

Facilitating the Development of a Community of Learners

Megan WEBSTER

『教育学論集』第68号

(2017年3月)

Facilitating the Development of a Community of Learners

Megan WEBSTER

*Visiting Professor from McGill University,
Montreal, Quebec, CANADA*

Abstract

While the literature in professional development (PD) for teachers makes clear that *community* is as an essential feature of environments that support teacher learning, little is known about how to *create* and *sustain* community from a facilitation perspective. In order to paint a portrait of high quality PD facilitation that supports the development of a learning community, I represented and decomposed the PD facilitation practices of an accomplished leader of mathematics teachers. To do so, I analyzed video data collected in a longitudinal study to investigate the nature of high quality facilitation. This qualitative analysis reveals that effective facilitation of PD for teachers that supports the development of community entails cultivating trust by helping participants get to know each other, sharing vulnerability, and positioning teachers competently. Findings inform teacher professional development, teacher education, and educational leadership theory and practice.

Introduction

We learn in groups and from groups: in fact, we don't seem to learn much at all if we don't have someone with whom to talk about our ideas. It ought come as no surprise, then, that educational scholars have identified *community* as an essential feature of environments that support teacher learning (Borko et al., 2005; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Further, scholars have long noted a consistent correlation between measures of teacher community and higher than expected student achievement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton,

2010; Horn & Kane, 2015). While there is a strong consensus amongst teacher educators that community matters when it comes to supporting teachers' and students' learning, to date, little work has zoomed in on the role of the facilitator in *generating* teacher community. What are the practices of a PD facilitator who supports the development of a learning community amongst teachers? In order to answer that question, I conducted an instrumental case study of one accomplished professional development (PD) facilitator who helped develop a learning community amongst middle school mathematics teachers. In this paper, I share the conceptual framework that underpinned my study, my methods of analysis, and my findings.

What is a learning community? Conceptual Framework

A learning community is comprised of a diverse group of teachers who share what they learn with each other. In an authentic learning community, educators are explicitly focused on the supporting the learning of others (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Further, an authentic learning community is governed by social norms which allow teachers to push each other to develop their thinking and change their positions (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). An authentic learning community requires a high degree of social trust and norms of interaction which enable teachers to take the risks that learning entails (Webster, 2016). However, as previously stated, the role that a facilitator might play in modeling trust and developing these norms has been underspecified in the literature.

Methods

In order to answer my research question, I conducted an instrumental case study to generate theory about how a facilitator can cultivate a learning community of teachers. The data from this study was gathered as a part of Middle School Mathematics and the Institutional Setting of Teaching (MIST) project. The MIST team investigated what it takes to support instructional improvement of middle-grades mathematics teaching on a large scale over time. As a part of the MIST project, thousands of hours of video of instruction and PD was collected from four major urban school districts in the US. After watching many hours of

video footage from a number of PD leaders and districts, I chose to focus on 27 hours of PD led by a skilled facilitator I call Sabrina, collected between the years of 2008-2011. Sabrina was the mathematics director of a large, Midwestern urban school district.

I selected Sabrina because the groups of teachers with whom she worked gave evidence of meeting the two criteria of generating a community of learners: her sessions were focused on issues of student learning, while teachers shared what they learned and developed their thinking in small and large groups. Secondly, Sabrina pushed teachers to make connections between their ideas about students, pedagogy, and disciplinary content, thereby generating opportunities for teachers to learn.¹

My methods followed several iterative stages of analysis: I began by viewing and transcribing the videos, and then I wrote analytic memos. I then developed a coding scheme that identified three broad categories of analysis of facilitation: activities (what participants are doing), participation structures (how they are doing it), and talk moves (what the facilitator is doing to orchestrate the work). I then parsed those categories into finer grained codes by coding onto StudioCode, a software programme which allowed me to code directly onto the video. Finally, once I had identified **what** Sabrina was doing and **how** she was doing it, I identified the patterns and functions of those facilitation practices. The final stage of analysis comprises the substance of my findings.

Findings

An analysis of Sabrina's practice allowed me to better specify what it takes to develop community where it might not already exist. I learned that developing community entails cultivating trust by helping participants get to know her and one another, sharing vulnerability, and positioning teachers competently. I expand on the following practices below.

A key feature of community is that the participants trust one another. Environments that are characterized by trust amongst participants are more likely to be environments that generate opportunity to learn (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). After 12 years of intensive research in the Chicago Public School system, Bryk and colleagues (2003)

¹ For an extended summary of the case selection, see Webster (2016).

found that trust was the *key* institutional resource required for enacting ambitious reforms. However, it is not always clear how a skilled facilitator creates and sustains trust with teachers and between teachers. Sabrina built trust by getting to know the teacher participants, sharing information about herself with teachers, making space for vulnerability, and positioning teachers competently.

Sabrina's facilitation reveals that an essential feature of building a trusting community of learners is having personal knowledge of the people in the room. As workshops began, Sabrina talked with teachers, often joking with them about things like weather and parking. More often, however, her talk revealed some personal knowledge of the teacher, such as when asked, "how is life at Alfred [Middle School]?" If she didn't know a teacher, she introduced herself. In one session, after chatting with teachers, Sabrina turned on her "whole group voice" to formally initiate the session and welcome everyone to the session. Mentioning that there were a few new people in the room, a teacher asked Sabrina to introduce everyone. Laughing, and asking for forgiveness if she made a mistake, Sabrina introduced each participant by name and school, often sharing a few details about the teacher. "I'll start easy," she began, "this is Barb Everhart – we went to college together, so if I don't know her, whoo!" These social interactions, characterized by smiling and laughing, epitomized the tone of her interactions with teachers.

Sabrina also helped teachers develop trust by getting to know one another. She shared her knowledge of participants with a positive frame; she shared teachers' strengths and successes publicly:

Rod Smith passed away this weekend. A lot of you were pretty close to him. He has been a long, long time advocate for math in the state. He was retired from this district the whole time I was in this district, and yet, I felt like he was a math leader here... I know ten of those years he was on the school board. Even when he wasn't on the school board, he was everywhere. Just send out some good wishes his way. Anybody want to say anything about Ross? I know some of you knew him even better than I did...

Teacher: I would not be in this district if it were not for Ross; I absolutely would have just walked away in the first semester, cause you know how tough it is. And he just constantly was: it's gonna get better, it's gonna get better, it's gonna get better. It was very positive. And yet, not in a false way. He didn't have his head in the clouds. He knew how tough it was. I also credit him with the math department in [City] was the strongest math district in [the State]... [He] made for a very strong department. He was a good guy. He wrote textbooks I taught

from... He came in to my classroom once when I was teaching from his textbook and I introduced him to the kids, and showed them his name!.. It was fun! ... Sabrina: Remember that magnet trick he did on the overhead? So everyone was attracted? (People laugh, share magnet stories.) (090210: 00:07:28)

In this episode, Sabrina made space for teachers to share their experiences of an important figure in their community. In doing so, she also invited newcomers into the community by introducing them to local personalities and history. She also positioned teachers competently, by highlighting the many contributions one teacher made to the district over time.

Sabrina also shared information about herself with the group, another aspect of building trust. At the same time, Sabrina shared few details about her life outside of her role as a district leader: I don't know, for example, her sexual or religious orientation, her family status, or her ethnic heritage. She sometimes shared surface information about herself with the group in the context of professional conversations, such as talking about the size of her condo in the context of a math task focused on determining square feet. She frequently shared information about the professional development she attended herself, and what she learned at PD sessions.

More often than sharing information about her life outside of the particular session teachers were attending, however, Sabrina shared her feelings about the workshop with the group. The feelings she shared were almost always focused on what was unfolding in that moment, and they almost always fell into one of two categories: happiness or vulnerability. Sabrina laughed frequently and heartily, and often celebrated the successes of teachers in the room: in six sessions I coded 23 episodes of "making light," or episodes in which she said something that made the whole group laugh. Sharing her joy and remaining in the present with teachers surely contributed to the upbeat and optimistic tone that is palpable in her PD sessions, even on video recordings.

Sharing one's vulnerability is a key feature of developing trust with and amongst teachers; in the absence of vulnerability, trust will not flourish. I coded 34 episodes of Sabrina's facilitation characterized by vulnerability across the six sessions. For example, on March 9, 2009, she asked for help putting up chairs after the session because she needed to attend a funeral directly following the workshop:

I know I'm gonna be short with some of you today... I just have a lot of things

going on in my personal life that are getting in the way of me giving myself to the job. I apologize. If anything, email me and I'll be in a much better space next week (090306: 00:50:44).

As a testament to the relationships she built with teachers, these expressions of vulnerability were always met with support and reassurance from teachers. Immediately following the statement above, a teacher raised her hand:

Can I say a general comment?... When you sent out the email that said we had to read another article, I was like oh God! Not another article that's not practical, and it feels like we're in college, but then I started reading this one and I was like, oh! I like this! It's telling me something to do! (090306: 00:51:00).

Here, it seems that the teacher wants to respond warmly and kindly to Sabrina, though the teacher does not explicitly address 'the elephant in the room,' Sabrina's need to attend a funeral. In response, Sabrina smiled, said, "Well good, I'm glad," and moved on with a smile to the next activity. Sabrina consistently built a sense of mutual cooperation with her teachers through opening herself authentically with the group.

On several occasions, Sabrina also shared vulnerable information about others with the whole group. At the beginning of one session, she stated: "Nancy, I hope you don't mind that I share this... [Nancy nodded]... Nancy's father passed away this week. I always say this job is easy if the rest of your life is sane. But there is always something. This is a hard job." The teacher replied, "This is also a great place to be if your life is hard." The group then briefly discussed how kind students could be to teachers when they were struggling. Here, Sabrina modeled tender compassion for the teachers in the room, as well as framing the work of teaching as being 'hard,' valuing the work of teachers.

Sabrina also approached potentially conflictual conversations with teachers with a frame of vulnerability, presenting herself transparently and openly. Asking teachers to change their behavior is difficult, as the following episode reveals. Sabrina only "called for compliance," or asked teachers to comply with her requests, seven times across all six sessions, and three of these episodes were characterized by her own vulnerability. For example:

I am sorry to be treating you like a class right now, but I feel like I'm struggling to

have people “up here” all day. I know it’s just the end of... I’m not used to working with adults... and it’s been a challenge for me this year. The things I expect of students I can’t expect of you adults. You come late, you don’t read your articles, you leave early, you have all these excuses, you expect to leave... It’s hard... you know, like, the things I would say to my students, you know, to get quiet, I can’t say to adults... I’m like, I’m not made to work with adults... It’s just not in my skill set. And it’s been a struggle for me this year. Because I can’t do what I do with students. And, you know, that’s like, what I’ve had twenty years doing. And I can’t do that with adults. And I’m like, I can’t transition. I mean, I shouldn’t say “can’t.” I suppose I could. I am *not willing* to make that transition. So. I’m just gonna be really explicit right here. Could you all just listen up right here, a second? And I know I see myself in you guys too. I’m like, wow. [Teacher interjects, talks over: “You’re doin’ fine!”]. I am sure I’ve pissed off some of my leaders in the past. For lack of a better way of sayin’ it! (090210; 03:49:00).

Here, Sabrina framed teachers’ disappointing participation as stemming from her own lack of expertise. She put herself down: she is sure now that she has “pissed off some of her leaders in the past,” presumably from lack of consciousness about the impact of her behavior. Thus, she made explicit her vulnerability in her call for compliance, while framing teachers’ non-compliance as unconscious, not malicious. At the same time, because of her framing, she is able to call out teachers’ behavior—with “all their excuses”—strongly and clearly.

Sabrina builds community by positioning teachers competently. As Krause, Louis and Bryk (1994) found, “Teachers must feel they are honoured for their expertise—within the school as well as within the district... Respect, trust, and a shared sense of loyalty build professional commitment and the cooperation required for collaboration and shared decision making” (p. 161). In other words: in order to learn, teachers need to feel valued and trusted. Across the six sessions, I counted 24 episodes of Sabrina affirming the professional competence of teachers in the room. I note that she does not do this through simple affirmations such as “good job” statements, on the contrary, she rarely *praises* teachers: I coded only seven utterances of “Affirmation, no explanation,” such as “nice work!” across all sessions. On the other hand, she framed her affirmations of competence in professional language: “I want you to know that I am considering you all my experts, and I’m going to ask you some things that are going to become policy in the district” (101028; 00:01:00). She positioned teachers competently:

We’re gonna be better teachers if we know each other and talk to each other.

Here's what I know for sure: I don't know sixth grade math. Cause I've never taught it. The experts for 6th grade math are in this room. You can certainly ask me questions, but what I would do is ask the people that sit in this room. Learn from one another and get to talk to one another (110203; 02:39:32).

Similarly, when one teacher shared a difficulty helping her students avoid a common mathematical error, Sabrina responded, "my guess is that the teacher who asks this is not the only teacher that has kids that want to [make that error]. Anybody have any thoughts on this?" (110203; 04:00:07). Here, Sabrina normalizes the concern, and situates it within a developmental framework for which she presumes other teachers have insight.

Conclusion

While scholars agree that community is a key feature of effective teacher learning communities, there has been little prior research which attempts to understand how a facilitator can actively *create* community. In this research, I examine the case of Sabrina, who deftly brings math teachers together for the sake of learning. As a prerequisite for their engagement with mathematics and pedagogy, however, they need to feel safe enough to take the risks that learning entails. For that reason, the facilitator has a key role to play in setting up and maintaining norms of interaction which enable trust amongst participants to flourish. This research suggests that by helping participants get to know one another, sharing vulnerability, and positioning teachers competently, facilitators may create and sustain an authentic learning community governed by mutual trust.

References

- Bielaczyc, K., & Collins, A. (1999). Learning communities in classrooms: A reconceptualization of educational practice. *Instructional-design theories and models: A new paradigm of instructional theory*, 2, 269-292.
- Borko, H., Frykholm, J., Pittman, M. E., Eiteljorg, E., Nelson, M., Jacobs, J., . . . Schneider, C. (2005). Preparing teachers to foster algebraic thinking. *ZDM Mathematics Education*, 37(1), 43-52.
- Bryk, A., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Grossman, P., Wineburg, S., & Woolworth, S. (2001). Toward a theory of teacher community. *The Teachers College Record*, 103(6), 942-1012.
- Horn, I., & Kane, B. D. (2015). Opportunities for professional learning in mathematics teacher workgroup conversations: Relationships to instructional expertise. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 00, 1-46.
- Webster, M. (2016). A decomposition of the practices of high quality professional development facilitation for teachers. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Full Text.
- Wilson, S. M., & Berne, J. (1999). Teacher learning and the acquisition of professional knowledge: An examination of research on contemporary professional development. *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 173-209.