



# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR COLLABORATIVE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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In the last decade, reference to “professional learning communities” has dramatically increased in the literature of both education and business.<sup>1</sup> Much of this literature claims that professional learning communities are a major strategy for improving institutions in a changing world. For example, in *Professional Learning Communities that Work*, Dufour and Eaker (1998) argue, “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities” (xi).

Schools must cope with changes—either ongoing or projected—in the U.S. economy and in student demographics. They are affected by increasingly sophisticated technologies, media, and communication systems. In order to ensure that their practices are relevant and effective in the face of such sweeping changes, it is essential that adults in schools be learning continually. Since learning is fundamentally a *social* process (Belenky et al. 1997; Dewey 1997; Vygotsky 1986), teachers need to work in collegial communities that encourage sharing expertise and problem solving; building collective knowledge and exploring relevant outside knowledge; providing critique on existing practices; and inventing, enacting, and analyzing needed innovations. In these ways, learning communities become productive sites for the professional development of teachers, as well as critical leverage points for profound change in school cultures and much-needed whole-school change.

Thus proponents claim that schools must become “learning organizations” (e.g., Darling-Hammond and Sykes 1999; Dufour and Eaker 1998; Fullan 2006; Hargreaves 1994; Senge et al. 2000). Unfortunately, there is a stunning lack of clarity about what actually is being proposed. A wide variety of distinct professional development approaches, school social groupings, and change and improvement strategies appears in the literature labeled “professional learning communities.” What, in fact, is a “learning community”? What purposes should learning communities serve? How do they operate? How do participants interact? How should they interact to fulfill their purposes? What motivates people to participate in them—or resist them? Do these communities actually contribute to school improvement and improve student learning, and how do we know? What conditions would convincingly attest to their efficacy? In the end, how does a learning community differ from any other group of colleagues working together?

In this book, we share what we have learned about the aforementioned questions based on five years of research in an initiative funded in 1999 by the Lucent Technologies Foundation. Called the Peer Collaboration Initiative, the project established “Lucent Learning Communities” (LLCs) in a set of schools in four districts in New Mexico, Washington, Pennsylvania, and Florida. (In a second phase, the foundation funded a district in New Jersey.) The project designers intended to provide and support an innovative vehicle for teachers’ professional development. Within the Peer Collaboration Initiative, we came to define LLCs as small groups of educators who meet regularly to engage in systematic, ongoing, peer support and critique in order to improve their educational practices and student learning. To scaffold their efforts, the LLCs used *a priori* guides (known as protocols<sup>2</sup>) to structure their conversations as they shared professional practices and artifacts of student learning.

In chapter 2 we describe in detail the Peer Collaboration Initiative and the research we conducted. Here in chapter 1, to illustrate what we mean by “learning community,” we present two vignettes drawn from our field notes of direct observations. Throughout our documentation process, we were guided by Flyvbjerg and Sampson’s (2001) conception of “social science that matters,” that is, research that aims to contribute to practical wisdom about human welfare—and we can think of few institutions that offer more toward the common good than public schools. With that in mind, we intend for the two vignettes to shed light on the practice, problems, and possibilities of teachers’ learning communities, particularly because such communities are so often invoked as the means of improving student learning.

The first vignette is from a highly functioning LLC; the second is from one far less developed. Through points of comparison and contrast, we seek to accomplish three purposes. First, we illustrate key features of the learning communities we studied. Second, we provide a common text for readers that can be used as a point of reference in later chapters. Third, we conclude the chapter with a discussion of what these vignettes imply about ways to foster and sustain teacher learning in the community.

### A LINCOLN ELEMENTARY LLC

The following vignette depicts a meeting occurring about seven months into the life of this particular learning community. The LLC is composed of six fifth-grade teachers at Lincoln Elementary, one of two schools serving students in the district's lowest socioeconomic neighborhoods. Lincoln enrolls about 700 students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. The teachers meet twice a month for two hours. While all have between two to four years' experience as members of an LLC, this is the first year that this group has met. And, while the facilitator has four years' experience as an LLC coach at Lincoln, this vignette occurs during her first year working with this group. On this day, the participants experienced a breakthrough. For the first time, a teacher brought an example of a student's work with her and candidly confessed frustration in working with that student.

*It's a gloomy February day at Lincoln Elementary School, one of the poorest schools in this East Coast, mid-size urban district. In a second-floor classroom, a group of six teachers gathers around a table cluttered with food, coffee cups, pop cans, and papers. Speaking over the animated laughter and chatter, Alice, a teacher serving as coach for the group, speaks up, "Okay, we'd better get started. I just want to remind you of our norms, especially number one." She grins and then gestures toward a poster propped up on a bookcase. It reads:*

1. *Be punctual.*
2. *Be honest. Give constructive criticism and listen to constructive criticism.*
3. *Share the air. Give everyone a voice.*
4. *Stay on topic. Use time efficiently.*
5. *Try to reach an equitable consensus when possible, but report all voices and opinions.*

6. *Be prepared.*

7. *Be flexible with norms by revisiting them from time to time.*

Voices hush. Alice continues, “Okay, Mary Ann, you’re presenting today. Remember you’ve got five to ten minutes to describe your dilemma. We’ll listen and we won’t interrupt. Then we get a crack at asking some questions for about five minutes or so. After that, Mary Ann listens and we discuss the problem. Then we’ll debrief. You know the drill, right?” She gestures to an easel holding a chart. The chart reads:

Protocol

Presenter presents dilemma (10 minutes)

Clarifying questions (5 minutes)

Probing questions (5 minutes)

Discussion (15 minutes)

Presenter responds (5 minutes)

Debrief the process (5 minutes)

Mary Ann begins, “Since fall, I’ve been trying to create a kid-friendly rubric. You know, one that makes my expectations clear? I’m using math exemplars from past versions of the state tests with the kids as in-class assignments. I don’t know if these test questions are realistic for some kids, but I suppose I’ll never know unless I try hard to help them. Anyway, I’m hoping to get this group of kids better prepared than last year’s. I’m pretty frustrated, though.” Mary Ann has launched the group into its work.

“I brought this example of one kid’s work. As you can probably see, he’s trying to solve one of the exemplars. [She distributes copies of a mathematical word problem that entails being able to sort out relevant and irrelevant information and analyze a simple graph.] It’s typical of what happens when some kids work on these problems. You can see there’s more guessing than estimating. You can also see that he’s not quite sure which information from this word problem he needs and which information is just beside the point.”

Mary Ann goes on to provide more detail about why the student’s work had troubled her. Eventually, she says, “I need to figure out what to do here.”

The five other teachers lean forward, listening carefully. One says, “So do you have a particular question you want us to consider with you?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about the question. Well, let’s see. I guess I want to know, ‘How can I create a kid-friendly rubric that shows kids what is expected of them?’”

Alice speaks up at this point. "Since I'm the facilitator today, I want to remind everyone that we can take several minutes for clarifying questions."

Jeff pipes up immediately, "You say this is typical. How many of the kids are struggling like this kid?" Over the next few minutes, the group peppers Mary Ann with questions to put her dilemma in a clearer context. "How much experience with problems like these had you given the kids before you assessed them?" "Have you laid out the steps for the kids?" "Have you asked them to explain their problem solving to each other?" The questioning continues, until Jean asks, "Since this is a word problem, have you thought about how much your student's reading level might be affecting things?"

Before Mary Ann can answer, Alice jumps in: "We've sort of organically moved into probing questions. So, if it's okay with everyone, let's start asking the probing questions. You know what I mean. These are the questions to help Mary Ann to look more deeply at what's going on here. We've got five minutes. Go for it." Jean repeats her question. Mary Ann responds, "Well, I certainly check out reading scores and take that into consideration, but in lots of cases, I don't think that's the real problem."

The questions come slowly at first but then gain momentum:

"Have you asked the kids to think aloud as they work through these problems?"

"Are you having the kids work together on any of these, so they can talk about how they're trying to solve them?"

"Do you think this kid really 'gets' the concepts involved here, or is he just trying to go through a memorized procedure?"

"Do you think you've given enough scaffolds to support this kid's problem-solving process? Do you know if he's got some misconceptions about how to solve this kind of problem?"

"Do you give the kids a chance to look at their work afterward and revise?"

Mary Ann answers the questions and takes occasional notes. At times, she answers a question quickly and decisively. At others, she looks surprised or puzzled. Occasionally, she winces and smiles painfully. A little more than five minutes into the process, Alice announces, "We need to move to discussion." Mary Ann pushes her chair back from the table, signaling her role as a listener rather than participant. The group begins their discussion.

"I think it's important that Mary Ann gathered these exemplars and that she's trying to help kids be successful," says one teacher. Another responds, "I agree, and the fact that she chose this particular exemplar shows she's got high expectations for kids."

After a brief silence, someone remarks, "I admire her for bringing a student's actual work here. It's hard to share a sense of failure, you know?" Alice good-naturedly quips, "Yeah, leave it to Mary Ann. She's always the first one in the door—ready or not!" They laugh.

"You know I can't get the reading aspect of this out of my head. I wonder if Mary Ann worked with small groups of kids and had them read the problem aloud if it might help her. Oral reading can sometimes show you a lot."

"Okay, but her question is about a rubric. Remember she said she wanted kids to be clear about her expectations?"

"I know, but if part of what you have to do to solve a problem like this is read with comprehension, then shouldn't that be a criterion on the rubric?"

"So how's having that on a rubric going to help a kid who's struggling with reading? You can have all kinds of rubric criteria, but what good does it do?"

"Wait a minute! Are we getting rubrics mixed up with something else here? Maybe Mary Ann's not looking for a rubric here? I don't think this is really about making expectations for a final product clear. I think what this is really about is helping kids know how to think through a problem like this. It's almost like she wants a checklist to help kids with the mental process. Aren't rubrics for assessing products?"

"Maybe you're right. What Mary Ann is really asking is how to give kids a way to think about this kind of problem. Maybe a rubric could actually do that. She wants the kids to monitor how they're thinking about the problem, right? I keep going back to reading comprehension, though. It's so central to all this."

Mary Ann's colleagues discuss her dilemma from multiple angles, turning it over like a prism in the conversations, looking for insights and possible strategies. Alice remarks, "I keep wondering if the kids need a lot more practice. This problem actually requires kids to sort out a lot of relevant and irrelevant information." Jeff jumps in, "I agree. And I'm thinking about that idea I brought up earlier. What if the kids could do these exemplars in groups and explain their thinking out loud? Wouldn't they get better at doing it on their own?" Lisa replies, "Actually, this whole discussion has me wondering how I might rethink my own approach to giving kids these practice problems. I want to figure out how to help the slow readers understand the problem so I can separate out the difference between reading skills and math skills. I guess I'm in the same boat as Mary Ann. Seems like the same kids keep struggling, you know?" Alice responds, "Yeah, and how do you help those kids without boring the others out of their tree?"

*“Listen, the more I think about this, the more I’m convinced we need to integrate our literacy instruction with math instruction. When kids ‘get’ these problems, they’ve grown by leaps and bounds in reading comprehension, don’t you think?”* Mary Ann writes furiously and, by turns, frowns with concentration or grins in delight. Throughout, she is silent. After ten minutes or so passes, Alice says, *“Well, we’re running out of time. Let’s have Mary Ann tell us what she’s heard.”*

*“Wow! All I can say is that was amazing! I’ve got tons of good ideas!”* Mary Ann responds enthusiastically and then enumerates suggestions and questions she plans to pursue. She ends with, *“Of course, you were completely off the wall on some things. [Everyone laughs.] I mean, some suggestions you made just aren’t my style and some just wouldn’t work with my kids. But one thing that’s really clear to me now is that my question wasn’t right. What I really want to know is how to scaffold kids’ thinking on problems like this.”*

*At this point, the whole group debriefs. The group talks about the process and then Alice asks, “Did Mary Ann raise anything here useful for all of us?”* In the course of the discussion, they decided:

- *They have made an important distinction between thinking about rubrics as criteria for success and rubrics as descriptors for thought processes (meta-cognition).*
- *They have articulated more precisely what it takes for a student to tackle word problems like those on the state tests.*
- *They have reminded one another about an unavoidable intersection between reading comprehension and math word problems and suggested a better integration of reading and mathematics instruction.*

*As they enumerate what they are learning together, Lisa says, “You know, we are all really worried about what kids are thinking as they try to problem solve. Let’s face it: reading comprehension is also a big worry! How can we know how to help students if we don’t think through more systematically how reading affects so much else that they do and if we don’t know what they’re thinking? In fact, reading is all about thinking, right?”*

*After a thoughtful lull, Alice responds, “Whew, this has been intense. I think we owe a lot to Mary Ann for bringing student work. I want to suggest something. Remember last summer [referring to coaches’ training] we learned about that idea of a ‘cycle of inquiry’? The idea about our whole group working on a common question? I think we may be ready for that.”*

*Jeff asks, “How does it work again?”*

*“You know, you decide you’ve got a question; you decide on some action plan to explore the question; you go back to the classroom and try whatever you decided to try; then you basically see if it worked; and then you come back together, talk about it and tweak it, or try something else. Or sometimes you just find a new question. I’ve got a chart somewhere about this. I’ll dig it out.”*

*The bell signals that time is up. The teachers jump from their chairs, grab another bite of food or sip of coffee, and snatch up their papers. Alice calls out as they head off to meet their students, “Listen, next meeting let’s see if we can draw out a common question from our work today.” And, in fact, for the rest of the year, they did indeed investigate the cycle of inquiry.*

#### ATTRIBUTES OF THE LINCOLN LLC

The above vignette contains a number of qualities that distinguish it from conversations that typically occur among teachers. In other words, this is not business as usual. Some of the qualities include the following:

- adopting an inquiry stance
- acknowledging limits of individual knowledge
- making individual worries public
- tightly focusing on teaching and learning
- collectively committing to ensuring student learning

*Adopting an inquiry stance.* There are a number of points in the discussion where teachers could simply have resorted to excuses. For example, they could have said, “These kids can’t read, so how can they do word problems?” Someone might have added, “These tests aren’t realistic for our kids.” But rather than becoming mired in conditions they viewed as beyond their control, the group members began looking for ways to address the problems at hand and then posed a number of questions. The presenter began with questions, but more were raised during the ensuing discussion by other participants. All involved adopting a stance of inquiry (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993, 2001), turning over in their minds their colleagues’ dilemmas as they thought about possible strategies. The community’s deliberations generated multiple possibilities rather than focusing simply on a single solution or plan for solving the problem.

*Acknowledging limits of individual knowledge.* Because the work of teaching is ostensibly about bringing knowledge to students, many



teachers want to project an air of expertise. When they are unsure of subject matter or frustrated by an inability to reach students, they often feel guilty and scramble either to find some answers on their own or to cover up the deficit. In the previous vignette, however, teachers talked openly about “not knowing” how to teach reading in conjunction with mathematics, and they revealed to one another doubts about how to help their students with word problems. They demonstrated clearly that being a competent teacher does not require knowing everything. On the contrary, competent teaching requires owning up to “not knowing” and engaging in continuous learning.

*Making individual worries public.* A closely related factor is that when one teacher openly admits a lack of knowledge, then others are freed to do so as well. Typically, teachers are not only highly reluctant to reveal what they do not know, but they are also often reluctant to ask for help from their colleagues. During this meeting, for the first time in the life of this group, a teacher brought a student work sample to her colleagues and made a plea for help. In doing so, she took the group beyond a sustained commitment to meet regularly. Her action helped the group embark on a deeper endeavor: to make thorny dilemmas public in the group and to engage in systematic, focused discussions about addressing them. By bringing an authentic teaching and learning problem to her colleagues, Mary Ann demonstrated her faith that useful professional knowledge resided in the group. When group members actually discussed the problem, they saw for themselves how much practical benefit can arise from participation in their LLC. With so many demands on their time, teachers must be convinced that collaborative efforts, such as LLC work, are going to be worth the effort.

*Tightly focusing on teaching and learning.* With structure provided by the protocol and an experienced facilitator, and because the group is a manageable size (six teachers), the conversation stayed focused on the issue brought to the group by one member. At the same time, participants used the protocol as a guide rather than a recipe; as such, it shaped the discourse but did not interfere with its fluency. Although participants remained focused, the discussion also took interesting detours from the presenter’s question. While these detours generated new possibilities in terms of defining and addressing the problem, participants did not stray from the central issue: improving student learning. The substance of the discussion was clearly professional, but relationships also seemed to thrive, as evidenced by the easy laughter and gentle gibes. The vignette captures teachers doing serious work while also enjoying each other’s company.

*Collectively committing to ensuring student learning.* Perhaps most important, these teachers are clearly concerned with how to help students. Faced with the work of a struggling student, they do not waste time delineating the student's inadequacies as a learner and bemoaning the supposed causes. Rather, they try hard to analyze precisely what difficulties the student is encountering so that they can generate strategies to help him or her surmount them. The heart of the whole conversation reveals an abiding faith that the student can and will learn if classroom conditions are right. This vignette also reveals the willingness on these teachers' part to shoulder the responsibility for ensuring students' learning, even those who struggle the most. It demonstrates that teachers in this LLC never resort to defining students as hopeless. Instead, they embrace their students' learning struggles as problems to be solved.

#### A SANTOS ELEMENTARY LLC

The example of the Lincoln teachers demonstrates a group that has achieved a certain level of sophistication as a learning community. How might their LLC compare and contrast with one that is newer, less experienced, less developed? What might characterize a less sophisticated group? To shed light on these questions, we present a second vignette of a group that has been together for only four meetings. Moreover, most of the group's members are new to LLCs. As with the Lincoln LLC, the session portrayed in the following vignette from Santos Elementary was the first time the group had looked at student work from a member's classroom.

The 2001–2002 school year marked the second year of participation in LLCs for Santos Elementary, a school of approximately 500 students in a large district in the Southwest. That year, 78 percent of the faculty took part in an LLC, exceeding the initiative's expectation of 50 percent. With this rapid expansion, new groups had formed, and LLC memberships from the previous year had shifted somewhat.

Most LLCs in this district followed the format used in the coaches' training: sessions opened with "Connections," a time for group members to share personal stories and thoughts. The group then reviewed feedback from the previous session, revisited the group's norms (established during the first meeting of the group), and engaged in an ice-breaker activity as a way of building trust. Commenting on these opening activities, one experienced coach observed, "It's a way to have fun and destress and to make us comfortable while we make our practice public."

In the remaining time, the group would use a protocol, facilitated by one of the group members, to structure discussion of a particular reading, professional dilemma, observation of one another's practice, or, as in this second vignette, to guide examination of teacher and/or student work artifacts brought to the group by a member. Near the end of the LLC sessions, the participants would fill out "reflection" forms, which encouraged them to comment on the session and their experiences, as well as suggest what might be done in their next session. While many groups in this district reported frequent use of a protocol for discussing professional dilemmas, which does not require attention to specific student work samples, a few LLCs had started bringing student work samples to their meetings.

The following vignette is from the fourth meeting of the group, held in December. At Santos, the LLCs met once a month, from 1:50 p.m.–4:20 p.m., on a day when students left early in order to provide a block of time for teachers to work together.

*Conversation and occasional laughter increasingly fill the air as twenty-one teachers gather in a classroom, sign in, and pick up snacks from a long table against one wall. The noise subsides at 2 p.m. as soft-spoken Maria opens the meeting with the group's routines. First, there is "Connections," followed by a review of reflections from their previous meeting, a revisiting of group norms, and an ice-breaker activity. Just after 3 p.m., the teachers form three small groups, each with a designated facilitator, and begin working with a protocol. Maria, now facilitating one of the small groups, announces that they will be using the "ATLAS—Learning from Student Work" protocol.<sup>3</sup> Reading from a handout she is holding, she informs the group of the characteristics of the nature of their work together, as expected by the ATLAS approach:*

- *Looking at student work cannot simply be adopted as a technique by schools or teachers, but must be learned over time in a thoughtful, supported way.*
- *Time should be provided for a discussion of the purposes for using a particular process or approach; time should be reserved for reflecting on ("debriefing") the process just completed.*
- *Looking at student work demands blocks of time for teachers to work together, from an hour and a half to a full day.*
- *Looking at student work will be more effective when sustained over time, for example, year-long monthly or twice-monthly meetings.*

*Without any discussion of these points, Maria passes out copies of the protocol and asks the participants to review it silently. An unusual feature of this particular protocol is that it directs users to focus only on the work sample and to assume that the work makes sense to the student. According to the protocol, the teacher providing the work sample “should not give any background information about the student or the student’s work.” The point is to use only the evidence in the work and not the teacher’s expectations or judgments about the student. It describes five steps for the group’s session, providing key directions and suggested questions in each along with suggested time limits:*

- *Getting Started (2 minutes)*
- *Describing the Student Work (10 minutes)*
- *Interpreting the Student Work (10 minutes)*
- *Implications for Classroom Practice (10 minutes)*
- *Reflecting on the Process (10 minutes)*

*When the participants finish reading, Maria introduces Rachel, a teacher in a Title I program aimed at helping students transition from special education into regular classrooms. Maria is explaining that Rachel has volunteered to present her student’s work. During the first step of the protocol, Rachel deviates from it by giving some background on the student as she passes around copies of three pages from a student’s journal. She explains, “This is part of a reading response activity I gave to my transition class early in the year. The student is a female in the third grade, and I’ve been increasingly concerned about her.”*

*On the three pages, the student had written thoughts and drawn pictures in response to Rachel’s prompts and questions about the novel Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. Again, Rachel deviates from the protocol by talking about her expectations: “For this assignment, I was looking for high-frequency words and spellings appropriate for the third grade, and the student’s ability to make accurate observations of the text and logical interpretations.”*

*Providing yet more background information, she adds that her inquiry question for the year is, “When should I expect desired concepts to be internalized [by students]?” As is expected of all members of the district’s LLCs, Rachel has identified a question about her practice that she is focusing on throughout the year. The intention is that each LLC member will work on a unique question with the group’s coach and with the other LLC members.*

*Maria makes no effort to limit Rachel’s comments, which would assist the group in following the protocol more closely. Rather, after Rachel describes her inquiry question, Maria directs the group’s atten-*

tion to the next section of the protocol, "Describing the Student Work," which is to last ten minutes. She explains that the teachers should describe what they see in the student's writing samples while Rachel listens and takes notes but does not speak. She emphasizes, "Be very descriptive, without making judgments or interpretations."

Comments from the participants, offered with periods of silence in between, demonstrate that the teachers find it challenging to refrain completely from interpretation and judgment:

"The student uses a variety of font sizes in her writing."

"The pictures are simplistic, but defined."

"She appears to have difficulty with capitalization and spelling."

"She uses complete thoughts."

"The student shows knowledge of subjects and predicates."

"The student shows comprehension [of the text] through the use of expanded sentences."

The identification of characteristics continues for nearly twenty minutes, with participants remarking on the "wobbliness" of the letters, the way the student closely followed the margins on the page, and the types of pictures she drew, which one teacher finds to be expressive and animated. A number of comments focus on grammar. One participant points out that the student tends to overgeneralize the "ck" phonetic cluster, another points out "consistency in spelling," and another notes that the "commas are where they are supposed to be."

During this time, Rachel increasingly squirms in her chair, shifting her body position while appearing to listen intently. Eventually, she blurts out, "This is hard!" She then explains that she is finding it very difficult to remain silent and not jump in with explanations or in defense of her student. As facilitator, Maria is nondirective, making no moves to keep the teachers focused on the elements of the protocol or to point out that they are mixing judgments with descriptions.

Glancing at her watch, she says, "Okay, we'll now move to the third part, 'Interpreting the Student Work.'" Again reading from the handout, she explains, "It's where we'll attempt to make sense of what the student was doing and why, by finding as many different interpretations as possible and evaluating them against the kind and quality of evidence." She points out that Rachel is again expected to listen, take notes, and not talk.

Much of the ensuing discussion is nonresponsive to Maria's direction and centers instead on the student's understanding of grammar, accentuating the positives the group members see in the work. They comment that "the student has a good grasp of verb tenses," "a good

sense of punctuation,” and makes “good use of proper nouns.” Again they have strayed from the purpose of the protocol by diagnosing the child rather than imagining the child’s thinking. At one point, Rachel muses aloud, “She does have a nice voice and rhythm in her writing.”

The next segment of the protocol directs the group to focus on implications for classroom practice. Maria reads aloud that the group is to “discuss any implications this work might have for teaching and assessment in the classroom.” The group members become more animated and make suggestions about how Rachel could help her student. One suggests that Rachel construct a flowchart of the plot of *Harry Potter* that the student could keep in her journal. Others ask: “Have you tried having the student read assignments out loud, you know, to build on her oral skills?” and “Have you done any peer editing with the kids?” Rachel replies, “No, they don’t do peer editing—the group isn’t there yet.” Another suggests, “How about putting examples of the student’s work on an overhead projector, so the class as a whole can revise and edit it.” Another cheers Rachel on with, “You do have her writing now. She’s on the right track. She just needs polishing for presentation.”

Neglecting the final segment of the protocol, “Reflecting on the Process,” Maria announces, “We’re now at the end of the protocol.” Rachel jumps at the chance to talk about her student: “There’s this thing with spelling with this student. She gets perfect scores on her spelling tests, but I’m really worried about this kid. She has a speech impediment and has trouble pronouncing her ‘r’ blends. She consistently scores one to two levels below grade level on reading tests.” Appearing to reflect on what she’s heard from the group members, she muses, “You know, this kid is more interested in telling a story, not writing.”

Rachel’s insight is left hanging as the allotted time is over and group members begin packing up their materials, preparing to leave. Maria comments, “How difficult every kid is.” Another says, “I can’t imagine doing this for a whole day.”

## COMPARING SANTOS AND LINCOLN

The preceding episode from an LLC at Santos Elementary reveals some characteristics in common with the more experienced group at Lincoln. In both groups, a teacher is willing to share artifacts of work from her own classroom and appeal for help to the members of her learning community. Moreover, both presenting teachers exhibit a willingness to trust the group to provide needed help and appeal to them with ques-

tions based on a student work sample. Both groups stay focused on the intended topic; while their conversation is guided by a protocol, neither group strictly adheres to each step.

In addition to these common features, there are important differences, and some of the common features have different effects. The Lincoln group displays fluency and comfort with the conversation, even as it raises questions and issues. The facilitator's guidance is seamless, attending to the flow of the conversation more than directing it, with no clear demarcations of the beginning and ending of the phases of the discussion.

In fact, the teachers at Lincoln appear to have internalized the steps of the protocol and adapted it to their needs. Teachers other than the presenter express their own worries as they offer suggestions and ask for clarification from the presenting teacher.

At Santos, in contrast, only the presenting teacher names a problem or issue. There are few opportunities for clarification, and the somewhat stilted discourse proceeds haltingly, as if the teachers are unsure of the process. Their talk becomes animated only when they are prompted to offer implications for classroom practice, perhaps indicating less comfort with what the protocol asks of them until the end, when they feel in more familiar territory.

The Santos facilitator appears less skilled, allowing multiple deviations from the protocol. For example, when the presenting teacher obviously violates the protocol by describing her intentions and interjecting information about her inquiry question, the facilitator does not interrupt or redirect her. The group is not guided into discussion of the considerable evidence they have generated, and the insight Rachel voices at the end about the student being more interested in storytelling than writing is left dangling, a lost entry point for collective knowledge development and teacher learning. And, alas, the group will not meet again for a month.

Among the many possible reasons for the observed differences between the two learning communities, three stand out. One is simply that "experience shows." Not only does the coach at Lincoln have four years' experience in that role, but each of the learning community members is also experienced in LLCs (two to four years each). Moreover, Lincoln's group has been together for seven months and meets twice monthly for two hours. In contrast, the Santos vignette is from that group's fourth meeting, a session that occurs only once a month. The coach is newly trained, and the members have no prior experience using protocols.

A second explanation is size and structure. The Lincoln group is small—only six teachers—while the Santos group of twenty-one is much larger. Even as this large group breaks up halfway through the meeting for more intimate protocol-guided conversations, it is not clear that the membership of the small groups remains constant from meeting to meeting. Such lack of continuity would likely diminish their development as an LLC. The Lincoln teachers meet twice monthly for two hours, while the Santos group meetings are monthly for two-and-a-half hours. A month between conversations, especially when participants are novices at peer critique and assistance, is less likely to contribute to the development of analytic discourse than would more frequent meetings. Another structural feature is how the two LLCs use their time together. For the Lincoln group, the analytic discussion of their professional practice is the focus of their two hours. The Santos group used only about half of its time together in this way.

A third explanation for the observed differences is in the choice of protocol used by each group. The Lincoln group used what is commonly referred to as the “consultancy” protocol. The steps of this popular format are very familiar to the group, so much so that its discussion flowed rather quickly and purposefully toward more analytical discourse. The protocol guides group members, but they easily find their own footing and spend most of their time in substantive analysis and thoughtful reflection on the nature of the problem they are considering. In fact, it’s conceivable that the group, at that point, could have had the same discussion with very little reference to a particular protocol. Earlier practice with the protocol had taught the teachers how to have the conversation, and their experience led them to focus on analysis.

At Santos, even though the facilitator read aloud the assumptions behind the “ATLAS—Learning from Student Work” protocol, there is little evidence that those assumptions had significance or meaning for the group. The needed conditions set by ATLAS include sustained use over time, thoughtful support, time for discussion of purpose, and reflection on the process. None of those conditions obtained. Thus there was a significant mismatch between the circumstances of that particular learning community and what was needed for effective use of the protocol. Therefore, while both groups deviated from the protocols they used, the deviations at Lincoln extended the analysis and furthered a shared purpose; at Santos, the deviations altered or subverted the intentions of the protocol’s designers and did not result in the intended analysis.

Moreover, of the two protocols, the ATLAS protocol is likely to be more challenging to use effectively. ATLAS directs teachers to learn



from student work by suspending judgment and being strictly descriptive about the work without prior knowledge of context—about the teacher’s expectations, or the classroom setting, or the student. Such a stance is highly counterintuitive and also runs counter to other pressures on teachers to learn as much about individual students as possible. Thus not only are the Santos teachers engaging in a new practice—examining the work of a student from one of the teacher’s classes—but they have selected a protocol that directs them to do this in a novel and perhaps an uncomfortable manner. The Lincoln teachers are also examining student work for the first time. However, even though they are far more experienced with peer critique, they use a protocol they know well to guide their dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

The two vignettes highlight characteristics we saw both in newly formed LLCs and in LLCs that developed over time with the individuals and groups supported by the Peer Collaboration Initiative. For a variety of reasons (e.g., shifting research focus, school district personnel changes), we do not know how that particular Santos learning community evolved. We do know what happened at Lincoln, and that story is contained in chapters 6 and 7.

As the initiative developed, we observed that certain practices more than others accompanied teachers’ insightful analytical discussions about teaching and learning. Through engaging in constructive criticism, participants grappled with *problem posing*, with understanding the nature of the problems and issues they brought to the group rather than simply with solution seeking. Along with the many suggestions for addressing problems or issues, group members also wrestled with the multiple perspectives within the group. Along the way, new roles developed—teacher as critical friend, teacher as problem poser, teacher as learner, teacher as inquirer—that overlaid their many other roles, including teacher as implementer of imposed mandates and responder to external accountability.

And when their work together really “cooked,” they began to build a *shared responsibility* for developing knowledge with each other about teaching and learning. They became *accountable to each other* for what was happening in their own classrooms as they tried out ideas generated in the group and shared with group members their tales of success (or of woe).<sup>4</sup> Their work together became highly meaningful for their work with their own students.

We are convinced, however, that if teacher learning communities are to reach their full potential to leverage significant change, then such communities must do even more. The teachers participating in them—and the leaders of schools, and of school districts—must reject recipelike answers to complex problems, which are all too often proffered in schools. They must come to see that constructive responses to children’s learning problems demand keen attention, not only to generalized ideas about research-based practices but also to the specific, the idiosyncratic, the relational, and the personal. The Lincoln LLC shows us glimpses of what it looks like when teachers search together for contextualized answers to contextualized problems.

In the best of the communities we observed, teachers’ shared observations about students were rich in detailed particulars about behavior, attitudes, and social contexts. Out of their talk rose complex portraits of their students—their words, interactions, and behaviors. Moreover, in these communities the collaborative dialogue spawned possibility, inventiveness, and hope. Instead of hovering tightly around “the ways things have always been done” or “are we doing the protocol right?” the teachers’ conversations took flight toward what could be and what ought to be.

If this vision for teachers’ learning communities were to become widespread reality, then teaching might become something more than a “special but shadowed” (Lortie 1975) semi-profession. Learning communities can contribute to the true professionalization of teaching by increasing the likelihood that good teachers will stay in teaching, professional learning will be enhanced, and teachers’ tacit knowledge and practice-based expertise might be leveraged for the greater good. Teachers, then, would be positioned to reclaim accountability as a professional right and responsibility. The purpose of the rest of this book is to explore both the possibilities and the realities that arise from teachers learning in community. In exploring the multiple dimensions of this complex work, we have remained optimistic, even in the face of so much to lament over many of the current public policies governing teaching and public education in America.

## NOTES

1. For example, a literature search confined to journals produced by the American Educational Research Association between 1964 and 2000 yielded 788 articles using the phrase, while a search using Google Scholar in mid-April 2006 produced millions of hits.

2. For examples of protocols, go to <http://www.nsrffharmony.org> or <http://www.lasw.org>.

3. The descriptions about the mind-set needed for this approach to looking at student work that the facilitator read to the group appear to be from the work of Steve Seidel and colleagues of Project Zero at Harvard University. These statements do not appear on the actual protocol the group used during its December 2001 meeting. That document contains a note saying it is a tool developed by Eric Buchovecky and draws on the Project Zero work and that of the Leadership for Urban Mathematics project and the Assessment Communities of Teachers project.

4. For a fuller treatment of teachers' stories, see Wood 1992, 1996, 2000. See also Wood and Lacey 1991.

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