

PRINCIPLES  
OF DESIGN

# ENERGIZE

LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES



PRACTICAL TIPS PUT THE EMPHASIS ON LEARNING

By Lois Brown Easton

**A**t School A, the professional learning community is engaged in implementing a mandated mathematics program. At School B, the professional learning communities are grade-level teams of teachers and classroom aides pursuing their own agendas for improvement according to school goals.

At School C, mixed grade-level and subject-area professional learning communities meet during the school's faculty meetings to discuss issues the principal and others have raised.

Which is the true learning community?

The groups at all three schools may be professional learning communities, but the extent to which they are professional *learning* communities may vary. *Learning* is more than just the middle word in *professional learning communities*. Learning is living, according to Peter Senge

and associates: "Learning is at once deeply personal and inherently social; it connects us not just to knowledge in the abstract, but to each other" (Senge et al., 2000, p. 4).

## ADULT LEARNING IS ESSENTIAL

Adult learning is essential in schools. Learning Forward's Scholar Laureate Shirley Hord observes, "The improvement of our schools seldom results from mandates. What has become very clear is that change (its adoption and implementation) cannot occur without the provision of ongoing and long-term learning for the professionals" (Hord, 2011, p. xv).

Professional learning communities make sense. As a structure, the premise of these communities promised a lot to the profession. However, some communities have proven disappointing, and the concept as a whole is in danger of fading like many initially exciting structures for change, such as small schools and block scheduling. Structures need substance to succeed. Substance comes from a set of design principles related to what people do within

the structure, and why and how they do what they do. As Hord notes, “Despite the abundance of information and resources committed to professional learning, we have much to learn about how to create and maintain effective communities of professional learners” (2011, p. xvii).

In some cases, professional learning communities are just a new name for doing the same things as before. As one teacher commented, “Professional learning communities are just meetings dressed up in their Sunday best.” “It’s business as usual,” another teacher reported. “We discuss things, but we do nothing. Nothing changes.” “It’s a gripe session,” a disillusioned principal reported. “All they do is argue and bellyache, moan and groan.”

Think about Schools A and C. Their learning communities are the type that disappoint educators because they may be professional and they may be collaborative, but they are not about learning. In School A, the work is focused on implementing a mandate. Usually, mandates come from outside a school; someone has imposed them from the state, district, or even the federal level. Implementing something is, by definition, carrying out or fulfilling. Think of a horse with blinders on. People in professional learning communities with a mandate see what they are allowed to see. They learn how to fit the mandate into the existing system but do not really learn the system — much less work to change a faulty system — or find important work to do as a result of their learning.

In School C, the work is superficial — discussions. In a typical discussion, advocacy flourishes and opinions ricochet around the room. Participants seldom pause to understand and build on ideas. What happens as a result of these discussions? Usually nothing. And, next week, there’s a new issue to discuss.

School B may have true professional learning communities. Faculty are grouped by grade level, perhaps by choice, and these groups appear to be self-organizing, seeking improvement of student learning in their own ways, and referencing school goals to keep their focus.

### DESIGNS FOR LEARNING

One way to think of adult learning is to consider it as a process of design, “of finding coherence, what works in a particular environment. [Learning design] is about purpose and what furthers purpose. Design is not engineered nor imposed from the outside. It is neither a formula nor a set of foolproof steps. Design is open to opportunity” (Easton, 2011, p. 1).

It is tempting to think that real professional learning communities — communities in which people really learn — can be organized from the outside or that starting them is a matter of five easy steps. The implication is that there is a right way to work toward a right outcome (and, con-

versely, a wrong way and a wrong outcome).

In reality, real learning organizations in all areas (corporate, nonprofit, educational) are messy. Margaret Wheatley, a management consultant and writer who studies organizational behavior, says people like to “pretend that we [a]re in control every step of the way” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 37). We prefer to talk about “executing plans” rather than reveling in surprises (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 37).

Sometimes professional learning communities are mandated from some level, such as building, district, or state. The structure may be mandated, but learning is better if educators in learning communities are given a chance to figure out how to organize themselves specifically and what to do in these communities related to a school’s goals. The more learning communities are dictated or mechanized, the more the learners in them are deprived of the opportunity to become true learning communities. Ideally, the learning community structure itself emerges from a need or purpose and passion: “We must help our 3rd graders learn and love to read nonfiction.” The specific structure similarly emerges (“We’ll work in grade levels” or “Let’s form cross-disciplinary teams”).

Structure emerges from self-organization. Wheatley states, “We work with what is available and encourage forms to come forth. We foster tinkering and discovery. We help create connections. We nourish with information. We stay clear about what we want to accomplish. We remember that people self-organize and trust them to do so” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 38).

Anarchy? Chaos? Not for long, if learning is the goal. Wheatley suggests that “fuzzy, messy, continuously exploring systems bent on discovering what works are far more practical and successful than our attempts at efficiency” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 25). Learning means that we work with many people, encouraging discoveries and learning from mistakes, helping everyone to find what works.

Educators who want to find their way between one extreme or the other (formulaic implementation driven from the outside versus chaos) might want to consider using the following principles of design as guidelines for effective professional learning communities.

### PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

#### 1. Professional learning communities emerge from passion and purpose.

Rather than originating from outside the school setting, effective professional learning communities emerge from the inside. They come from someone’s curiosity (“I

really would like to figure out why students do not do homework”) or pain (“I wish students would think deeper about history than they do”) or data (“We can’t keep losing students between 9th and 10th grades”). Curiosity, pain, or data (often all three together) lead to purpose: “We’d better do something about this.”

**Practical tip:** A principal or other administrator can nudge professional learning communities into existence by asking questions such as:

- “What do wish we could do better here?”
- “What bothers you about the way our students learn?”
- “Why do you think so many 7th-grade boys avoid reading on their own?”

Rather than coming up with solutions, principals can come up with questions and encourage others to do the same. Professional learning communities with genuine questions will seek relevant and effective solutions.

## 2. Professional learning communities are sensitive to the environment.

If only we could replicate what works in other schools or scale up particular reforms. Such is the lament of educators and policymakers. Educators say they don’t want to reinvent the wheel, but replication and scaling up are not universally effective. Even in seeking to replicate or scale up someone else’s solution, educators need to do some wheel reinvention of their own. They might not reinvent the concept of the wheel, but they do need to engage in customizing the wheel to the car. Imagine a tractor’s wheel on a shiny new sports car. Imagine a school that adopts block scheduling without the slightest idea of how to use the extra class time to help students learn.

Replication and scaling up don’t work because the relationship of problems to solutions is neither simple nor direct in schools. Most school change problems are not “tame problems,” according to Garmston and Wellman (1999, pp. 223-224). School change involves mostly “wicked problems,” they note. “Tame problems” lead straight to solutions; “wicked problems” defy known algorithms. They are “tenacious and nonlinear. They contain unpredictable barriers and recur, folding back on themselves. . . . Existing ways of thinking cannot handle wicked problems” (p. 223).

Consider these problems: curriculum that is misaligned or not aligned at all, either vertically or horizontally, assessment that doesn’t match curriculum, instructional strategies that lead to low-level learning, teacher evaluation, a toxic school culture, student disengagement from learning. These problems cannot be resolved through simple replication of others’ solutions. Solutions to these problems are likely to require some reinvention of the wheel, customizing to the nature of the school, and considerable messiness.

**Practical tip:** One way to be sensitive to a school’s environment is to do a scan of congruence between what educators in

CONGRUENCE SCAN			
What we believe	Reality: How this belief is manifested in our school	Evidence to support our reality	What we might do to enhance congruence between beliefs and reality
We believe that all students are creative.	We provide art classes for all students except those in special education.	Schedules for special education.	Make art classes a part of the day for special education students.

that school believe and how well their school exemplifies these beliefs. The table above suggests how a group might engage in a congruence scan.

While they are engaged in the congruence scan, educators might also investigate what seem to be unusual successes within their environment. These successes might be considered examples of “positive deviance,” uncommon strategies that work with the same students and under conditions that others also have (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Sparks, 2004). Analyze these internal examples of success before going outside for solutions. Ask, for example, “What is it about our music program that seems to fire up our students?” Apply what is learned about success in one area, such as the music program, in other areas: “What would active engagement, such as what we see in our music program, look like in our mathematics classes?”

## 3. Professional learning communities are a result of relationships.

In the haste to get something done, education reforms are usually fast-forwarded, starting before people are ready to start and finishing before the reform has shown results. Funders seek the next newest thing. Legislators have only a couple of years to prove that their reform ideas work.

One aspect of successful group work is sacrificed in the hurry to enact reform: relationships among people. Crafting and continuing these relationships take time and can be cut in favor of agendas, to-do lists, and progress reports.

However, relationships can affect those agendas, to-do lists, and progress reports, often in a poisonous manner. More than one team has gone astray because of people problems — people who were “negative no matter what the issue was (the ‘yab-buts’), dominated the discussion, advocated for their own ideas rather than engaging through inquiry, remained uninvolved, criticized but never stepped forward to help the group improve, or clung to the past” (Easton, 2011, p. 37).

**Practical tips:** Go slowly at first, building relationships (see the Four Corners tool on pp. 53-54 for a way to build relationships), uncovering assumptions, and discovering common ground. Focus on purpose and passion. Focus on the students. Have some rules of engagement (sometimes known as norms)

that are built, referenced by, and used by the group to make sure all voices are heard. Have a rule of engagement related to what members of the community do when someone breaks a rule; make it permissible to call for a “rule” or “norm” check. At the end of meetings, have the group evaluate how well it has done on the rules and resolve to address issues that arise from the group evaluation.

#### 4. People in professional learning communities acknowledge a variety of solutions and processes.

If professional learning communities are to work, they must be full of possibilities. The minute a participant thinks the outcome is preordained or the process is set in stone, disillusionment sets in. People feel used, even if what they are doing is otherwise valuable. If the hidden agenda is to implement a new mathematics program, do not ask a professional learning community to do it. Form a consortium of mathematics teachers (and others) who know that is their task. Let the professional learning community engage in learning how well students are learning mathematics and seek solutions for improving their learning, which may or may not involve implementing a new program.

Because professional learning has so often focused on implementing something, educators often come to their professional learning communities with the mindset that asks: “What is it that we’re supposed to do?” They expect to be told what the group is to accomplish rather than discover for themselves what is needed in their particular environment. They may keep waiting for someone to tell them what to do, unused to being asked to explore the possibilities. Such a mentality lessens the learning and thinking that participants may be able to do.

**Practical tip:** Reverse the order of typical reforms. Do not start with *what* to do. Instead, start with *why* something needs to be done, which leads to a discussion of what gives us purpose and how strongly people feel about the problem. Then consider *how*: How do we want to work together? How could we organize ourselves? Finally, consider *what*: What, exactly, will we do (at least in terms of first steps)? A professional learning community might need to engage in several why-how-what cycles before finding what is needed to create better learning conditions for students. Intermediate *what* steps might include obtaining additional data from a variety of sources, such as student interviews or looking at student work. For more information on reversing the order of typical reforms, see Simon Sinek’s video, *How Great Leaders Inspire Action* (Sinek, 2009a), or read his book, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (Sinek, 2009b).

#### 5. Professional learning communities energize thinking.

The signs that a community is not working are boredom, fatigue, and a feeling of ineffectiveness. Sighs in members’ voices, reluctance to spend another hour in their learning communities, and complaints to colleagues might mean that people

are not energized by their work together. People in successful learning communities work beyond meeting times, extending their inquiry into hallways, offices, and faculty lunchrooms, after school and in the summer. Learning energizes people. A professional learning community that is missing its middle word is probably not working for people. Check principles 1-4 to see what is amiss.

**Practical tips:** Provide many opportunities for voice. Start meetings with an opener that gets every voice in the room. For example, have people engage in a protocol known as 30-60-90 about a question related to the group’s work (such as “How well does our school schedule work?”). For 30 seconds, they find and interview someone they don’t know well and are, themselves, interviewed on the question, both of them taking notes. For 60 seconds, they repeat the procedure with someone else they don’t know well, sharing not only their own ideas but also those of their first partner. For 90 seconds, they repeat the procedure with another partner, sharing their own and ideas from their previous two partners (D. Morais, personal communication, 2005).

Prepare for individual and group processing and sharing time after each significant activity. Close with reflection and sharing.

Have people do online surveys to register their feelings about a professional learning community meeting, and then share and discuss with the whole group the results of those surveys. To take the temperature of the group, occasionally conduct one-legged interviews (Hall & Hord, 2001) during which members interview each other on a key question for as long as they can stand on one leg. To gauge how people feel about an issue, use the “fist to five” strategy: Holding up a fist is a definite “no” vote for something; holding up five fingers is a solid “yes” vote; a fist, one, two, and even three fingers indicate conditional attitudes that require exploration (Easton, 2011, pp. 80-81).

Have learning community participants make regular 15-minute presentations of learning to the whole faculty, perhaps during time set aside for these presentations in faculty meetings. Leave time for feedback and questions and answers. Have learning communities keep a portfolio of artifacts related to the group’s work (Easton, 2011, pp. 79-80), perhaps referencing them during their presentations of learning. Have groups maintain a blog or establish a Wiki to share their learning. Make sure that these adult learners have a strong voice in what’s happening to them and what they are doing.

#### KEEP THE PROMISE

Shirley Hord states, “The premise, the purpose, the promise of the professional learning community is the learning of the professionals of the staff — in schools, those certified, responsible, and accountable for delivering an effective instructional program for all students” (2011, p. xvi). Ensure that professional learning communities live up to their premise, accom-

*Continued on p. 54*

# FOUR CORNERS

## A TOOL FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

<b>Part 2</b>	In part 2, individuals form new groups, mixing those with different group work preferences to explore the resulting impact on group discussions. The impact will vary according to the focus of the discussion.
<b>1</b>	<p>Ask individuals to leave their groups to create new teams with representatives from each original group. The new teams will perform a task you have selected, related to the work the group is to do that is as real as possible (such as planning a professional learning event). Have the new teams spend 15 minutes before beginning the task introducing themselves to the other members of their groups, stating their preferences, and discussing the following topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Look at the distribution in your group. If it is lopsided, consider what that might mean for the group. For example, a group with nearly everyone in <b>vision-making</b>, with a few people in <b>action</b> and <b>community</b>, and no one at all in <b>structure</b>, may have a tendency to talk far too much, frustrating the action people. The group will have to work conscientiously together to be sure members develop some workable structures. It is important to acknowledge the strength of each preference as well as to understand the potential downsides of each one when taken too far.</li> <li>The need for balance between building a vision and taking action is often at the core of group dissatisfaction. <b>Vision-making</b> people can be very powerful in their perspective, often being the point people in a change initiative. It helps to name the nature of a meeting. If <b>vision-making</b> is the focus, invite the <b>action</b> people to bring their knitting or some Silly Putty — something to occupy their hands as the group works through making a vision. If <b>structure</b> is conspicuously absent, focus a meeting on developing workable structures.</li> <li>Notice the kinds of questions and language each preference uses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Community</b> folks often check to see if everyone is OK. They may speak up when a break is needed.</li> <li><b>Structure</b> folks often ask when, how, who says, how long, what time?</li> <li><b>Action</b> people are apt to say, "Enough talk. Let's move on this!"</li> <li><b>Vision-making</b> people will often inquire about why something is being done, what the purpose is, or if an idea has implications that have not been considered.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
<b>2</b>	Ask participants to share what was discussed with the whole group, allowing five minutes for each group. Once the discussion is finished, have the group turn to its scheduled "real" work. After the meeting, ask participants to assess how knowing each other's preferences and the group's profile helped with doing their work.

Continued from p. 52

plish their purpose, and achieve their promise by ensuring that learning dwells in the center of the structure.

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