

## **When Is A Learning Community Just A Pseudo Community? Human Agency in Community Learning and Functioning**

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### Introduction

As both a symbol and an aspiration, the idea of ‘learning community’ (LC) continues to resonate in educational discourse, almost becoming an obligatory appendage to new educational innovations (Grossman *et al.*, 2001). The notion is invoked as both an aspirational goal and a putative vehicle to overcome educational challenges. The very notion of community itself implies many appealing features of human relationships—a personal sense of familiarity and safety, feelings of self-worth and vitality, actions of mutual concern and support, and appreciation for one’s personality and contribution to group professional life rather than for rank or achievement. Some scholars (see for example Achinstein, 2002; Bower, 2006) have also indicated that the social construction of learning in community appears to be motivated by a deeply felt experience that individual action is very limited in sustaining learning and school system improvements.

In responding to these needs, there have been a number of theoretical formulations about the ways that learning communities are supposed to function in educational settings and what kinds of potential benefits should be expected (Achinstein, 2002; Pomson, 2005). There has also been considerable research on the character and effects of LC in school and school districts (Halverson, 2003; Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001; Youngs & Kings, 2000). In addition, more recent case studies of teacher professional communities (Brint, 2001; Grossman *et al.*, 2001;

Zellermayer & Margolin, 2005) have explored the human and cultural complexities with which teachers struggle and work through tensions and conflicts, and form those community structures needed to sustain their professional relationships. However, the overall body of work has not addressed the ways in which the varied dimensions of human agency interpenetrate the diverse functions and learning outcomes of LC's. Scholars have focused most effort on the construction and operations of LC's or have critiqued them, with little recognition of what drives and shapes personal engagement with, and agency within, them.

We felt that a need existed to get a sense of the ways that human agency shapes (and is shaped) by the catalytic events, functions, personal perceptions, structures and outcomes of LC's over time in terms of the nature and purposes of collective learning processes. Without understanding such processes, we had little to guide us as we attempted to understand why the notion of LC has currency, under which circumstances, for what purposes, and in which shapes?

This study investigated the individual motivations for interaction and the degree of human agency of a group of special education administrative and teaching staff in western Canada within a self-declared school district-level learning community. The study aimed at extending the recent discourse on complex conceptions of learning community; one that takes into account the agentic dimensions of personal action and interaction, as well as the challenges involved in building and sustaining learning communities that operate within an educational context framed by a socio-cultural and educational paradigm (see Figure 1). More specifically, this study:

- describes and analyzes the community members' primary motivations for interaction within the professional learning community;
- explores and analyzes the ways, and the extent to which, community members perceive their district's group as a functional LC;

- explores and analyzes the forms and content of interactions within the LC;
- describes and analyzes how community members use their agentic capacities;
- describes and analyzes the change outcomes of the LC.

The paper is divided in three parts. In the first, we construct a conceptual framework by examining the evolving literature that approaches learning community as a socially constructed concept with complex and meanings. Reference is made to work that illustrates the researchers' interests in reading LC as a shifting, porous, and malleable phenomenon. We also examine why, as well as how, human agency plays a significant role in the emergence and construction of an LC. We will make specific reference to the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) in conceptualizing the notion of human agency. The second part presents the research methodology employed in this study. The final part of the paper analyzes our findings of a school district-level learning community that displayed a degree of unity with hints of heterogeneity in the exercise of human agency.

This case study is essentially a pragmatic one; our concern with the fundamental nature of learning community stemmed from studies we have conducted into change and learning community in a school setting (Barnett & Fallon, 2007a; Barnett & Fallon, 2007b). However, the application of our findings to a school district case may go some way to counter the somewhat idyllic notion that learning community is a necessary vehicle for change in education. There exists a robust literature (see for example Welch & Panelli, 2007) pointing to the problematic realities occurring beyond cosy constructions that present learning community as a predominantly positive phenomenon. This paper adds to such work by highlighting why, even though leaning community may not guarantee common experience, harmonious professional

relationships, or sustainable collective learning and improvement, it is nevertheless sought to address and counter challenging educational issues.

### Conceptual Framework

In our attempt to grasp the notion of learning community in all its complexity, we became aware that we needed not only some basic concepts and a language, but perhaps even a whole way of thinking, from which to build an overall conceptual framework. That framework, moreover, needed to be one that most readers would, with careful thought, view as an adequate basis for in-depth analysis, one that could lead to useful insights in our account of what drove the research participants to create a learning community, their understanding of its meaning and functions, and their individual level of engagement with the learning community.

The first step in constructing a coherent conceptual framework to guide our analysis of data was to chart a clear position on the foundational issues related to the paradigmatic base of learning community. Once we established a coherent position, the second step was to address the notion of learning community and its contextual dimensions, features, and functions. To complete our conceptual framework we needed to review the literature addressing the concepts of human agency and its relationships to change outcomes and internal dynamics of the learning community. Together these components provided a conceptual foundation for our analysis.

### Paradigmatic Foundations of the Learning Community

The defining quality of a learning community is that there is a culture of learning that involves a group of people in a collective effort of understanding (Sergiovanni, 1999; Starratt, 1996). Some authors highlight the fact that the metaphor of learning community transcends the characteristics of the industrial-age paradigm and represents a remarkable departure for a new

paradigm that recognizes the inadequacy of the current dominant clockwork view of the world (Anderson & Klinge, 1995; Starratt, 1996). Mitchell and Sackney (2000, p. 6) for example, “believe that a new educational order is emerging, one that relies on metaphors of wholeness and connections, diversity and complexity, relationships and meaning, reflection and inquiry, and collaboration and collegiality”. Such authors are referring to the need for a different conceptual model of learning to provide the primary socio-cultural values and forms to frame the notion of learning community. In that we agree. However, there is a relative paucity of substantive discussion about which socio-cultural or educational paradigm should be the source of the general, epistemological, cultural, political, and educational functions of learning communities in educational settings.

The question we sought to address in our conceptual framework section therefore was *not* what paradigmatic assumptions and educational-purpose parameters currently *do* form the basis of all or most learning communities. Rather, we asked what kind of values, assumptions, and concepts *should*, in general, form the basis for learning communities?

Ultimately, the emergence and construction of learning community, wherever it occurs, whatever its governance arrangement, and whatever combination of resources support it, occurs within some degree of agreement about fundamental socio-cultural and educational-purpose parameters. In short, learning communities, like all socially constructed entities in education, occur within what Bertrand and Valois (1980) call a socio-cultural and educational paradigm. They hypothesize that the final form of an LC is based upon the choice of socio-cultural paradigm employed. However special the situation and issues surrounding the construction of a learning community are, it inevitably occurs within some broadly generalizeable paradigmatic parameters of the type Bertrand and Valois map out (see Table 1). In brief, *we choose how to*

*interact and learn collectively based on what we believe about the socio-cultural nature of society.*

Bertrand and Valois (1980, p.69) offer the following definition of a socio-cultural paradigm: “The action exercised by a society, as a result of its activity, on its social and cultural practices, by the combination of five elements: a concept of knowledge, a concept of relations among persons, society, and nature, a set of values, a way of doing things, and an overarching sense of significance”. An educational paradigm, according to Bertrand and Valois, consists of two parts:

1. a group of general orientations, of norms and rules that define educational reflection and action; and
2. a praxis dimension that specifies or favours particular modalities regarding “how to proceed.” It is thus “exemplary” (p. 95).

Although their analysis borrows deftly and eclectically from a broad swath of classic socio-political and socio-cultural thought and although it spans several different approaches to ontology and epistemology, Bertrand and Valois (1980) were able to draw the following relatively simple summative map (see Table 1) of educational paradigms and socio-cultural paradigms as a “working hypothesis” of the key relationships as they see them.

Table1: Framing the Notion of Learning Community within Different Paradigm Theory Bases (Bertrand and Valois, 1980; Paquette and Fallon, *in press*)

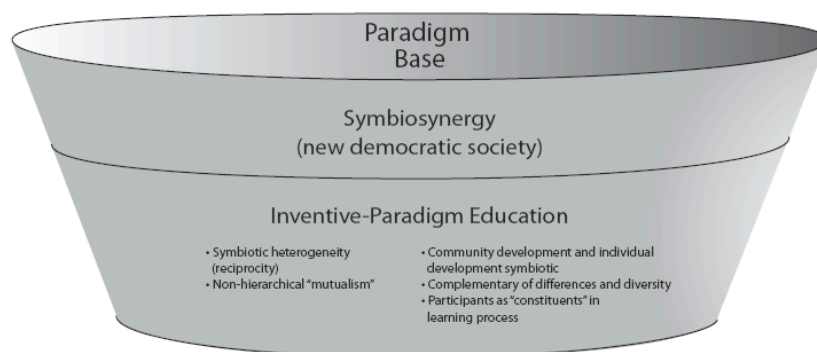
	The Industrial and Post-Industrial Paradigm	The Existentialist Paradigm	The worker dialectic Paradigm	The Symbiosynergic Paradigm
	Socio-cultural paradigm characterized by positivist and economic efficiency assumptions about knowledge and the nature of society.	Socio-cultural paradigm characterized by a person-centered way of understanding and organizing society.	Socio-cultural paradigm characterized by communist and socialistic assumptions about knowledge and the nature of society	Socio-cultural paradigm characterized by sustainability of life systems and non-hierarchical complementarity of individuals and communities as ways of being and relating in a society.
	Corresponding educational paradigm characterized by a conception of education as an efficient	Corresponding educational paradigm is characterized a conception of education based on	Corresponding educational paradigm is characterized by a conception of education based on a	Corresponding educational paradigm is characterized by a conception of education based on a symbiotic mode of knowing in which the learners

What socio-cultural paradigm *should* provide the epistemological ground, the relations among persons, society, and nature, the sources of values, the ways of doing things, and the global sense of social purpose for a learning community?

Few real-world schools and school systems operate *entirely* within the assumptions and values of only one type of paradigm. Nevertheless, we believe that teachers and administrators in most learning communities have an overall orientation in favour of a single socio-cultural paradigm and a single educational paradigm and that, as Bertrand and Valois view it, the latter flows from the former. Following that logic of educational paradigms flowing directly from socio-cultural paradigms, we ask the next logical question. What educational paradigm should be the source of the “general,” “epistemological,” cultural, and political “function” of learning communities in school systems?

Figure 1 represents our schematic response to this question. Within the schema we try to “flesh out” the issue of desirable paradigm choice. First, we take it as self-evident that, to be at all coherent with most scholars’ definitions of learning community, it should be situated fundamentally within the symbio-synergetic socio-cultural paradigm with its assumptions of universal interdependence, unity, and symbiosis. To represent this fundamental requirement in constructing a learning community, we think of the symbio-synergetic paradigm as occupying most of the available space in the socio-cultural “layer” of Figure 1.

Figure 1: Paradigm Base of Learning Community



### Approaching Learning Community: Towards Considerations of Community as a Social Construct

The relational ways in which people construct and express their shared experiences and interests or negotiate their concerns about the need to act and change provides the next “layer” in our conceptual framework.

We define an LC as a socially constructed entity (Vygotsky, 1978) aggregate of diverse individuals who, through relational means, express their shared experiences or interests. The members negotiate change and power sharing (power that derives from their knowledge, skills, and competencies) in order to help all the members of the LC to cope with difficulties as well as plan and implement changes (Brint, 2001). We do not suggest that the concept of learning community must be treated as an “idealized fantasy of common-being, nor a unity of experience or perspective” (Welch & Panelli, 2007, p.350), nor as a relatively homogenous social category requiring sameness. Instead, we conceptualize an LC as a continually shifting, unstable, stratified, imprecise, porous, and malleable landscape of connection originating from one discourse or another about motives for collective interaction and learning (Brint, 2001; Irwin & Farr, 2004; McMillan, 1996; Welch & Panelli, 2007).

These motives are centrally important in our understanding and conceptualization of LC's in educational settings. The primary motivators of particular interactions and connections among members of a learning community influence its collective form which can be either adaptive or (less frequently) generative (Zellermayer & Margolin, 2005). This perspective casts learning that takes place within an LC as a complex, non-linear process in which a group of individuals organize themselves following their driving forces (primary motivators)—permitting, enabling, precipitating, and triggering events, processes, and conditions—that shake the community and place it at the edge of potential chaos (Levy & Merry, 1986). Such forces create “defining moments” (Grimmett, 2000), moments for potential growth or redefinition of communal values (Zellermayer, 2001) and collective situations in which individuals can no longer interact, or participate in ways they once did (Matuzov & Hayes, 2002). These driving forces explain why the notion of LC has currency as a vehicle for change in specific contexts. As already indicated, we view this question as critical to understanding human engagement with LC and the consequence of communal relations in terms of its relevance to its participants, the types of learning taking place, and the change outcomes.

The nature of these driving forces affect the types of communal learning that color and shape the processes of learning in community and its internal functioning (Zellermayer & Margolin, 2005). Irwin and Farr (2004) have called such processes of community either “adaptive” or “generative”.

Adaptivity is a response to policies, materials, or knowledge framed outside the community and imposed on it. In such a context, learning communities are viewed as management tools to respond to outside demands generated by externally evolving situations. In this process, the need for new knowledge is not created within the community but comes down

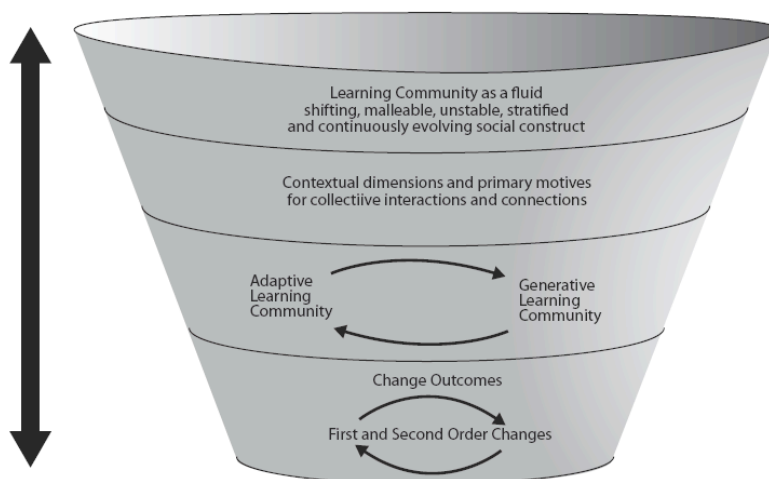
from above in what Clandinin and Connelly (1995, p. 9) call the “conduit”. The dynamic is one of ‘power over’, top-down control. The learning outcomes are conducive to the emergence of adaptive first-order changes, which consist of minor adjustments that are not paradigmatic transformations and that do not change the system’s core functions (Fullan, 1991; Levy & Merry, 1986; Sheldon, 1980).

Generativity, on other hand, occurs when community members are on the decision-making end of ideas to change things. This situation requires that the community has the capacity to mobilize its members for effective problem solving, to create or discover a reality beyond the one that currently exists, and to choose one that fits the LC’s needs. In practice, it means that the LC must have the knowledge, skills, and/or resources to generate something new, or it must be able to access them elsewhere. Therefore, the new knowledge reasserts the community’s right to control its own destiny; one that has to be created collectively within itself. Members must have equal voice within a dynamic of power-with, non-hierarchical control. A truly generative community may be more likely to engage in creating second-order change (Levy & Merry, 1986) in all of the following categories:

- The organizational paradigm (including the underlying assumptions that shape perceptions, procedures, and behaviors in a school organization);
- Organizational purpose and mission;
- Organizational culture (including the beliefs, values, and norms shared within the organization); and
- Functional processes (including the organizational structures, decision-making processes, and communication patterns).

To represent the importance of these fundamental contextual dimensions in understanding the basis of differences of forms of learning communities and the consequences arising from them in terms of types of learning and changes, we have shown in Figure 2 what does shape—often powerfully— the forms and functions of LC’s.

Figure 2: Nature, Functions, and Outcomes of Learning Community

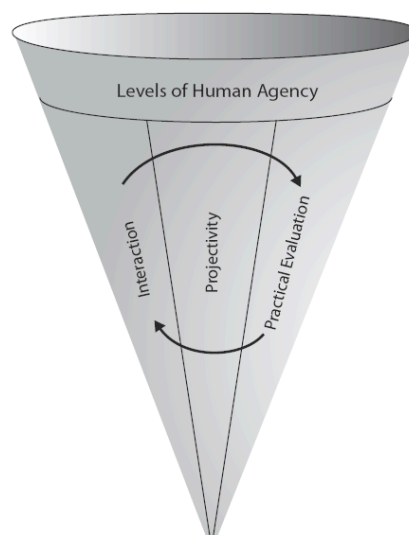


Part of the dynamic affecting any LC includes the motivations of those seeking to create or construct them and the associated levels of agency exercised by its members in this process. Agency thus interacts with, and impacts, the functions (thinking, learning, acting, and interacting), and outcomes of an LC. We think of agency therefore as a process of social engagement that allows members of a learning community to critically shape their own responses to problematic situations or catalytic events. Such actions require the continual refocusing of past and future ways of acting, being, interacting, and learning. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 970-71), noted, human agency is a “temporally constructed engagement of social actors of different structural environment—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations”. This definition encompasses three specific dimensions of human agency: iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation.

Iteration refers to the capacity of individuals to reactivate past patterns of thoughts and actions in order to make the organization (of special education educators in this case) relatively

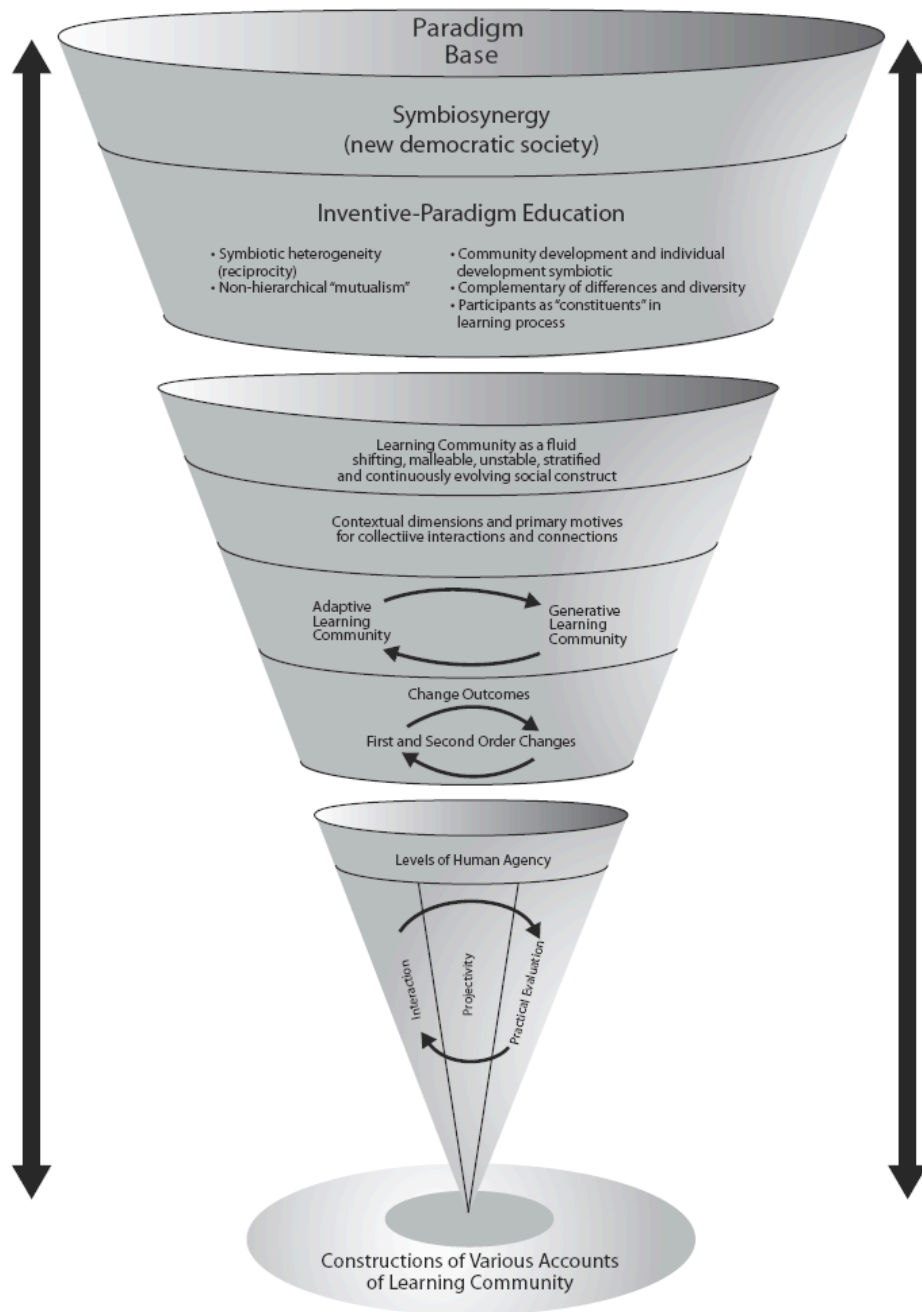
stable and resistant to second-order change. Projectivity refers to the imaginative generation by individuals of possible trajectories of thought and action, in which received structures of thoughts and action may be reconfigured in relation to individuals' view of the future. Finally, the practical-evaluation of human agency refers to the capacity of individuals to make practical and normative judgments among alternative potential trajectories of thoughts and actions in response to the emerging challenges, demands, dilemmas, or ambiguities of evolving events. However, as Emirbayer and Mische (1998) point out, these three dimensions of human agency “do not correspond in any simple, exclusive way to past, present and future as successive stages of action” (p. 972). However, they claim that for each dimension of human agency, one temporal orientation (past, present, or future) is the dominant one, shaping the way that individuals collectively respond to emerging challenges of learning and practices as their LC functions and change outcomes. Figure 3 presents our representation of how differential levels of human agency exercised by LCs' members impact their individual perceptions of the nature and relevancy of their engagement.

Figure 3: Levels of Human Agency



Thus, Figure 4 presents the overall conceptual framework we used to develop an understanding of how members of the LC we studied perceived the nature of their engagement as a process of continual adjustment through collective learning within a changing educational environment. At its paradigm base, our framework takes the values, assumptions, and way of doing things that constitute Bertrand and Valois's symbio-synergetic paradigm as the preferred, although not only, context for understanding the construction of learning communities within a change environment. We therefore believe that LC's should be shaped within inventive-paradigm ideas of education. We also recognize learning within a community as a shift of the level of human agency which interacted with, and impacted, the structure, form, functions, and outcomes of a learning community.

Figure 4: Overall Conceptual Framework



### Methodology and Procedures

We employed a case study design for this research project (Merriam, 1998). Working entirely within the qualitative research paradigm, we took what teachers and administrators said about their declared learning community as their individual perceptions of reality. We attempted to understand the participants' personal mini theories (Kelly, 1955) of LC in the light of their

personal practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1981)—understandings that had been forged in their experiences. By triangulating their views against those of others and seeking out both the commonalities and the differences, we developed our own theory of the community process in that particular special education department at that time.

The research project was a ten month reflexive, hermeneutic case study that examined one particular group of special education administrators and teachers who were located in an urban mid-sized school district in western Canada. The participants were engaged in collaborative work within a self-declared LC that evolved out of the foundational idea that special education professionals working within a learning community who share and generate knowledge would be more likely to address recommendations from a previous assessment report of Student Support Services (SSS) calling for changes for better interconnectivity among their members, connectivity with the field, cultivation of diversity of view-points and for an alternative organizational structure conducive to collegiality. Data were collected in three primary ways:

- Online semi-structured interviews between researchers and participants using Email. The interviews included questions about participants' levels of engagement (or disengagement) in the environment that constitutes their declared PLC, the type of knowledge acquired through their community-based learning, how they forged the bonds of community, shaped and maintained them, worked through conflicts in their social relationships, and formed and/or reconfigured the community structure.
- Online real time interactions with research participants using the medium of chat. All synchronous chats were recorded and archived. The data were analyzed qualitatively for themes related to the experiences, perceptions, and agentic interactions of community members.
- Document analysis of current and archival special education department documents (policy statements, internal memoranda, minutes of meetings, and historical artefacts).

Data were analyzed hermeneutically and employed interpretive interactionism (Walstrom, 2004). This approach was employed for the online interactions so as to better find the local meanings of participants and to connect these local meanings to the policies of the school board that address them, while at the same time critiquing them and problematizing the structural, and practical features of the LC.

Using Miles and Huberman (1994) constant comparative methodology, the qualitative data were analyzed on two levels. The first level involved preliminary coding which aided the development of descriptive as well as interpretative statements. The second level involved writing case vignettes and generating pattern codes. Displaying participants' experiences through representative vignettes helped to clarify our understanding of their LC by focusing on the description and analysis of a series of events taken to be representative or typical in the case being studied. We used a qualitative software instrument, Atlas ti®, to develop the initial and ongoing codes and locate patterns.

#### The Context: The Precipitating Conditions

The SSS in the School District had been the subject of an assessment report that had highlighted the perceived unresponsiveness of SSS to students and schools' needs coupled with "high levels of stress and anxiety that appear to permeate much of the system, limiting trust levels and restricting capacities for collaborative participation" (Boyd, 2003, p.4). Warning signs about the need for significant changes and reorganization led to an acceptance by the administration of the need for a new direction that would be qualitatively and quantitatively different from the current one.

We were asked to initially participate in creating a mission and vision for student support services. We had some reports that were not flattering. Our students were not fully

benefiting from what we were doing. [There was a] need new direction and insights. (Research chat, February 8, 2007 - Participant 5)

Functioning as a declared LC gained currency with the administration for accomplishing the recommendations that had called for changes in the organizational paradigm; organizational mission and purpose; organizational culture; and core processes. SSS was asked to engage in creating second-order change (Levy and Merry, 1986) in the following categories: the underlying assumptions that shaped the perceptions, procedures, and behaviors of SSS; the beliefs, values, and norms shared within SSS; and the organizational structures, decision-making processes, and communication patterns.

These recommendations were attempts to engage SSS members in communally constructing a common definition of the SSS community's practices that would eventually validate a new organizational structure as well as new roles for the community members, and most importantly, to provide exemplars for the practices that were going to be part of these new roles.

It was rather confusing when we changed over from district support specialists doing the jobs to school based people. [It was] quite a change for many. (Research chat, February 8, 2007 - Participant 5)

Taking away people who were seen as experts or well experienced from our schools and reassigning LA teachers and moving them from their more familiar roles to support more designated students and low incident students. (Research chat, February 8, 2007 - Participant 1)

The assumption made about the need for functioning as a learning community was that members of SSS would engage in a reflective reassessment of their role, their personal motivations, and collegial relationships, and seek to improve their practice and that of the

system. For SSS members, accustomed to working on their own and attending professional meetings that did not lead to communal learning, membership in such a learning community was a radical innovation. Potentially, it could engage them in facing unfamiliar demands and challenges such as negotiating practical issues, collaborating, reflecting, risk taking, revealing personal knowledge, and exposing their work to peer scrutiny—all of which could challenge their basic assumptions and former views about SSS.

... then we share ideas and practices that might help improve things; we go back out and try them out; we come back and share our experiences, ongoing, job embedded, results driven practice based upon teacher dialogue and discussion. (Interview, April 15, 2007 – participant 5)

The expectation was that community-based educator-embedded learning would better equip and prepare educators in SSS to deal with the organizational changes that were about to take place: from a model of district-support specialists to a school-based model combined with inter-agency programs to implement inclusive programs for special needs students.

## Findings and Discussion

### Individual Perspectives of the Nature and Functions of the SSS LC

The report “*Student Support Services Review*” (Boyd, 2003) had originally called for a communication and collaboration structure designed to foreground, critique, build, and enhance practitioner expertise and improve the overall responsiveness of SSS. For some participants, this was the original intent of functioning as an LC:

I believe that SSS intends to be both a forum for providing a learning environment and a problem solving/working group (Research chat, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007 – Participant 1)

The intent of the PLC was not to have policies and rules take over but to do action research, collaborative inquiry and so on about top achievement challenges in our district and how to find a way to improve it. Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007– Participant 5)

In their struggle to transform SSS into a more responsive entity, some LC members became aware that their whole way of thinking about their organization was inadequate and they needed to make a shift from a mechanistic conception of reality to a more holistic one that recognized the communality of their aims.

It's a community where people work towards a common goal and continue the conversation -so to speak. (Interview, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007 – Participant 4)

However, some research participants presented a view of the LC that was equated with a somewhat ephemeral community, one without focus, constantly changing, and so temporary as to appear insignificant in terms of having any real impact on the functioning and reworking of SSS:

SSS as a group is arbitrary. By that I mean that we are made into a group by the structure -- not that we would necessarily choose to create SSS as it stands today. (Research chat, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007 – participant 3)

[The concept of] communities connotes that we have a common purpose and goals I don't get that sense with SSS. (Interview, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007 – Participant 4)

Although the district SSS administration sought to transform SSS into a sustainable leaning community to mobilize practitioner expertise and build collective responsibility for the reworking of SSS, it seems that they had unwittingly caused conditions that undermined the building of a generative LC (Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007 – Participant 5):

If there is no change in how power is exercised we will not have an exemplary sustainable district program. Pockets of excellence will be there but that expertise will unlikely have much opportunity to be shared...only informally. We talk but do not walk the walk.

Interviewer: ... does it imply a change in the actual structure and form of power within SSS?

Participant 5: Top down stuff all the time stifles. We need more balance and respect for grassroots thinking. The people who are doing the job do have some expertise.

Our data showed that SSS transformed itself into a learning community by declaration and hoped that it would effect change in individuals and in the culture of SSS as a workplace. However, from the perspective of research participants, it succeeded only to create a pseudo-community, one characterized by interactional congeniality but whose authenticity was questioned by research participants. The LC that emerged did not function within the assumptions of the “symbio-synergetic” and “inventive” educational paradigm, and, in particular, within a commitment to symbiotic heterogeneity, reciprocity, and knowledge production to promote new ways of being and acting.

What currently exists is not working. It is not that easy as many of us are alone in different schools and have little venue to share such thoughts other than informally of course. We need to create a quest out of the chaos of needs and information that abounds. I think we have lost our energy knowing that upcoming budget considerations and a change in focus by the leadership have caused us to stray from the intent of the LC. (Interview with participant 5)

In terms of its function, the SSS LC was perceived as a management tool rather than a learning one. It failed to operate a shift in the traditional leadership role from leader-centered (top-down) to shared leadership. The LC emerged as an infrastructure designed mainly to lead staff members to adhere to goals defined and outlined by the administration.

I think it functions more as a management tool. I don't think that was the initial intention (Research chat, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007 – participant 3)

It [the learning community] is now regarded as a management tool rather than a learning tool. It is not of and for us anymore, but for policy, regulations and so on. The intent was not to have policies and rules take over, but to do action research and collaborative enquiry. (Interview with participant 5)

There were three underlying issues identified by research participants that represented the real challenge in creating an authentic SSS learning community: (1) determining core purposes for collaboration; (2) balancing between the establishment of a community-building structure versus critical inquiry; and (3) identifying enabling and constraining power structures and institutional conditions. Participants advocated for an organizational and learning structure with:

- A strategic purpose requiring:
  - Collaboration and interdependence among educators and influence for teachers;
  - Use of collective knowledge to discuss and resolve school wide issues;
- A governance structure characterized by:
  - educators sharing equal voice within a dynamic of power-with, non-hierarchical control;
- A set of coordinating activities designed to:
  - increase and sustain collaboration and collegial patterns of interactions;
- A wide range of practices and structures that enable educators to:
  - generate knowledge by designing, planning, researching, evaluating, and preparing new ways of acting, teaching, interacting;
  - oppose unshared individually held knowledge that impedes the development of clear, commonly held sets of ideas and practices;
- A safe environment that allows educators to:
  - Provide to each other useful critiques of their teaching and contribution to the school;
- A shared power arrangement in which the exercise of power is dispersed among staff and targeted at issues central to the common good.

### Individual Perspective of the Nature of Agentic Practices and Change Outcomes

Our data have shown that the research participants' agency was mainly grounded in unreflected and mostly unproblematic patterns of actions and thoughts which refer to routines,

preconceptions, patterns, and traditions. Therefore, it seems that the LC functioned to reorganize existing ideas and information instead of generating new learning and that limited the exercise of human agency to its iterational dimension.

I don't think we own the LC concept yet. That is part our doing and part the old way of doing things still framing things up in the old way. We are tinkering instead [with] the old box. We retrofit not design. (Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007 – Participant 5)

Members' agency was focused mainly on a low level of reflectivity and the available data demonstrates that the LC structure was not conducive to the exercise of those agentic processes (projectivity and practical-evaluation) that can give shape and direction to future possibilities and lead to second-order type of changes.

We have not made the shift to the new thinking and culture. We still think it terms of the old box. (Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007 – Participant 5)

In this case study, the LC was not perceived by research participants as a catalyst for change as intended in the Review (Boyd, 2003). It was perceived more as a new infrastructure for the status quo, which resulted in locating individuals' agency in routinized, pre-structured forms of learning, action, and thoughts aimed at the reproduction of past patterns. Evidence has shown the LC's members were able to focus only on a small area of their professional and SSS reality.

The focus of our sharing is info. related. i.e. I work with child X, you have either worked with the same child or one with similar challenges. What can you tell me that will help in working with Child X. (Research chat, February 22, 2007 – Participant 9)

Is our collaboration limited to sharing? [It] depends on the context. It's is only sharing when someone gets up and says, "I read a book about X and this is what I got out of it" OR I saw y speaker and this is what I got out of it and here is what may be of value to you. OR "May I introduce XYZ and here is what they have to say to you" ---- on any topic from Art Therapy to FAS. (Research chat, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009 – Participant 3).

However, our data analysis doesn't clearly reveal the causes of this persistence and resistance to change of practices. We don't know if it is due the individual or cumulative effect of hidden professional sanctions, of the current organizational power structure of SSS, or of the normative influence of past or founding practices embedded in the organizational structure.

### Conclusion

Although the concept of community as both a symbol and an aspiration carries many positive connotations among special education personnel, the majority of research participants held the view that their learning community (LC) did not manage to become an authentic generative LC. This failure occurred despite the fact that the district administration had made the LC an object of deliberate, conscious activities that were explicitly intended to build community conducive to changes.

However, we found that the central characteristic of this declared LC was predictability rather than creativity. This perceived lack of creativity (projectivity and practical evaluation dimensions of agency) was due to the absence of learning activities and actions that should have been programmed into the LC's interactions from the beginning. The perceived lack of agentic capacities amongst the LC members led to the failure of creating and sustaining a creative state within the LC to overcome the marked and easy tendency to revert to safe, stable patterns of the past.

The question that must be addressed is what sort of learning community the SSS should become in terms of the kind of agency that its members can exercise in a sustainable manner over a long period of time. Certainly not all forms of communal organization are good, and an SSS learning community like any other must meet certain criteria if it is not to resemble a pseudo

or inoperative learning community without the potential to build capacity for change and improvement. The challenge in this research project was to describe and analyse the variable nature of the interplay between the SSS LC's nature and functions and human agency, "rather than seeking to understand these as standing in opposition, or as being mutually constitutive in a direct and stable way" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p.1002).

The founding narrative of the SSS LC was a community characterized by:

- A conception of learning and change based on a symbiotic mode of knowing;
- Members' development of capacity to create new alternatives and;
- Production of knowledge that would promote new ways of being and acting;

that together would support a vision of their institution (SSS) based on non-hierarchical decision-making and complementarity of differences.

This was not enacted in the LC in the way that its founders had hoped because most participants were highly sceptical of the LC they experienced and believed it to be both inherently limiting to their professional freedom and hostile to second-order change. They perceived their LC more as an institution imbued with latent authoritarianism, hostile to innovation and creativity rather than being a community that enables individuals to exercise dimensions of agency oriented toward projectivity and practical evaluation.

We contend that the symbio-synergetic paradigm provides most of the primary socio-cultural values and forms within which various notions of learning community should be framed. Learning community should emerge and function within the assumptions of the "inventive" educational paradigm, and, in particular, within commitment to symbiotic heterogeneity and reciprocity. It should centerpiece the importance of relationships and of continually maintaining and renewing them. In such a view teachers and administrators are 'constituents' in a learning

process based on relationships designed to sustain reform and improvement within the educational system.

Future research is still needed to fully understand why and how learning communities' members might increase or decrease their capacity for invention, choice, and transformative impact in relation to the situational context within which their LC has emerged or simply declared to exist. Further understandings will be gained as future theorization and fieldwork seeks to investigate why some learning communities become inoperative or unsustainable. To give a critical account of LC's operating within school districts or schools, we must have both conceptual and normative ground on which to stand. Hopefully, this article has added to both through the notion that agentic capacity is a prerequisite for authentic generative learning communities that can engage in second order change.

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