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# Table of Contents

1. Why Teacher Networks (Can) Work.....	1
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## Why Teacher Networks (Can) Work

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**Abstract:** In recent years, teacher networks - defined here as groups of teachers organized for purposes related to teacher learning, inquiry, support, or school improvement - have been embraced by researchers and practitioners alike for their approach to teacher professional development.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to such traditional professional development approaches as workshops or inservice days, networks often reflect a social or constructivist orientation to teacher learning. Researchers and advocates of teacher networks have suggested that one of the reasons that there is so much excitement about this approach to teacher professional development is that networks are examples of communities of practice,- a concept developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger.<sup>1</sup> In my view, the power of this idea is in the conceptualization of learning-as-socialparticipation, which begins with the assumption that engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are.

**Full Text:** Headnote

Communities of practice, in which learning and teaching are interwoven in social networks, may someday lead to a movement to put thoughtful professional expertise back into schooling.

DURING my first month of graduate school, I read that Japanese teachers' school days included time to discuss their practice and plan lessons with their colleagues. Many years have gone by since I came across that information, but sometimes I still think about it.

The reason that image of teacher collaboration made such an impression on me, I think, is because I had recently left elementary school teaching after only a few months as a long-term substitute teacher. An important factor in my decision had been that I felt so isolated from other teachers who might have goals similar to mine. The experience of isolation was especially profound because I had just graduated from a small, alternative teacher preparation program called "Learning Community" that was based on social theories of learning. The program practiced what it preached. We preservice teachers were engaged in learning in the social context of a community; we studied and discussed practice together, co-taught, supported one another, formed friendships, and developed ongoing collaborations and conversations with colleagues with similar interests. Less than one year after graduating from the Learning Community program, I was in my first teaching job - alone and starved for the kinds of connections I had had and the ideas and support that they had provided.

It was only in hindsight, once I began to study teacher networks as a researcher, that I recognized why I was so struck by that article about teaching in Japan. Researching school change in an urban middle school in Philadelphia, I met Jennifer and Ellen, two teachers who were exceptionally well connected to networks of educators drawn together around common interests. These interests included multicultural education, community service learning, teacher research, teaching writing for English-language learners, and more. I was struck by the way Jennifer and Ellen were revitalized by meeting outside the school day with other educators who shared their passions. They were excited by the new ideas that they brought to the school from their networks, and they could trace their own changing practice in terms of those ideas. As was the case for the Japanese teachers and for me in Learning Community, for Jennifer and Ellen, learning and teaching were interwoven in social networks.

Since the completion of my research project, I have read the growing literature on teacher professional

development networks and have learned that Jennifer and Ellen are not alone. In recent years, teacher networks - defined here as groups of teachers organized for purposes related to teacher learning, inquiry, support, or school improvement - have been embraced by researchers and practitioners alike for their approach to teacher professional development.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to such traditional professional development approaches as workshops or inservice days, networks often reflect a social or constructivist orientation to teacher learning. Many are based on the premises that contexts for teacher learning should endure over time, build on teachers' knowledge and experiences, provide opportunities for critical dialogue and inquiry, and foster the public sharing of practice and understandings. Turning to learning communities outside of their schools, teachers can find everything that schools, too often, are not.

#### NETWORKS AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Researchers and advocates of teacher networks have suggested that one of the reasons that there is so much excitement about this approach to teacher professional development is that networks are examples of communities of practice,- a concept developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger.<sup>1</sup> In my view, the power of this idea is in the conceptualization of learning-as-socialparticipation, which begins with the assumption that "engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are."<sup>1</sup> Wenger's model of communities of practice incorporates four "deeply interconnected and mutually defining" components of this social theory of learning:

- \* Community: learning as belonging;
- \* Identity: learning as becoming;
- \* Practice: learning as doing; and
- \* Meaning: learning as experience."

In interesting ways, this framework captures much of what is noted in the literature on teacher networks - a literature heavy on concepts like identity, community, and participation. Teacher networks are explicitly or implicitly contrasted with traditional approaches to teacher professional development, such as workshops or inservice days, which are faulted for failing to recognize that the kind of learning that inspires change in practice takes time and social support. In addition, teachers often view conventional professional development offerings as a waste of time because they are disconnected from everyday practice and the pressing questions that arise therein. Indeed, professional development is often pursued without any attempt to understand - or sometimes even respect - existing practice and its underlying assumptions. In short, traditional professional development in schools has often been undertaken without attention to communities, identities, practice, and meanings.

Networks take a different tack. In many networks, it is not that tools, skills, discrete knowledge, and technical fixes are eschewed, but rather that they are considered within social contexts where a great deal of attention is given to communities, identities, practice, and meanings. What you do, who you are in engagement with others, and whom you want to become are central to the professional development approach of many networks.

Readers will note that I am idealizing networks in this article. In practice, most networks have strengths and weaknesses, and few represent the ideal I write about here. My argument is that networks are poised to be a powerful source of teacher learning and school improvement - especially if they are designed and actualized in ways that respect the assumptions underlying communities of practice.

#### COMMUNITY: LEARNING AS BELONGING

Ann lieberman and Milbrey McLaughlin write that "networks that engage and sustain teachers' interest and commitment blend, rather than differentiate between, personal and professional, social and work-related activities."<sup>1</sup> By making the context for professional development one of interpersonal connection and interaction, networks foster the commitment of time, energy, and perhaps something of ourselves.

Last year I was a member of a learning community of university professors. For months our community was functioning very much like a formal seminar, and the formality seemed to be hindering our work together. We have since talked about the fact that many of us were unsure about the expectations for our collaborative work.

Many of us had questions that were not asked or concerns that were not expressed.

One day we all met early, before the official meeting time, to discuss a presentation that we were to give as a group. As I walked up to the group, I saw that one member was sharing pictures of her son. Soon, many of us were sharing pictures of our children and stories of our personal lives. Then we got to work. Something changed in our work together that day. We were both more relaxed and more invested. We were more vulnerable and more trusting. We were more honest. All of these characteristics - trust, honesty, vulnerability, comfort, investment - lead to better learning, more meaningful learning, and an openness to hear and change. Connecting to one another made us connect more to our work together. With much of the formality gone, the distance that characterized our early work together began to disappear. We claimed a new ownership over our joint enterprise.

Recently, I attended one of the last class meetings of an extended professional development experience for science teachers that functioned for some as a network. Although I had heard from some of the participants that they valued the network-like aspects of the series of meetings - talking about current practice and new learning with peers, posing questions and hearing stories of the impact of new ideas - I was still surprised when a couple of the teachers pulled out cameras and began to take photos of their instructors and new friends. This told me that the experience was more than just a class. It reminded me of my Learning Community experience in college, which was more than just a teacher preparation program. We made sweatshirts representing our community. We kept in touch through a newsletter for 10 years following our graduation, sharing news of major life events, both exciting and tragic, as well as reporting on where our work as educators was taking us.

In both of these cases, to different extents, learning experiences were intertwined with interpersonal experiences and relationships. Critics might respond, "Sure, experiences like these are 'nice and 'pleasant,' but do they matter for our learning?" I would argue that they do, because the social connections we make with others whom we learn to trust and respect invest us in the process of change. Moreover, these experiences have the potential to do much more than develop our technical professional expertise; they can contribute to or even transform our identities as educators.

#### IDENTITY: LEARNING AS BECOMING

In addition to the effect that belonging to a group has on identity, networks often have explicit philosophies, missions, values, assumptions, and orientations that help shape participants' identities. When teachers voluntarily join a network, they often do so based on their personal and professional interests. Teachers choose networks that engage them and are responsive to their passions and questions and to how they see themselves as professionals. Then, through being associated with the network and pursuing a joint vision, teachers gain new experiences, language, and resources.

Jennifer, for example, joined networks that focused on the range of educational issues that mattered to her: English-language learners and literacy, social justice and multicultural education, and more. She joined these networks because of who she was as a teacher and a person. Yet who she was as a teacher and a person was further refined through her participation. As she interacted with and learned from peers with similar interests and ultimately advanced into leadership roles that allowed her to share her practice with others, her identity was transformed and strengthened.

Ellen's experience was different, in that she was introduced to a community service learning network almost by accident, through an opportunity suggested by her principal. The idea aligned with who she was as a teacher, and she attended a conference. She became quite taken with the approach, and within a year of that conference, she was an expert in community service learning.

Teachers' associations with other like-minded professionals outside the school can be powerful, especially for those who feel isolated within their school. Networks often include old-timers whom newcomers can emulate. While Jennifer, having moved into leadership roles, was an old-timer in a few of her networks, she had less experience than some of the more senior teachers in her teacher research group. When she talked about that

group, I could hear how much she respected them. In addition to learning from these colleagues and their experiences, simply being associated with teachers she respected so much contributed to her view of herself. The mission of a network, which links colleagues with similar interests in a community of practice, is important, but there is another dimension of identity that networks offer teachers: professionalism. Networks offer learning opportunities in a context of dignity and respect that teachers do not always experience. Being treated as a professional, with one's experiences and perspectives valued, contributes to teachers' efficacy, agency, commitment, and engagement in the work of the network and the work of teaching; being treated as a professional may also help teachers construct an identity that is more rewarding and a better fit with how they see themselves.

In the school where Jennifer and Ellen worked, teachers were constantly responding to new mandates from the district and school administration that informed them what curriculum and reform programs were going to be implemented or eliminated, what new school policies would change their daily work lives, and even how much time they had to spend preparing their students for a slate of standardized tests. For very experienced teachers like Ellen, and for very well-respected teacher leaders like Jennifer, being given so little control over aspects of their work lives was frustrating. However, when they worked on projects in the context of educational networks, they were no longer receivers of information, but contributors to ongoing conversations about teaching practice. Their experience mattered, and their professional views were respected.

The literature is clear on the fact that, historically, teachers' work has been de-professionalized and de-skilled. Within the field of education, there is often a chasm between those acknowledged as the producers of knowledge and those who have traditionally been viewed as the receivers. Networks bridge this chasm by taking teachers' knowledge and practice as the starting point for learning and having teachers themselves lead the work of professional development. As Ann Lieberman and Diane Wood write, in this model, teachers become "active and interactive, developers rather than developed, passionate instead or passive."<sup>8</sup> Being treated as professionals has a powerful impact on teachers' identities.

#### PRACTICE: LEARNING AS DOING

While talk of reaching practice has generally been difficult to find in schools, it is central to the work of networks. Even though the school where Jennifer and Ellen worked was going through a number of changes and reforms during the time of my research there, teachers had few places to talk about their practice with respect to the changes, and so most of the new school-sponsored ideas and programs remained peripheral to their work. Many teachers at the school felt alienated from the changes, if not completely unaware of what they meant for their practice. In contrast, Jennifer in particular was active in teacher networks that were structured around teachers' sharing their practice and making it public.

Some networks take professional development beyond talk about practice and into the realm of "learning as doing" by incorporating inquiry into the experience. Jennifer was involved in a number of networks, but there was one that was far and away the most important to her. It was a teacher research group. In it, she worked with colleagues who shared her passion for multicultural education. Engaging in research in their own classrooms and then coming together to share their findings enabled the group members to learn from one another's inquiry. Jennifer looked forward to sharing her developing ideas with her fellow teacher researchers and found that their perspectives pushed her to broaden her understandings of multicultural education. Moreover, teacher inquiry became an important aspect of her daily practice.

Many teachers indicate that sharing practice or engaging in inquiry with others makes for a powerful experience. Analysts suggest that networks "reward participants with a renewed sense of purpose and efficacy" and provide "nourishment"<sup>11</sup> and "intellectual and emotional stimulation."<sup>11</sup> I certainly saw this with Jennifer and Ellen. When frustrations mounted at the school site, they could weather them because they were so engaged with and excited by what they were doing in their networks.

Not all networks are created equal; not all embrace an inquiry approach to teacher learning. But the structure of

a social network offers the potential for teachers to intellectually engage with what brought them into the profession or to find new passions through work in a community of practice. It is difficult for traditional professional development to do that.

#### MEANING: LEARNING AS EXPERIENCE

The fourth component of Wenger's social theory of learning is meaning, he argues that learning is the negotiation of meaning through participation. Participation in communities is the context in which we learn to assign meaning to our lives over time. Schools can be seen as the primary community of practice to which teachers belong, because of days, months, and years of accumulated experience. However, I would argue that much of the power for changing practice comes from negotiating meanings across two competing communities: schools and teacher professional development networks. The substance of the learning and the trajectory of the development of professional identities differ in these two communities. However, practice is shaped by negotiating meaning across both of them.

For example, Jennifer and Ellen both brought new ideas, assumptions, and language to their school from their teacher networks. They used their broadened experience to contest what they viewed as the limitations of school policy and practice. Jennifer, for example, challenged her colleagues' shallow interpretation of multicultural education - a "multicultural fair" approach - and advocated for the infusion of a more fundamental multiculturalism throughout the curriculum. Ellen advocated for ways to actively engage the school's students through local neighborhood/community participation and tried to pull colleagues into her students' servicelearning projects.

Thus their networks inspired them enough to take action in their schools but also provided legitimacy for their ideas and advocacy. Their networks linked them not only to other educators but also to sites of knowledge production in the field. When teachers come together in network spaces to discuss and think about educational practice generally and their own practice specifically, they also become connected to the research, theory, and scholarship supporting the mission of the network. At this intersection, educators are poised to produce new cultural practices, new orientations to their work. Ann Lieberman and Maureen Grolnick write, Education networks bridge two cultures. On the one hand they are connected to a system that organizes the delivery of education to school-age children through an elaborate system of codes, regulations, standards, and assessments. On the other hand, they support the professional development of teachers and administrators who work within that system, who need to be free to step outside of it in order to consider ways to improve the very schools and system within which they work.<sup>12</sup>

This is the sort of negotiation of meaning that makes networks promising spaces for professional development. Educators involved with networks don't just step outside of their bureaucratic systems, they also step into a world of ideas and practice-focused discourse. Networks, even those that privilege teachers' knowledge and interests, aren't neutral about where they want their participants to end up. The goal is always sound improvement informed by big ideas.

Thus networks occupy an interesting place in the educational landscape. First, they are explicitly designed for learning and change. Second, the structure of networks, unlike that of schools and other workplaces, is flexible rather than bureaucratic, so networks aren't often faced with contradictory goals that compete with teacher learning. Third, because participation is voluntary, teachers' own goals align with those of the network. Teacher networks offer a good foil for the schools, where bureaucracy, politics, and myriad other factors often compete with teacher learning and thoughtful school improvement.

#### NETWORKS IN TODAY'S SCHOOLS

Despite all that we know about education and learning, schools today are increasingly overpowered by technical, test-driven approaches. What professional educators believe is important for learning has been pushed to the margins by political pressures on schools. It was not surprising to me that Jennifer and Ellen were critics and resisters of teach-to-the-test pressures and used the resources of their networks to justify their

stances. Both teachers had big dreams for their students and saw powerful learning experiences related to critical thinking and problem solving as a way to realize them. Their participation in networks let them know that they weren't alone in their big dreams and big ideas and provided support and strategies for teaching against the grain.

Although thus far there has been only limited research on how teachers' participation in networks specifically changes actual classroom practice, 13 networks have been on the rise as an approach to teacher professional development for some time. It will be interesting to see whether the current political climate for public schooling reverses this trend, as teachers are confronted with ever more prescribed curricula and pedagogy, or whether more teachers flock to networks as a survival strategy. If a movement can be mounted to put thoughtful professional expertise back into schooling, it might well emerge from networks.

Sidebar

Networks are poised to be a powerful source of teacher learning and school improvement.

Sidebar

Jennifer and Ellen both brought new ideas, assumptions, and language to their school from their teacher networks.

References

1. Networks have become so popular that they have been used as strategies to implement and support particular school or district reforms, but these are of less interest to me. Distinguishing between policy-implementation networks and professional development networks is important because the power of professional development networks lies in their voluntary nature; teachers turn to them because they address particular professional or personal interests.
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12. Lieberman and Grolnick, pp. 36-37.
13. McDonald and Klein, *op. cit.*



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