

Chapter 1

Creating language teacher communities

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Abstract

Research shows that professional in-service teacher development activities carried out in form of lectures were found to have little effect on teachers' behavior at work while falling short in catering for their internal and external needs. So far, various new applications have been proposed and put into practice to minimize the negative effects of such shortcomings experienced in traditional professional development activities. Among many, language teacher communities (LTC) have revealed promising results in and for teacher development around the world. Hence, in this chapter, I review research focusing on LTC in the context of English as a second or foreign language teaching. Furthermore, I suggest some tips for establishing, organizing, and working within LTC. In order to do that, I review the relevant literature available and brainstorm some ideas while building onto our knowledge of the practice of establishing and maintaining LTC.

Keywords: community; community of practice; teacher education; reification; teacher development

1. Introduction

In my doctoral dissertation (Arikan, 2002), under the heading of “Statement of Purpose,” I wrote:

A growing body of research on teacher education informs us that teacher education research disregards teachers' own conceptions and is poorly anchored to teachers' day-to-day situations and problems (Black & Halliwell, 1999; Tisher & Wideen, 1990). For these researchers, teacher education research must be grounded in a more holistic view of what teachers know about their professions (Black & Halliwell, 1999; Fang, 1996; Kuzmic, 1994).

Although almost twenty years have passed since I wrote these lines, it is astonishing to see that our progress towards such “holistic view” is still too slow, that is, one can still start her dissertation or research article in the same vein today to point at the shortcomings of teacher education and development

practices with which we are familiar as a part of our profession as researchers as well as teachers. It is still true for today that professional development activities aim at advancing institutional training goals designed for participants' acquisition of necessary knowledge and skills (Sparks & Loucks-Horsely, 1990). Carter (1990) argues that this mainstream, didactic approach to professional development has mainly focused on what teachers need to know and how they can be taught that particular knowledge.

Communities of practice (CP) is another buzzword we have continuously been hearing in our professional circles regardless of where we teach or research in the world. "Developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger" this concept "is currently one of the most articulated and developed concepts within broad social theories of learning" (Barton & Tusting, 2005, p. 1). Despite the fact that the term is often used to refer to those meetings held by like-minded professionals to develop their skills, the often disregarded significance of the term lies in the fact that CP entails a theory of learning that is unique with its characteristics. Developed as an elaboration of Vygotsky's work, the roots of this theory of learning can be found in sociocultural theories of learning which presuppose that all human learning takes place within social interaction (Cole, 1996). Sociocultural theories of learning embody great importance in English language teaching since they "place language, culture and, therefore, community front and center in the development process, which makes them ideal organizing principles in teacher courses related to English language learners" (Jimenez-Silva & Olson, 2012, p. 336).

Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) argue that although it has widely been used in education as a term, community, as a word, "has lost its meaning" firstly because "it is not clear what features, if any, are shared across terms" (p. 942). These researchers, however, accept Bellah and colleagues' (1985) definition of "community" as a working term which refers to:

... a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it (p. 946)

Similar to the above mentioned researchers, at least within the confinement of this chapter, the term CP will be used to point at a socially interdependent group who, wholeheartedly, care both for their professional growth and well-being. In that sense, the term is purposefully used in opposition to what Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) name "pseudocommunities" whose professional meetings are characterized by "eye rolling, ridicule, and

muttering under the breath” (p. 957). Hence, CP and especially LTC should foster the feeling of togetherness and mutual support in a culture in which stratification and competition have already become the norm.

Research results from various countries such as China (Yan, 2005), Greece (Mattheoudakis & Nicolaidis, 2005), Turkey (Turhan & Arikan, 2009; Bümen and friends, 2012; Uysal, 2012) and the online world (Wesely, 2013) showed that professional in-service teacher development activities carried out in form of lectures were found to have little effect on teachers’ behavior at work while falling short in catering for their internal and external needs. Such professional development activities and programs that aim to develop teachers’ knowledge and beliefs were found to have severe limitations simply because they cannot help changing teachers’ behaviors (Hayes, 1997). When the case of Turkey is considered specifically, Bümen and friends (2012) reveal that although there are different teacher development models available, only the traditional model that is comprised of courses, seminars, and conferences is widely used in Turkey. Similarly, review of literature on INSET by Turhan and Arikan (2009, p. 414) revealed that “the trainees specifically felt the need to improve their practical teaching skills.” Hişmanoğlu and Hişmanoğlu (2010, p. 24) found that among the ten items answered by English language teachers interrogating their perceptions of the effect of educational supervision in terms of the curriculum and teaching methods/techniques, the highest strongly agree/agree decision was given about the item “Let teachers discuss ways of solving any problem with the curriculum.” All these findings suggest that Turkish teachers of English are inclined to be working in LTC because of their dissatisfaction with the narrow, traditional model of teacher development in which experts simply pass knowledge to the trainees.

Applications of CP in English language teacher education programs as a distinct model for teacher development have revealed promising results all around the world. Jimenez-Silva and Olson (2012) who worked with pre-service English language teachers in CP have found that establishing and working in such a community “is a promising way to help pre-service teachers build connections and collaborate in efficient ways to examine their own assumptions and ideologies of education, especially those that they hold for English language learners” (p. 343). Similarly, Patton and Parker (2017) conclude their research by stating that teachers’ engagement in CP as a part of their professional development “provided a foundation for collaboration and reduced isolation, allowing participants to extend teaching and research capacities” (p. 351). Yet, although much has been written about CP and LTC specifically, much more must be written to shed light on “how” CP and LTC

can be processed successfully. In this chapter, I suggest some tips for establishing, organizing, and working within LTC. In order to do that, I review the relevant literature available and brainstorm some ideas while building onto our knowledge of the practice of establishing and maintaining LTC. The four-week curricular plan suggested can help teacher trainers or teachers themselves to organize such activities so as to improve their professional development.

2. Components of LTC

Developing LTC necessitates a new understanding and conceptualization of teacherly practice. Knowing that many teachers feel isolated and left out in their professional development partly because of boring and irrelevant professional development practices offered to them, creating LTC appears to be a viable option. Activities in LTC amalgamate the realities of all agents, including teachers, students, and researchers, in a way to bring together individual teachers' in-depth discussion and understanding of issues surrounding all aspects of schooling. Such a fresh understanding makes the individual teacher think and act beyond the confinement of the classroom. As Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) states, when a teacher community is considered, it must naturally be accepted that "some people know things that others do not know and that the collective's knowledge exceeds that of any individual" (p. 973). Hence, such LTC should follow "jigsaw" activities in which teachers, like students who are exposed to such activities, "learn about different aspects of a common topic and then pool their learning in small groups or in a whole class setting" (p. 974). Little (2003), in her review of research, argues that teaching and learning can be strengthened and improved "when teachers collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and engage actively in supporting one another's professional growth" (p. 913). Hence, LTC can easily enable teachers' mutual exchange of ideas, experiences, and knowledge in a way to constitute a distinct opportunity for teachers' growth as professionals who learn from one another and with each other.

Believing in the power of apprenticeship, Lave (1991) argues that "developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeable skillful are part of the same process" (p. 65). Apart from developing skills that are in congruent with a language teacher's profession, LTC encapsulate a large spectrum of areas of knowledge and expertise ranging from thinking and reflecting and from gaining techniques and styles to contributing to a wider

temporal and spatial entities. To that end, LTC, as my review of research shows, entail various notions and assets towards developing a collective identity:

- sharpening the knowledge of epistemology, curricular content, instruction, pedagogy, assessment and student learning (Hairon, 2018).
- transparency (Little, 2003),
- joint enterprise (mutual negotiation of goals and procedures) (Wenger, 1998),
- maintaining and spreading democratic and civil discourse (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001),
- reification (Wenger, 1998),

Similar to all professional development activities, LTC aim to sharpen teachers' knowledge of epistemology, curricular content, instruction, pedagogy, assessment and student learning (Hairon, 2018). Transparency is gaining importance in educational institutions as a necessary aspect of accountability. Setting realistic and attainable goals, employing explainable and justifiable assessment tools and communicating with all parties involved in an honest way make up the content of transparency in educational practices. While doing that, establishing positive rapport with all parties involved in a way to reach decisions through mutual negotiation of goals and procedures and seeing all segments of education as a unit of joint enterprise should be perceived as *sine qua non*. Once these fundamentally important goals are set, maintaining and spreading democratic and civil discourse that will be available to all the result of which may be living in communities in which people reach consensus in all steps of human affairs starting from education and moving towards other social and political institutions.

Problems arise in all educational activities in terms of “how fully, completely, and specifically various parts of practice are made visible or transparent in interaction” (Little, 2002, p. 934). As human beings, we perceive our own realities through a process of reification, that is, by making the abstract more concrete or real, since we pass our meanings into the things, both abstract and concrete, after which we “perceive them as existing” (Little, 2003, p. 58). In other words, when the case of the individual language teacher is considered, one can easily claim that the teacher, just like any other member of society, both perceives and concretizes her world full of classroom activities and interactions,

use of materials, and assessment of students' work in a process at the end of which the world becomes an arena of experiences and things that she created in her mental set. Thus, any professional development activity must consider the reification processes of individual teachers within a social and professional context. It must be articulated that we all come from different walks of life although we may share similar experiences. Hence, trainers should start "with a focus on teachers' work and teaching lives, rather than a selection of professional development activities" (Little, 2002, p. 919). This new conceptualization that is based on the organic individual rather than the inorganic institution signals a sharp turn. In fact, this turn is a break away from traditional understanding of professional development which, in fact, is based on an earlier, and rather philosophical, break away from traditional views of knowledge as can be seen in Table 1 (McLure Wasco & Faraj, 2000, p. 158).

	Knowledge as object	Knowledge embedded in people	Knowledge embedded in community
Definition of Knowledge	Justified true belief	That which is known	The social practice of knowing
Assumptions and design implications	Knowledge is codified and decontextualized	Knowledge exists in the minds of people and is difficult to share	Knowledge develops in the context of a community
Knowledge ownership	Organization	Individual	Community
Motivations for exchange	Self-interest	Self-interest	Moral obligation
Promotion of knowledge exchange	Extrinsic and financial rewards	Reputation, status, obligation	Generalized reciprocity, self-actualization, access to community

Table 1. Timeline of nature of knowledge

As can be seen in Table 1, traditional trends consider knowledge as object and define knowledge as "justified true belief." According to such trend, knowledge is codified and decontextualized and organizations (institutions) own these knowledge pieces for self-interest of those who expect extrinsic and financial rewards in return of their contribution and participation. In contrast, on the other side of the spectrum rests knowledge embedded in community,

defining knowledge as a social practice of knowing contextualized within the context of the community who also own the knowledge produced or shared. That particular community is motivated in their knowledge seeking and producing endeavor through moral obligation while aiming to self-actualize by means of mutual reciprocity. This spectrum shows us that the major shift in locus of control has moved from abstract conceptualization of knowledge to a more concrete one that is socialized and actualized by communities rather than institutions. Seely Brown and Duguid (1991) underline the importance of concretizing our practice as teachers while arguing that “abstractions detached from practice distort or obscure intricacies of that practice” (p. 40). Hence, teacher education and development practices must seek for the “real” rather than the “hypothetical.”

LTC can center around some questions and tasks with specific functions as can be seen in Table 2. The functions given such as problem-solving and requesting information on the left are taken from Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 3). I have contextualized and wrote a set of sample questions that can be asked during the meetings of LTC for the purposes of this chapter. It should be noted that these questions serve different purposes. Studying these questions will in fact help us understand the nature of the patterns of interaction in such meetings. Thus, inviting participants to ask such questions will inevitably help them concretize the content and expected outcomes of the meetings held within the framework of LTC.

Functions ¹	Sample Questions/ Tasks
Problem solving	“I’m stuck. Can we work on this unit? The lexis to be taught is too difficult for my students. Can we brainstorm some ideas to make it comprehensible for my students?”
Requests for information	“Where can I find some handouts of vocabulary learning activities for my students?”
Seeking experience	“Has anyone taught difficult vocabulary to young learners before?”
Reusing assets	“I have a handout I used in my classes. It works great! I can send it to you and you can easily use it in your classrooms.”
Coordination and synergy	“Can we prepare a handout together?”

¹ Functions are taken directly from Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015, p. 3), but the sample questions and tasks are adapted by the author of this chapter.

Building an argument	“How do teachers teaching at other schools do this? Learning what they do will help me find a way.”
Growing confidence	“Before I give this handout to my students, I’ll use it here with my fellow teachers to see what they think.”
Discussing developments	“What do you think of the new curriculum for fifth graders? Will it work?”
Documenting projects	“We all have stated that this unit is too difficult for our learners. Let’s simplify it.”
Visits	“Can I have a look at your file folder? I need to update mine by adding new materials.”
Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps	“Who knows more about this age group? What are we missing in terms of additional materials? Who else should we talk to?”

Table 2. Functions of LTC and sample questions

3. A Sample Plan for LTC

I will share an extended and developed version of my suggested lesson plan I had prepared for an online teacher development course offered in cooperation of the American Embassy and the Arizona State University. The course I took lasted in eight weeks and this task of preparing a plan for engaging teachers in communities of practice was the task assigned during the seventh week. This plan aims to give an idea of a general flow of a meeting held for the purposes of LTC. This plan may be used to prepare for LTC meetings centering around different professional development objectives.

Week 1

Duration: One hour

Objective: Community building, developing mutual relationships in the group

Trainees meet in an informal manner to develop mutual relationships in the group so that they can work cooperatively in the future.

[Individual work] Trainees introduce themselves and then think and complete sentences such as “If I were an animal, I would be a because”

“My favorite song is titled I feel when I listen to it.”

“I felt so ashamed when...”

[Pair work] Trainees then work in pairs and find at least three common points they share and then report it to the whole group.

[Individual work] Trainees write a funny Haiku by using “I like” and “I love” such as

“I like teaching but
I love doing nothing yet
Next day I go work.”

[Whole-class work] Trainees dance to a song they like as a group or play a game to create a friendly atmosphere.

Week 2

Duration: One hour

Objective: Identifying the qualities of a highly motivated language learner

Trainees meet in an informal manner to discuss and brainstorm ideas on the qualities of highly motivated students.

[Individual work] First, they are given ten minutes to reflect on their past learning and teaching experiences to identify the qualities of a highly motivated learner. They may focus on one individual who is known to be an exemplary learner with her high motivation and present a case study of that individual.

[Whole-class work] The group discusses these qualities and prepares a pie or bar chart or a table to show these qualities numerically (statistically). They may also discuss how these results differ from their own individual cases and why. They may also discuss if these qualities are important for LTC.

[Assignment 1] Trainees will read a short article on the qualities of highly motivated learners distributed by the trainer.

[Assignment 2] Trainees, rate their students’ motivational levels by using a three point scale including: “Very much so, Somehow so, Not really so.”

Week 3

Duration: One hour

Objective: Finding and sharing good practices

Trainees meet in an informal manner to find and discuss good and exemplary classroom practices.

[Individual work] First, they are given ten minutes to think about their past learning and teaching experiences to identify what they consider as good practices. They may narrate a good practice they have previously heard or present a case study of their past experiences as learners or teachers.

[Group work] The group discusses these qualities and prepares a pie or bar chart or a table to show these qualities numerically (statistically).

[Whole-class work] They may discuss the reasons that make establishing good practices while providing solutions to the problems they identified.

[Assignment] Trainees will write a paragraph or a poem to express their vision of a good practice.

Week 4

Duration: One hour

Objective: Discovering our pedagogical weaknesses

Trainees meet in an informal manner to reflect on their own pedagogical weaknesses as teachers.

[Individual work] First, they are given fifteen minutes to reflect on their past learning and teaching experiences to identify their pedagogical weaknesses. They may be asked to complete sentences such as “I am good at teaching, but I feel weak when I” or “I know how to, but I feel anxious when it comes to”

[Pair work] Teachers work in pairs to exchange their pedagogical weaknesses. They prepare a pie or bar chart or a table to show their weaknesses numerically (statistically).

[Whole-class work] Trainees will put the results of their self-reflection into a table or chart to see the larger picture, that is, the pedagogical weaknesses they all possess. They discuss possible the root causes of their weaknesses and provide solutions.

[Assignment] Each trainee chooses a weakness they all shared and suggest a meeting, by writing a plan like this one, and maybe lead the meeting so as to minimize the negative effects of this weakness.

It must be noted that teachers need time as they establish trust while working within their LTC. Hence, trainers’ openness and sincerity are of utmost

importance to make trainees feel secure so that they can pour out their inner most feelings, ideas and experiences. Inter-group dynamics are also important while achieving these goals because participants must learn to listen to each other in a respectful way, refrain from dominating the interaction, and stay away from harsh criticism. Regularity of meetings and full participation contribute to the success of such communities.

4. Conclusion

This chapter is an end-product of document analysis (literature review and course notes) and an attempt of curriculum building. Two-step procedure was followed during the writing of this chapter. First, conducting a thorough literature review, and then bringing pieces of this process together to suggest a plan that can be used in various LTC. Soon after the set of articles, books and book chapters related with the aims and content of this chapter was prepared, I analyzed every piece of text by close reading. Then, the curricular plan of LTC meetings is prepared.

This chapter has started from the premise that LTC are necessary for professional development since traditional professional development activities remain problematic in terms of effectiveness. Hence, understanding the nature and significance of LTC must be first step to be taken, followed by applying them in various contexts. Such an ardent task is especially necessary and important in contexts like Turkey in which pre-service teachers of English unanimously complain about those facts such as “a close connection between the course materials and practical application in real classrooms was sometimes absent” and “opportunities for micro-teaching and practice teaching” were not enough (Seferoğlu, 2006, p. 372). Hence, in locales where teachers have experienced difficulties in attaining knowledge and practice that could make them feel secure and ready for teaching prior to starting their careers, robust and sustainable professional development activities are of utmost importance for the improvement of all educational activities as well as of agents.

Numerous reasons can be put forward to explain the benefits of and the rationale behind teachers' and researchers' interest in LTC. Among many, the fact that LTC provide members with chances of engaging in natural dialogue as for professional development rather than remaining as a passive observer or listener in an auditorium in which top-down professional development lectures or sessions are carried out. Parallel to that, employing the Internet technology to meet and carry out professional development activities within a LTC

perspective has already been used in many contexts. Blogs, social networking sites or forums can be used to extend the work and discussion situated in LTC.

As Little (2002) argues, teacher learning “ought to be evident in the ongoing encounters that teachers have with one another” (p. 918). Similarly, research should “show how teachers, in and through their interactions with one another and with the material environment, convey and construct particular representations of practice (Little, 2002, p. 934) in their workplace. Hence, continuous research should be carried out to measure the effectiveness of LTC while exemplifying the fact that “workplace learning is best understood, then, in terms of communities being formed or joined and personal identities being changed. The central issue in learning is *becoming* a practitioner not learning *about* practice (Seely Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 48). Thus, research should report exemplary activities and plans of LTC to reify and concretize the abstract, on-paper experiences so that such professional development activities help teachers in their professions.

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