what goes on in the classroom. This fear was rooted in the insecurity I was feeling about being a contract worker. Do I rock the boat? Do I be agreeable? Passive? Is it OK to be concerned about the growing class sizes and the quality of education? Challenge a full-time faculty member? Just hearing that others are sharing the same hesitations gave me an immediate sense of community. (Abigail)
Latisha also picked up on this theme in her reflections after the first FLC meeting when she stated:

I came to see some of my colleagues in a new light—there was a kind of shared vulnerability that predominated. There is something generative and grounding when we can all share common anxieties and de-mystify some of the uncertainties.

This notion of relating to others by sharing vulnerabilities was echoed by many participants during their exit interviews. One of the questions that I asked during these interviews was “Can you share a specific example of a time you felt supported by others in the group?” One participant responded:

There were many. But what immediately comes to mind is the point where I shared my disappointments and failures in one of my classes. The time when I prepared this big unit that I thought would be really interesting and some of the students just walked out. Rather than convey advice about how to improve my practice—a conversational trajectory that would probably occur in the college—I remember [two FLC members] positively reinforcing me with their own sense of professional vulnerability and helping me to come to terms with some of the impossibilities of this profession and the shared alienation that haunts our practice. (Elias)

Elias describes this support, which aided in the connection he felt with other members of the FLC:
I did not anticipate this kind of warmth, generosity, and critical solidarity that would emerge from participating in this group. I think it is a tribute to the character of our members and the richness of our professional community. People felt comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities; I believe this enabled us to strike a resilient bond.

This was a common theme from all the members, who expressed how having a safe space to express challenges and share successes allowed for a true community. As Beth stated in her exit interview:

It was a sense of ‘Ah… you struggle with that too! Although everyone’s stories were unique, I also was able to relate to others’ teaching challenges. We were not afraid to be vulnerable in the group, which helped the sharing of both strategies and challenges.

What was impactful for all was what began as a research project transformed into a community of professionals who now felt they had support moving forward. This idea was best expressed by Abigail, who stated in her exit interview:

I feel connected to quality teachers who care about the students and who are invested in their future… I feel that we will be able to continue supporting each other in the future as well.

These sentiments were echoed by Candice, who stated, “I think the relationships between the group members will hold and continue to provide support/resources in the future”.
Opportunities to deal with conflict and challenges

At the start of each meeting, participants were offered an opportunity to go around and ‘check-in’ with the group. The question that was posed at the start of each meeting was “Are there any specific challenges or triumphs (personal or professional) that you wish to share with the group?” For many members of the FLC, this offered a chance to share and unpack any issues that were causing stress or anxiety. This was much more than a time to ‘vent’; this was an opportunity to share struggles, disclose fears and anxieties and discuss the affective aspects of these issues in a respectful way with peers. As Frankie shared during her final reflections in the exit interview: “Check-ins served as an opportunity to talk about the challenges that had been going on just that day, as an opportunity to debrief and decompress.” This was confirmed by Ingrid, who added:

I think (the check-ins) also set the tone for then being able to speak about whatever question or topic we were going to talk about in a more candid way without having something more formal. I didn’t feel judged because everyone was so vulnerable and open.

One of the main challenges faced by many of the group members that came to light during check-ins was the feeling of stress that was experienced in the profession. Kevin highlighted this:

Personally and professionally, the FLC helped me with stress…Somehow knowing another person is going through what you’re going through makes the situation less stressful…that’s what the FLC helped me with…it made me feel less alone and pushed the idea that we’re all in this together. The trickle down
from that is that it has made me more encouraged to try something new in the classroom with less fear…I know I’m not alone.

Some of the other challenges and troublesome issues discussed during FLC meetings were:

- Scarcity of work
- How to deal with increasing class sizes
- Precarious nature of part-time contract work at the College/job security
- Working effectively with colleagues/conflict management
- Communicating effectively in staff meetings
- How to promote class engagement and participation
- Work/life balance
- Difficult interactions with and among students
- Issues around intellectual property
- Creating a positive work environment

The Faculty Learning Circle provided ample opportunities for members to offer alternatives or solutions to these challenges and issues posed to the group, as well as an opportunity for participants to look at challenges from another perspective or through another lens. A strong example of this would be a situation shared by Beth as key learning for her in dealing with conflict. She reflected on a situation with another FLC participant involving a fellow work colleague not associated with this project. When the issue around this third party was initially discussed, there were evident differences in
opinions and perceptions. Both participants were able to listen to one another’s position and share their own perspectives. As Beth stated:

There were a lot of assumptions made on both of our parts before this meeting. This meeting ‘broke the ice’ and, although impassioned, provided us with a friendly professional relationship.

Beth mentioned that because of the safety of the group she was able to move through conflict healthily and non-destructively. This was transformative for her as she discussed how her usual means of dealing with conflict was ‘fight and/or flight’ and how this experience marked a significant change for her. As she shared in her final reflection: “I felt I was able to express my point of view but I also listened and understood the [other] perspective”.

Many participants named ‘challenging assumptions’ and ‘viewing issues from other perspectives’ in their reflections on how the group built a sense of community with one another. As Elias shared in his own reflections on dealing with challenging situations that occurred in the group:

I do believe that membership in this community helped to generate a more naturalized and genuine relationship among colleagues. One of the main reasons for this is because we initiated a community outside of the parameters and power differentials intrinsic to the college. Professions can create existential vacuums—we bury our vulnerabilities so they won’t get exhumed and paralyze us at crucial moments. I think the visceral appreciation that came to animate this group was premised on the opportunity to surface and name the things we have
buried. There were moments of tension during our meetings... Turning the analytical conviction inward, I also believe that my own reductive judgments of my colleagues played a role in circumventing my growth as a practicing teacher, an intellectual, and as a respected colleague and friend. It seems that whenever we interact with a community, we are also interacting with our expectations and perceptions of that community.

**Theme: A site of love & belonging**

The shared emotional connection among members was evident by the behaviours that emerged during meetings and the deep bonds and connections that members felt with one another. As isolation within the profession was a key liability that group members expressed, the FLC served as a safe space where group members felt connected to one another in an intimate way.

**A space to connect with the whole person to aid in psychological well-being**

“I felt that the group provided non-judgmental support during a time in my personal life that was filled with transition”

~Beth~

One of the more interesting findings was how the FLC allowed for individual members to feel supported as whole people. This affective component to emerge from the group was so important that it stood out as a significant theme across meetings. It was underscored by highlighted by one of the participants who stated:

I have a need to be interacted with as a whole person at my workplace. And my workplace is sometimes tremendously anxiety producing: We are competing increasingly fiercely in a climate of scarcity at work. (The FLC) was a safe
ambit in which to talk about all the crunchiness and paranoia that can arise in the face of all of this pressure. (Candice)

One of the stressors indicated by many group members was the isolation that teachers felt in their profession. Due to these feelings, there were many instances where group members did not feel supported in times of personal crises. The FLC acted as a site of love, where members could be supported in all realms of their lives, professionally and personally. As Frankie candidly disclosed during the fifth meeting:

I feel sometimes that I don’t have the connection that I want with others, and then when I have this [the FLC], I just want to hold on to it so badly because there is so much to say. I don’t feel that connection day to day in my workplace, and I probably don’t have time for it day to day- I may only have 5 or 10 minutes to talk with a colleague before I teach or have to respond to emails. I feel this sense of disconnect in my workplace and I don’t know how to negotiate that because it is so much about balance and time- both of which I feel I don’t have enough of day to day.

Discussions around achieving and maintaining work/life balance was a topic that emerged during many meetings. The FLC was an ideal setting to share these struggles and collectively come up with solutions to aid each other in finding balance and harmony in both our professional and personal lives. This aided in transitioning members from being a mere group to feeling a true sense of community with one another. Meeting after meeting, group members banded together in ways to love and
support one another both personally and professionally. As Beth shared during her final reflections: “It’s funny how personal support can translate to professional support”.

**Opportunities for Social Gatherings**

As Frankie discussed in her exit interview, she was surprised by the group’s initiatives to engage in social activities with one another that extended beyond the confines of the FLC meetings to build stronger connections with one another. Many of these were the result of discussions that were had during the meetings that focused on ways members could decrease stress, improve morale and overall mental health. Some examples of social gatherings that bonded members and aided in achieving balance in times of stress and uncertainty were the development of a hiking club, organizing and attending birthday/milestone events for FLC members, and meeting after work at the ‘local watering hole’ in between or after meetings for a drink and more discussion. These initiatives were small ways where participants were able to build meaningful relationships with colleagues in ways that garnered trust and love.

**Research Question Three: How does participating in a Faculty Learning Circle act as a vehicle for professional learning that benefits both College educators and their students?**

**Theme: A space for information sharing**

> “My colleagues’ commitment to their craft also inspired me to reinvigorate my practice”

~Beth~

FLC participants were able to share resources, information and personal knowledge that were beneficial to other members. As Abigail reflected during the exit interview: “I was inspired at the wealth of knowledge that my colleagues knew about the actual structure of the institution.” This was helpful for participants as they were able to ask
questions and gain a deeper understanding of the institution, including the systems and standards that it adheres to. The theme of our place within the institution arose during meeting 2 when participants discussed the threat of an upcoming faculty strike. One of the members Ingrid, who is a part-time faculty member, asked the group what the implications of the strike on her as a non-unionized employee might be. Other members were able to share information, in particular Kevin, who had been at the College at the time of a previous faculty strike and was able to share his knowledge of how the College responded to it.

Members of the FLC often were able to share resources to support one another either personally, professionally or both. One example was when Frankie was discussing an activity that she assigns her students to introduce a controversial topic in her field. Candice offered to share an article that aligned with the topic that she was teaching to her class. This kind of resource sharing exemplified how members were able to share their knowledge and provide support to one another that would further their own development. In another instance, Abigail emailed the FLC members a TedTalks video on the gift of happiness by Charles Eisenstien, as a few of the group members had voiced concerns around how to deal with difficult colleagues. This resource served to offer another perspective on how to view the issue more compassionately. As Frankie reflected:

It not only was great to know that one of my colleagues from the FLC thought about me outside of that space, she was also able to provide me with a resource to allow me to view what I thought of as a problem in another light. This small gesture reminds me of the great support that my colleagues in the FLC are in my
development as a professional. How apt they are to respond to me and provide me with resources and support when they know I am struggling. This was impactful beyond words.

During the third meeting, participants started to ask questions around keeping current, motivated and inspired in the teaching profession. During check-in, Latisha expressed concerns around how faculty avoid becoming stagnant in the courses that they may teach repeatedly. This was echoed by many of her colleagues and numerous suggestions were made amongst the group on strategies to prevent this from occurring. Members suggested that they felt the FLC in itself was the dominant method in keeping current with their profession. Individual members shared their own ideas and strategies on how to not feel stagnant and ways to refresh their practices. This appeared to be beneficial to members as they left with some concrete strategies that they could implement into their practice.

Another valuable example of the information sharing that occurred was expressed by one participant discussing its impacts during the exit interviews:

I found our discussions around feedback to be particularly interesting. Many of the group members shared some really good ideas and examples in which feedback is given. I found that very useful and made amendments to the amount and timing of feedback I give. I’ve noticed changes in the classroom too…students love feedback and I don’t think I was giving enough before. Since giving more specific feedback, I’ve noticed that learning can continue far past just that assignment. (Kevin)
Theme: An informal site for teacher-led research

There were many examples of how the FLC acted as a space where faculty could pursue small-scale or informal research projects with the objective of better supporting students. There were three particular projects initiated by participants that served as professional learning opportunities for FLC members.

Collaborative Projects involving students

One powerful example of a collaborative project among participants occurred early on in the development of the FLC when one of the group members discussed a college-wide community action initiative she was creating at the College for students. Two other members were interested in hearing more about the initiative, and after the FLC meeting, they discussed strategies to incorporate this initiative with their students. When asked to describe if she was able to use any ideas discussed in the FLC in her own teaching practice, Latisha explained:

A fellow FLC member designed an assignment for his class that supported [the initiative] that I coordinate. We worked together to design a project that would benefit his students by offering ‘real world’ experience while benefiting [the initiative] with free advertising.

Upon reflection on this opportunity to collaborate, both participants identified that it would not have been possible without the FLC, as they worked in different areas of the college and there were insufficient opportunities for cross-collaborative projects across departments.
Supportive teacher observations

By the fifth meeting, participants were discussing ways we could make this circle more impactful on our daily practices. The suggestion of participating in peer classroom observations surfaced. There was an enthusiastic response by all members that this would be a fruitful method of gaining valuable feedback on both what was working well as well as suggestions for improvement from someone who was trusted. It was not until after the eighth meeting when two members found time to compete this professional development activity and bring their reflections to the following FLC session. The process itself served to bond these two members closely. Frankie and Candice discussed the process in meeting 9 as they felt that this would be beneficial to other members who were interested in engaging in this activity. Frankie described how they met prior to the actual class observations to share what they would like feedback on and a brief description of the session. Each teacher would observe an entire 3-hour class and make notes on what they observed. After both classroom observations were complete they would meet to debrief.

During the debrief, both teachers reflected on the following questions and shared their responses:

- How did it feel to have a peer observer in the class?
- What was the experience of getting honest/constructive/positive feedback?
- What did you take away from the feedback?
- If you were to do a peer-observation experience again, what would you do differently/want to be done different (process)?
- What should we highlight when sharing this experience with the FLC?
Candice was able to share some of her reflections and feedback with the group around this activity:

We identified times when we were free and the other person was teaching and I went to [Frankie’s] class and it was an amazing experience. I wrote two pages of notes during the class. It was wonderful to see how great she was in terms of giving lectures on specific content, her interactions with PowerPoint and the
balance between that and group work, the balance between different modalities within group work, such as interviews and case scenarios. The greatest pleasure was just to see how delighted [students] were to be there, people were really cheerful and pleased to be there and you could see that tone in particular with how they helped one another and supported one another.

In addition to sharing her reflections, Candice was also able to provide Frankie with specific feedback on what she observed during this classroom observation when she stated:

The little hooks that you do to keep [students] engaged such as referencing what was discussed in a previous class, or throwing out a rhetorical question… I looked over your materials and your assignment in particular was really neat. It was almost like the idea of the flipped classroom we have discussed. The assignment was to go and read [the article] and you had to come back to the following class and discuss it in a group. So the actual feedback was going to happen in the next class. [Frankie] made it really clear that you had to come, and you had to participate in order to be assessed and get marked, so ‘get ready’. It was a delightful thing.

Candice then asked Frankie to describe to the whole group how she experienced the process of having a colleague observing her teaching:

Going into this I was extremely anxious and nervous because this term has been filled with challenges and just not feeling ‘on’. The funny thing is that when [Candice] said ‘yes, let’s do this’, I had hesitations a few days before, I shared
my concerns with her prior to her visit and she said “Ok, I will observe you on how you come across to an outside observer, in light of how you have been feeling”. It was really interesting to get that perspective from her and much needed. Immediately this took away all my feelings of judgment, perhaps because we had narrowed down what I would be receiving feedback on. It would not be the content of my lecture, rather my teaching behaviours and presence in the classroom, something I think I desperately needed insight into from a trusted peer and colleague. I think that after the debrief I felt like “ok, I am not failing my students” because of all the positive things that she observed and was able to share with me.

What stood out during these two women’s observations was how this activity encouraged them to be more reflective on their own teaching practices. It also allowed them the opportunity to receive feedback and suggestions. Frankie highlighted this during her reflections on visiting Candice’s class the following week:

It was so great. What I noticed right off the bat was how [Candice] connects with each student; it was really interesting to observe. She took the first 15 minutes of the class connecting with each and every person in the room…It really was the experience of seeing how someone teaches and the little things that they do that was most impactful and made me reflect on my own practices. I really appreciated how she was able to link student comments and how she would paraphrase students’ comments in order to get them to think about the topics in a different way.
When Frankie asked Candice to share her reflections on the experience of having her observe her classroom, she shared with the other FLC members: “It was like drinking water when I was thirsty. The sheer excitement of having a wise practitioner giving me advice… and good advice, that’s what turns theory into practice.” Both Candice and Frankie shared how they were able to incorporate some of the suggestions made by the other into their teaching practices in order to improve their craft.

Candice also articulated that the most profound aspect of this activity with a colleague from the FLC was how she was open to receiving the feedback. She expressed how she did not feel she was being judged harshly because of the trust she felt with this colleague, in part due to the bond they had developed because of the FLC:

The exchange between me and [Frankie] was anything but crunchy, it just felt delightful, it felt delicious, it felt really safe and that would be the thing I wanted to take back to the FLC here with all of you is that it’s about the affective dimension of learning. There’s a way of being ready to change, of being ready to learn, and it rides on the bond that you have with the people around you.

The group discussed how receiving feedback from a trusted colleague was an important aspect of this exercise. As Latisha commented, this may have been because the power between participants was equalized. Candice added to these sentiments in her reflection: “Once again, it came back to feeling safe, and how we have generated feelings of safety within this group”. Frankie provided insight into how the feelings of safety may have emerged “We have been able to be vulnerable at different points over the last year
within this group. I think that has helped too”. Lastly, Candice shared how impactful this had been, especially as a part-time faculty member:

It’s like [Frankie] loves me, and she doesn’t wish me any harm, so her honest feedback is in the interest of theory, practice and pedagogy. I am free to disagree with her, but the comments always stay at the level of wanting to improve; wanting the other to improve. I know she is not out to get me. I think this is what is increasingly poisoning our Colleges in these times of austerity is that we are being asked to compete with one another more and more.

These reflections and candid dialogue among participants created further interest on the part of the other FLC members to engage in this activity. Elias shared how he wanted to engage in a peer observation with a fellow FLC member as he had never had the opportunity to do so. He spoke of how he had done practicums during teachers’ College and had also had his Chair attend half a class during his first year at the College, yet still felt this opportunity would greatly aid in his own professional development.

In addition, as the group discussed supportive teacher observations, they were able to collectively come up with ideas on how to improve the process itself.

**Evaluating student work collaboratively**

Another small group project that three of the participants organized after consideration of what would aid in their professional development was a “student assessment project”. As Latisha explained:
We each marked the same two student essays [individually], using the same evaluation rubric, to compare and contrast the experience, to see how we interpreted the rubric and how we graded the papers.

The outcome of this activity for the teachers who engaged in it was discussed in meeting nine, when the three participants shared their reflections on the activity with the group:

I wish we had done this sooner… I think what we realized; well what I realized was the importance of explaining the assignment clearly to students, and also realizing that we all have our own subjective interpretation of the [purpose of] assignment and of the rubric. (Beth)

After sharing how there were some significant differences in how each teacher graded each student’s assignment, Candice shared the following revelation:

It’s not fair to be marking people on a criterion that you haven’t been clear about…It wasn’t that we were judging one another on being a ‘harder’ marker… it felt more like an opportunity to go back and clarify the assignment and rubric… It felt like “Oh… if we are finding these differences, that means that a lot of what we do is contingent on our subjective perceptions”; we’ve got to eliminate as much of that as we can by being clear and really explicit in the assignment.

All of these faculty-led initiatives that emerged from the FLC served as further opportunities for members to collaborate, reflect and develop.
Research Question Four: What factors are most influential in organizing and maintaining a successful Faculty Learning Circle?

One of the goals of the current research was to explore factors that optimized the success of an FLC as a vehicle for informal professional development. With this goal in mind, during the exit interviews participants were asked to respond to the following question: “What were the aspects of the structure of the FLC that you felt worked well?” The following themes were identified as factors that contributed to the success of the FLC.

**Theme: Shared values & interests amongst members**

One aspect of the success of this research project that was identified by participants during the exit interviews was that there were commonalities amongst members. These commonalities were not only the fact that they identified as individuals in the same cohort (part-time or newly hired College educators), rather, the commonalities extended to the members’ shared interests in joining, as well as their expectations for this form of professional development.

**Interest in joining an FLC**

During the first meeting, participants were asked to discuss why they were interested in participating in a Faculty Learning Circle. This provided an excellent opportunity for members to hear the individual motivations as well as identify commonalities. This process set the tone for the group as the common goal that was expressed by each member was professional and personal growth. As Kevin commented after reflecting on the first meeting:
I found the first meeting to be really interesting. I really liked it and found the comments and personal experiences to really reflect my own opinions and ideas while contributing to the growth of new ideas and opinions. I’ve never been to a [College] meeting with so many like-minded minds thinking about so many interesting ideas. I found myself leaving the first meeting excited and motivated to get into something new… I’m excited to work with other teachers across different programs and link those different programs to a common goal.

These sentiments were echoed by many of the other members as they reflected on the first meeting. As Latisha expressed:

I was hoping to discover a community of teachers that could help me think and share. I sometimes feel, while teaching is deeply relational, we often squander opportunities to think and share in collaborative communities of inquiry that go beyond the politics of the office. So, I guess I gravitated toward this group because I craved a communal outlet. I also figured this could be a great way to discover new approaches to teaching and learning.

**Theme: Organic Development**

In developing this project, I was keenly aware of how power structures can inhibit individuals from feeling empowered in certain situations. With this in mind, I wanted to ensure that the FLC was democratic in nature. I knew that a key to achieving this goal was to allow the group to evolve organically. During the first meeting, participants were asked for suggestions on how they would like to utilize their time involved in the FLC. Therefore, from the start, it was transparent to all participants that our group was going to evolve organically. Participants were able to brainstorm ideas of what would be most
meaningful. Hence, there was not a prescribed agenda or structure; rather, each participant was able to contribute to what the FLC would look like based on his or her own needs and interests. The ideas that emerged from the discussion are listed here:

- Having group members provide some biographical information on how they got into teaching
- Sharing their teaching philosophy
- Discussing passions/challenges and strengths (strengths can be outside of teaching- as well as a discussion of how they impact your work)
- Critical incidents
- Teaching tricks/tips/activities that you have actually used that help your students
- Mentors who have influenced you and/or your teaching practice along the way
- Having a few structured questions to “take home” to prepare for next meeting
- Sharing student work
- In-depth/critical discussion of pedagogy/ethical issues/theories that pertain to our teaching
- A brief “check-in” at the beginning of each meeting for group members to share how things have been going in between meetings. This also allows individuals to share if there is something pressing that needs to be discussed during that meeting

*Establishment of group norms and expectations*

One of the reasons cited by group members for the success of this initiative was the democratic structure it was based upon. It was the faculty themselves who discussed what they needed from this FLC. Members thus took ownership over the process and
structure of the FLC. At the first meeting, we discussed the importance of the development of group guidelines (agreements regarding our conduct in meetings). This was important for individual participants as expressed by one member during the exit interview: “The setting of the guidelines at the start… we spent a lot of time during that [first] meeting fleshing them out… which aided in creating a sacred space” (Candice).

The guidelines that were discussed and agreed upon were the following:

1. **Confidentiality** → As we are a group that may bring some personal stories/challenges/issues, we commit to keeping the group a safe space for people to share without fear that what will be said will be repeated outside of our group. This trust will be developed over time, but we agree that this rule will be held in the highest regard for respect of our colleagues

2. **Being honest** → With one another and ourselves

3. ** Authenticity** → Being true to yourself (your spirit and personality)

4. **Direct Communication** → If you don’t understand or do not agree with a statement, OR if you are unclear with someone’s response, we commit to being clear with one another (links to honesty)

5. **Sharing Air time** → Being aware of everyone and not dominating the floor

6. **Having the right to “pass”** → If a question is posed to the group, you always have the right to pass

**Theme: Commitment and Engagement**

The frequency of meetings was realistic given our busy schedules. However, the participants sincerely committed to attending each meeting, which was required in order this to grow and develop as a group. This is also the main reason given by members as
to how we were able to transition from group to a true community. Candice stated that she thought one of the reasons the FLC was successful was that we all committed the time to collectively come together to work on professional development. A key factor to the success of the FLC was that participants joined voluntarily. This was not a mandatory component of their professional development and participants self-selected into this FLC.

4.3 Summary
In this chapter, I discussed the major themes that the data revealed. The next chapter will include my interpretations and a final discussion of the research, including implications for faculty, administrators and Colleges.
Chapter 5
Interpretations & Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This qualitative study aimed at exploring the experiences and reflections of nine part-time and newly hired full-time College faculty members who volunteered to participate in the development of a Faculty Learning Circle. An FLC brings together a small group of committed faculty to engage in dialogue around issues of teaching and learning as well as provide members opportunities to improve their craft (Hutchings, 1996; Cox, 2004). The need for sustained, meaningful, collegial and supportive professional development was identified by many of my part-time colleagues at the College where the current research was carried out. Research suggests that College educators are increasingly faced with teaching to a diversifying classroom as the demographics of college students continue to change (Canadian Colleges, 2013) as well as adjusting to the various technological changes that are occurring within higher education (Bates, 2010). In addition, part-time College educators face further challenges, most notably around pedagogical knowledge (Bakutes, 1998) and isolation within the profession (Ouaulty, 2000, Grubb, 1999; Thirolf, 2013). As a response to these circumstances, this study highlighted the importance of peer support and teacher collaboration vis-à-vis a Faculty Learning Circle as a vehicle for the professional growth and development of part-time and newly hired College faculty. Specifically, I wanted to answer four research questions:

1. How does membership in a Faculty Learning Circle influence and shape teacher identity?
2. In what ways does a Faculty Learning Circle contribute to a sense of community among teachers?

3. How does participating in a Faculty Learning Circle act as a vehicle for professional learning that benefits both College educators and their students?

4. What factors are most influential in organizing and maintaining a successful Faculty Learning Circle?

This chapter will discuss the implications of the research conducted, the limitations of the current study as well as recommendations and suggestions for future directions in the use of Faculty Learning Circles for Canadian Colleges. Lastly, I conclude with a personal reflection.

5.2 Analysis

Research Question One: *How does membership in a Faculty Learning Circle influence and shape teacher identity?*

Based on the data, what appeared to be most efficacious in influencing teacher identity was the opportunity for teachers to reflect on and share autobiographical narratives as well as revisit their philosophies of teaching and education. This is important for a few key reasons. First, research suggests that forming a professional identity is central to the process of becoming an effective educator (Alsup, 2006). Reflecting on teaching narratives allowed meaningful ways for participants to probe their process of becoming a college educator, and hence develop a greater sense of agency. Teacher agency allows teachers to connect with a sense of empowerment to develop and transform (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Second, sharing narratives allowed participants to learn about each
other in unanticipated ways, deepening their solidarity and setting the stage for fruitful collaboration. Wagner (1998) suggests that learning is an experience of identity. The relational learning that occurred within the FLC served to inform and support members to develop how they view their role as professionals and their teaching practices. This learning also fostered genuine trust among members as they began sharing intimate details of their own narratives; these early bonds were essential for later peer-led collaborative projects the group members would engage in.

**Research Question Two: In what ways does a Faculty Learning Circle contribute to a sense of community among teachers?**

Wegner (1998) highlights the value of belonging to a community of practice, which is a group of people who “share concern or passion for something they do, and who learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wegner, n.d, para 2). The FLC very much acted as a community of practice. It was more than just a group. It was a unified collective of passionate individuals who shared expertise, learning, activities, dialogue, stories and experience. Upon initial reflection, this cohesion seemed to evolve naturally from the group, however, upon deeper analysis, there were key ingredients that came together and aligned to support a sense of collegiality and community. The intimacy of the group invited members to be vulnerable and build trust with one another in meaningful ways. Based on participant responses, the FLC built a sense of community by providing a safe space to unpack many of the issues that impacted participants, work through conflict and challenges and problem solve around stressful situations. This was significant as the safety and collective vulnerability allowed participants to deal with conflict in a healthy and productive manner. It opened up a space to view differences
non-judgmentally and the see the ‘other’ in new ways. In addition, the space was a sacred one where we offered comfort, marked major events, and celebrated successes. These two complementary functions of the group allowed for a natural development of a sense of community. Secondly, the FLC served as a way to assuage the systematic isolation that participants experienced within their profession as College educators. It acted as a site of love and belonging. Participants found many ways to support one another to ensure that each member felt supported and cared for in many aspects of their lives - not just professionally. This shift from feelings of isolation to collaboration and a sense of community was a true transformation and allowed the group members to bring their whole selves to the group. Indeed, of the most striking results of the study was how the FLC acted as a site to connect with the whole self, the whole person who is teaching and learning, which in turn aided in members’ psychological well-being. In addition, the FLC encouraged a sense of collegiality that extended beyond the confines of the group. Members found many opportunities to connect with one another outside of the group setting, increasing the likelihood that this sense of community will have very long-term benefits.

**Research Question Three:** How does participating in a Faculty Learning Circle act as a vehicle for professional learning that benefit both College educators and their students?

The Faculty Learning Circle also acted as a site of inquiry for participants, which fostered ongoing professional growth. One of the strengths of the FLC was that it served to expose participants to ideas and teaching strategies that they might not normally have considered. The FLC itself was a source of information sharing that enhanced
participants’ pedagogical content knowledge. This was driven by the pedagogical needs of the group members themselves, and was identified as enhancing the instruction that took place within the classroom. In addition to information sharing, the FLC provided members ample opportunities to engage in small-scale, autonomous, self-directed research activities such as projects involving students, supportive peer observations and collaborative evaluations of student work. A conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that the FLC did in fact transform practice in the participants who engaged in these activities. The opportunity to reflect and dialogue with the group upon completion of these small-scale research activities also served as a catalyst for future collaborations.

**Research Question Four: What factors are most influential in organizing and maintaining a successful Faculty Learning Circle?**

The Faculty Learning Circle clearly met its intended goals of being a vehicle for informal professional development and support, and can thus be defined as a “success”. In exploring factors that were most influential in organizing and maintaining a successful FLC, the most striking feature that participants identified was the shared interests and commonalities among members. These commonalities were initially observed during the first meeting when participants each shared their reasons for wanting to join. This process allowed participants to identify parallels in both interest in joining and expectations of the FLC.

The FLC was one way in which the faculty themselves drove their own professional development - a task that was extremely empowering to the individual participants as well as to the collective group upon reflection. The organic nature of the evolution of the group itself served to lateralize the power dynamic across members. One notable
feature of this process was the development of and universal respect for group norms. In addition, members shared in the decision-making process for what topics and themes would be the focus of each FLC meeting. Lastly, the commitment on behalf of participants to whole-heartedly engage with the process throughout the duration of this research project was a key factor in its success. As the FLC was a sustained form of professional development, with meetings once a month for the duration of over a year, it allowed for faculty to develop robust bonds with one another and offer many opportunities for reflection on the process.

5.3 Implications for Faculty

This project illuminated the need for opportunities for faculty to meet, and discuss issues that are affecting them both professionally as well as personally. A Faculty Learning Circle appears to introduce the possibility of connecting faculty in ways that otherwise may not be possible. It both eases feelings of isolation and provides participating faculty ways to develop concrete strategies that they can use both inside and outside the classroom. A few caveats for faculty who wish to organize an FLC:

First, it should be noted that effective facilitation of the FLC was identified as one aspect that was important in the development and maintenance of the group’s success. Therefore, it is recommended that members of an FLC take turns facilitating meetings around a specific theme, issue or question relating to teaching and learning. The facilitator serves as a guide for the discussion, ensuring that the conversation stays focused. This allows for a truly collaborative approach, one that seeks to eliminate any power imbalances among group members. Second, based on participants’ reflections, allowing time for a brief check-in at the start of each meeting is seen as an important
way for participants to connect with one another and share any specific triumphs and challenges that are occurring at the present time. This allows members to connect with and support one another in their current situations, and sets the tone for each meeting. Third, the first 2-3 meetings should primarily be a chance for the group to get to know one another to develop a sense of community. This can be achieved by the sharing of teacher narratives and/or philosophies. Last, an article or activity to help frame and give shape to each meeting theme may be useful. It should be noted that scholarly articles are excellent ways to engage with the current literature and/or research on the themes identified by the group; however, these should be used as secondary sources, as faculty felt that discussing their own strategies and research was a more valuable method and better use of the FLC time.

5.4 Implications for Administrators & Colleges

Findings from this research contribute much to the current thinking around professional development opportunities for faculty. By reviewing the faculty’s needs and concerns identified within this thesis, College leaders are informed of the particular challenges and issues that are perceived as pressing for part-time and newly hired College faculty. Colleges have the unique opportunity to utilize this research and create opportunities for faculty to develop their own Faculty Learning Circles. The current work provides administrators insights into the gains made by the participants through their experiences in an FLC as a form of professional development. It also reflects the need for greater opportunities for peer collaboration and support. Therefore, it may be worthwhile for Colleges, in general, and administrators and staff development offices in particular, to encourage faculty to initiate this form of PD by highlighting some of the benefits
discussed here. An increase in this sort of PD would ultimately aid in creating an atmosphere where professional growth and relational learning is valued, and where these opportunities are not only encouraged, but also promoted within the larger academic setting, fostering a collaborative culture.

Exactly how an FLC may be promoted, however, may constitute an emerging issue. Participants in this study stated that time was one factor that could potentially present an obstacle for future FLC initiatives due to the multiple personal and professional commitments that faculty have, therefore, it is recommended that administrators provide work time and/or another form of compensation for the development of FLC initiatives across departments and divisions. Material support would express the fact that the institutions value the commitment of FLC participants, and benefit from their engagement with this type of informal PD.

As a final thought, it should be noted that a preeminent objective of an FLC is to promote excellence in teaching and learning. This has obvious impacts within the classroom, as college educators who are present, confident and feel supported, who are exposed to fresh ideas and can be reflective on their own practices, are better prepared to showcase these behaviors within their classrooms, ultimately impacting student success.

5.5 Limitations

I noted two potential limitations to this research project – generalizability and researcher bias. Firstly, the study included nine participants, which limits the generalizability of the conclusions. The teachers involved in this study shared many similarities that made for a homogeneous sample in many respects. All were all part-time or newly hired faculty
from one particular division in one College who were self-selected volunteer participants. They also expressed similar reasons for joining and participating in an FLC, universally already having a strong motivation to improve and develop. All participants craved a space to discuss teacher challenges and learn how to advance in their craft. These specifics are particular to this study and therefore the results will likely vary with other faculty in other circumstances.

Secondly, the researcher was also a participant in the FLC, and coded all the data for the research project. The effects of this limitation were mediated by ensuring that I triangulated the data to ensure validity, which involved using multiple sources of data (audiotaping the FLC meetings, teacher reflections and exit interviews). I also allowed for the emergent construction of categories from the data through attention to words or phrases that appeared and recurred. Lastly, I allowed for member checking throughout the duration of the project, asking the participants regularly for input and feedback.

5.6 Future Directions

This study sought to explore and theorize the experiences of participants within the creation of a Faculty Learning Circle. Upon reflecting on the process and reviewing the data in preparation for this writing, it is very clear that further research into the use of Faculty Learning Circles as a form of peer-led professional development for College educators is recommended. The current study only focused on the experiences and reflections of nine part-time and newly hired faculty within one division of one College; to draw generalizable conclusions would require further research exploring the impacts of an FLC on given cohorts across divisions, departments, and Colleges. By broadening
the scope of this research, there would be a potential for identifying additional benefits or limitations of this type of informal professional development for College educators. Second, further research on the long-term efficacy of an FLC as a form of professional development would be needed. One method to assess effectiveness would be to allow participants to share discussions or research from within the FLC with others in forums such as Divisional or College meetings. Another may be to follow up with participants on how they have continued to engage with this form for PD across time. With so many passionate and dedicated “dual professionals” found in higher education, it is my hope that more can be done to support and develop opportunities for growth for these devoted members of our profession.

5.7 Summary & Final Reflections

This paper has outlined how a Faculty Learning Circle was beneficial for part-time and newly hired College educators who want to continuously improve their practice and build collegial relationships. I came to this research with the intentions of exploring how the development of a FLC would benefit individual members and in what specific ways. What I did not expect was the deep connections that these educators would build with one another. These bonds were an unanticipated, yet significant result of the research. I found it extremely difficult to capture and illuminate these bonds and connections on paper. The lasting implications of this research project are seen by the FLC’s commitment to continue with this community – it appears that we had dug up issues and ideas that we needed to explore further and, as Candice stated “search out loud together”, and our work had just started.
As I completed writing the final chapters of this thesis, the members of the FLC have continued to meet monthly and have engaged in other small scale research activities with one another, shared resources and strengthened their bonds and have continued to be a valuable support for one another.
References


Thirolf, K. (2013). How Faculty Identity Discourses of Community College Part-Time Faculty Change Over Time. Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 37, pp.177-184


APPENDIX A

Information Letter

Dear ________________,

You are invited to take part in the research project identified above which is being conducted by Jacqueline Macchione from XXXXX.

This research project examines the potential impact(s) of a peer-led Faculty Learning Circle on the professional development needs of College faculty. The purpose of the research project is to provide a detailed description and analysis of faculty members expressed views with respect to teaching and learning, their teaching practices as well as to identify any changes in their professional development during the formation and duration of a teaching and learning circle. The aim of this study is to highlight the importance and impact of peer support and teacher collaboration as a vehicle for professional growth and development for faculty at the College level. Research in this area is limited, thus, adding to the literature has the potential to facilitate improvement of teaching practices as well as allow college educators to effectively engage, motivate and teach a broad spectrum of adult learners that are seen within the College setting.

Who can participate in the research?
I am seeking 6-8 part-time or newly hired College faculty to participate in this research. This project is geared towards educators who wish to collaborate with other faculty and enhance opportunities for professional growth.

What choice do I have?
Participation is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason and without penalty. If this happens, the research will explain why and advise you about any follow-up procedures or alternative arrangements as appropriate.

All information collected will be confidential. All data collected will be stored securely with the researcher and kept for a period of three years in a locked file cabinet in the office of the researcher. At no time will any individual be identified by name in any reports resulting from this study.
What will I be asked to do?
- You will be asked to participate in 6-8 two hour Faculty Learning Circle meetings commencing at the end of the Spring/Summer term and concluding at the end of the winter term.
- At the first meeting, you will be asked to share your ideas on what will be the focus of each discussion. These meetings will be audio-recorded.
- After each meeting, you will be asked to write a brief reflection on the experiences and shared discussion from the Faculty Learning Circle. These reflections may be used as a starting point to our discussion at the following meeting.
- After the final Faculty Learning Circle, you will be asked to participate in a group exit interview with the researcher.

What are the risks and benefits of participating?
There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this research project. The potential benefits of participating are the following:
- Engage and share experiences, strategies of instruction and professional development needs in a safe and supportive environment
- Contribute to the limited amount of literature on the impacts of Faculty Learning Circles for College faculty

How will the information collected be used?
The data from the research will be reported in the researchers Master’s thesis paper for the University of Toronto. To ensure participant confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used in the report. Participants will have access to their own data throughout the project to provide additional feedback or omit any data they wish not to be used.

What do I need to do to participate?
Please read this Information Letter and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. If there is anything you do not understand, or you have any questions, please contact the Principal Investigator.

If you would like to participate, please contact me by email at XXXXX at which point I will forward you a consent form. The meetings for the Teaching Circle will be negotiated by all participants after consent has been gathered.

Thank you for considering this invitation,

Jacqueline Macchione
Sample FLC Agenda

Luminaries Meeting #7

Check In:

How has your start up been this semester? Any specific challenges or triumphs (personal or professional) you wish to share?

Discussion Theme:

Keeping teaching fresh

Discussion /Guiding Questions:

- What specific/concrete methods do I (or have I) employed to stay fresh and/or current within my practice and/or field?

- What resentments do I need to resolve in order to move forward more optimistically and with a fresh mind?

- Are there any aspects of the profession that I am ignoring out of fear of change or lack of knowledge?

- What is one “resolution” or method I will to try this term in order to stay fresh/current/updated?

Admin…
APPENDIX C

Group Exit Interview Questions

Teaching Circle Assessment: Final Personal Reflections & Group Interview

Please take some time to reflect on the process of being part of our Faculty Learning Circle over the past year. I would greatly appreciate if you could type your descriptive responses to these questions and send these back to me in an email by Thursday May 30th so I can review before our final group interview where we will discuss some of these questions and your responses in our group. Please keep in mind that your responses will assist me in assessing what impact a FLC has on its members, so if you could be specific when possible, honest and reflective in your responses it would be greatly appreciated. Please feel free to write as much as you can to these questions, as this will assist in the research.

During the group exit session, you will have the opportunity to elaborate on some of your own responses (questions in bold will be the focus of this exit session) or respond to others. Your own reflection will remain confidential; you can choose what you wish to share with the group.

If you have any question some concerns, please feel free to email me or call me at XXXX. If you need more time and cannot meet the deadline, please let me know. Thank you so much for being involved in this research project.

1. What was your initial interest in joining this group?
2. What were your expectations at the first meeting? In other words, what did you hope to achieve/accomplish and/or gain by participation in this group?
3. Were your initial expectations met? If yes, in what ways? If no, why?
4. Did membership in this group aid connecting with colleagues and/or creating a sense of community? If so how?
5. If you responded yes to #9 \(\rightarrow\) Can you share a specific example of a time you felt supported by others in the group?
6. In what ways did the FLC assist in the sharing of ideas and teacher practices?
7. Were you able to use any of the strategies/ideas discussed in the FLC in your own teaching practice?
8. In what ways did the FLC work well for your needs (personal and/or professional)? **Please be specific.
9. Was there any meeting that stood out for you as being most memorable or meaningful during any of the FLC meetings?

10. Did anything surprise you about being part of this group? (i.e. did you experience something that you had not expected?)

11. What were the aspects of the structure of the FLC that you felt worked well?

12. In what ways could the structure of our FLC be changed or improved?

13. Any final thoughts/reflections you wish to chance that you feel the above questions have not addressed?
Appendix D

Consent Form

I, (please print)__________________________________________ have read and understood the information on the research project which is to be conducted by Jacqueline Macchione and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to the following:

- Participate in Faculty Learning Circles that will be held every 2-3 weeks for the duration of the Fall and Winter terms that is being audio-taped

- Complete a written reflection after each session

- Participate in a semi-structured group exit interview that will be audiotaped at the end of the Winter term

- Review the data at the point of data analysis

I agree to voluntarily participate in this research and give my consent freely. I understand that the project will be conducted in accordance with the Information Letter, a copy of which I have retained for my records.

I am aware that I can withdraw at any time for any reason. I am also aware that I have the right to refuse to answer or respond to any question during the Faculty Learning Circle and/or during the semi-structured interview.

________________________________
Print Name: _____________________________

________________________________
Signature: _____________________________

Date: _____________________________
APPENDIX E

Guiding Questions for Meeting 2: “Sharing Our Stories”

- What experiences do you feel led you into this profession?
- Were there any key moments that were significant turn(s) in your career path? In other words, where have you been influenced, and from where have you learned valuable lessons?
- Who are your role models in teaching? What makes them great teachers?
- How do you hope to make a difference in the lives of your students?
- Who are you, as a teacher, and who do you want your students to become?
- Why did you want to teach in the first place?
- How do you propose to grow as a teacher/educator?

**Please note: these are guiding questions only; you may wish to use all or none of these to share with the group**