You can’t be growing all the time. There are ebbs and flows: when you get into a new school year; after a few weeks; the beginning of a new term; the end of term tidying up and rewards and satisfaction. No document you can produce will ever show us all those layers.

(Headteacher, quoted in Stoll et al. 2006b, booklet 12: 2)

We take this headteacher’s (principal’s) challenge seriously. She is almost certainly right that it is impossible to capture fully all the nuances of what makes professional communities work. Nevertheless, we approached this book with the belief that it is worth subjecting the popular ideal of professional learning communities (PLCs) to greater scrutiny. After all, many proponents eulogize its potential power to build capacity and transform schools, but there are still too few schools that know how to start – or, if they are already well along the road to developing professional learning communities, how to inject further energy into their efforts. In the light of significant efforts in many countries in the last few years to personalize learning and involve a wider range of stakeholders in school improvement, it is timely to subject the concept to greater analysis and see whether there are any new perspectives on professional learning communities that can help enrich our understanding of what they are, how to develop them, and what they do for teachers, students, and parents.

In this chapter, we start this search by exploring five questions:

- How are professional learning communities currently defined?
- Do existing definitions capture the full extent of professional learning communities?
Does the existing knowledge base lead us to deep understanding of how to develop professional learning communities?

Does the existing knowledge base draw sufficient attention to the challenges of professional learning communities and how they might be addressed?

Do existing collections pay sufficient attention to varying national contexts?

How are professional learning communities currently defined?

There is no universal definition of a professional learning community, but there is a consensus that you will know that one exists when you can see a group of teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Mitchell and Sackney 2000; Toole and Louis 2002). An underlying assumption is that the teachers involved see the group as a serious collective enterprise (King and Newmann 2001). It is also generally agreed that effective professional learning communities have the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of professionals in a school with the collective purpose of enhancing student learning (Louis et al. 1995; Bolam et al. 2005).

Each of the words making up the phrase ‘professional learning communities’ brings its own important meaning. The word professional suggests that the community’s work is underpinned by: a specialized and technical knowledge base; a service ethic orienting members to meet client needs; strong collective identity through professional commitment; and professional autonomy through collegial control over practice and professional standards (Talbert and McLaughlin 1994). Although teachers have limited control over professional standards, historically they have been able to exert discretionary judgement in the classroom (Day 1999), and in many countries they have a strong (although not exclusive) influence on curriculum standards.

During the 1990s, much of the emphasis was on ‘professional community’. It is not insignificant that the word ‘learning’ now appears between ‘professional’ and ‘communities’, because it connotes a shift in the emphasis away from a focus on process towards the objective of improvement. Although some early research on teachers’ workplace focused specifically on learning – Rosenholtz (1989) distinguished between ‘learning enriched’ and ‘learning impoverished’ schools – others pointed out that cohesive groups often have limited interest in changing their current practice. Little (1999), for example, distinguished between schools with strong teacher communities in which the professional culture is either that of ‘traditional
community’ (where work is co-ordinated to reinforce traditions) and ‘teacher learning community’ (where teachers collaborate to reinvent practice and share professional growth). Collective learning departs from traditional forms of professional development, which emphasize opportunities for individuals to hone their knowledge and skills in and out of their school settings. Learning in the context of professional communities involves working together towards a common understanding of concepts and practices (Bryk et al. 1999; Marks et al. 2002; Stoll et al. 2006a). What is held in common supplements, but does not supplant, what teachers learn individually and bring to their classrooms?

Underlying the earliest discussions of professional community was the core assumption that the group’s objective is not to improve teacher morale or technical skills, but to make a difference for students (pupils). Building on the arguments for the importance of caring as a component of school cultures (Noddings 1992; Beck 1994; Sergiovanni 1994; Hargreaves with Giles 2003), the professional community literature assumes that teachers always need to focus on the relationship between their practice and their students. However, a focus on caring without a clear link to support for student learning is regarded as meaningless and counterproductive, particularly for disadvantaged students (Louis et al. 1995). Subsequent analyses of student achievement in schools indicated that the presence of professional community that is centred on student learning makes a significant difference to measurable student achievement (e.g. Louis and Marks 1998; Bolam et al. 2005). This is what gives the concept the ‘legs’ to stand among other proposals for reform (Louis 2006).

In sum, the term ‘professional learning community’ suggests that focus is not just on individual teachers’ learning but on (1) professional learning; (2) within the context of a cohesive group; (3) that focuses on collective knowledge, and (4) occurs within an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of teachers, students and school leaders.

Do existing definitions capture the full extent of PLCs?

Professional learning communities have largely been interpreted as referring to groups of teachers supported by leaders. Is this group of ‘stakeholders’, however, now sufficient to serve the needs of all students in diverse contexts, as well as bringing about the kind of change needed in a complex and fast changing world? We think it is time for an expanded approach to the concept of professional learning communities to include both a broader membership and involving divergent knowledge bases.

An enlarged framework for professional learning communities forces those within schools to consider who has a valid stake in making a
difference to students’ learning and life chances. The saying ‘it takes a whole village to raise a child’ has particular resonance in relation to professional learning communities: can and should teachers go it alone? Schools exist within a wider social context. Disadvantage within the community has a significant impact on schools beyond its effects on individual students (Mortimore and Whitty 1997; Ainsworth 2002), and it is well established that parents are co-educators with teachers (McNeal Jr 1999). While school effectiveness research demonstrates that schools can make an important difference, this must not be construed to mean that teachers can be held entirely responsible for the success or otherwise of their students (Reynolds 1996). Others have vital roles to play too.

Teachers’ knowledge base also traditionally encompasses subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and that relating to child or adolescent development. Is this knowledge base truly broad enough to encompass all of the challenges that face children and young people in a diverse and changing society? There are other relevant and essential knowledge bases – some but not all of which may be professional knowledge – that are likely to be critical in helping improve schools. This may also mean challenging the status system of whose knowledge counts most – and the difficulty of doing this should not be underestimated.

In Table 1.1 we lay out some newer approaches to membership of PLCs that extend the available knowledge bases.

In addition to these alternative ways of construing potential PLC membership, there are other external stakeholders with specific expert knowledge that schools either call on or who, through critical friendship or creating ‘urgency’ (Earl and Lee 2000), may generate the impetus for developing PLCs. Such examples include staff in school districts and higher education institutions, external consultants and policy makers. Broadening perceptions of professional learning communities means rethinking notions of specific ‘location’ for professional learning community. Professional learning communities can cross boundaries, both the fuzzy social differentiations that develop between groups within the school, and the clearer borders that separate the school’s members from those in the community and in other schools. As with any boundary crossing, expanding our ideas about ‘who belongs’ presents challenges to the existing culture.

Taking a more inclusive perspective on membership in professional learning communities also raises a key question: are there developmental pathways in terms of increasing involvement? Do you have to start with teachers before you can involve support staff? We currently have more questions than answers. For example, if a staff member is supporting a special needs student in the classroom, but is not involved as an equal in a PLC’s development, how will this affect consideration of how to manage inclusion effectively? Similarly, if a school’s students have social care needs
that affect their learning and development but social workers play no part in developing the professional learning community, what are the effects on developing collective responsibility for student learning? Also, is it important or essential to have a thriving within-school professional learning community before you focus on developing external networks or do you start with multiple pathways? The jury is still out on many of these questions, which provides scope for further research.

While these examples suggest the need to broaden our understanding about what constitutes a professional learning community and who might qualify as a legitimate member, it is essential to emphasize that the purpose always remains the same – to enhance student learning. The desire to make schools more responsive to stakeholders may be an admirable goal in itself, but lies outside of the primary purpose of professional learning communities. Adding stakeholders to a PLC must not dilute or deflect its purpose, but augment its capacities and what it can achieve. In this sense, a recent definition of a professional learning community explains the extended professional learning community that we have described here: ‘an inclusive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Membership and knowledge bases of new professional learning communities</th>
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<td><strong>Systemic extensions to PLC membership</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>PLC as group(s) of teachers (original definition of PLC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extended across the school to include support staff, governing bodies/ members of school councils and students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extended among schools, to include networks of schools, often within school districts/local authorities, e.g. network or district as PLC, and sometimes including district personnel as members</td>
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<td>Extended beyond schools to include parents</td>
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<td>Extended beyond schools with the wider community and other services</td>
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<td>Extended beyond country borders to include participants in different cultural contexts</td>
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group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning' (Stoll et al. 2006a: 5).

Does existing knowledge lead us to deep understanding of how to develop PLCs?

There is a considerable amount of writing on professional learning communities, their characteristics and development processes, and yet it is extremely difficult to develop professional learning communities. This is at least partly due to the 'layers' described by the headteacher; the subtle nuances of communication, relationship building, collaboration and collective learning. Judith Warren Little (2002: 944) posed a challenge a few years ago to those who offer simplistic solutions or recipes:

> if we are to theorise about the significance of professional community, we must be able to demonstrate how communities achieve their effects ... The urgency associated with contemporary reform movements, especially those targeted at persistent achievement disparities, has intensified pressures on teachers and fueled policy interest in the collective capacity of schools for improvement. This is a timely moment to unpack the meaning and consequences of professional community at the level of practice.

We need better understanding of the collaborative processes in schools that lead to desirable outcomes for schools and those they serve. To do this, we need to go deeper in looking at concepts such as dialogue. While the idea of members of a team being able ‘to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine “thinking together”’ (Senge 1990: 10) may be extremely appealing, what does this mean when colleagues actually get together? What is it that opens up the ‘thinking together’ and, indeed, ‘learning together’ rather than ‘this is how you could do it better’? It is the subtle nuances that we need to understand. The same kinds of questions can be asked about aspects of professional learning community such as the role of culture and distributed leadership. What is it that makes these concepts ‘tick’?

To go deeper, we will also need more sophisticated processes and tools that can be used by professional learning communities or those supporting them; not well intentioned but mechanical tools, but more sophisticated processes and tools based on research that both helps promote understanding of and engagement with the idea and practice of professional learning communities with particular reference to people’s own contexts, as well as stimulating professional learning communities by promoting self-
evaluation, reflective enquiry, dialogue, collaborative learning and problem solving (Stoll et al. 2006b).

**Does the existing knowledge base draw sufficient attention to the challenges of PLCs and how they might be addressed?**

The difficulty of developing professional learning communities should not be underestimated. In addition to the usual daily implementation issues associated with any change process, there are bigger hurdles that, as yet, remain unresolved in many places. Of these challenges, we have chosen to highlight several in this book, although we recognize there are other important ones. The first challenge is the endemic difficulty of creating PLCs in secondary schools, where size and structure militate against school-wide collaboration, and where, specific disciplinary knowledge takes priority over shared knowledge about pedagogy and adolescent development needs. This is why secondary school studies of professional learning communities often focus on subject departments, and why professional community is usually lower among secondary school teachers (Louis and Marks 1998). A deputy head (assistant principal) in a secondary school in one of our research projects (Bolam et al. 2005) described his school’s professional learning community using a metaphor of a lava lamp with moving oil blobs, illustrating challenges of developing professional learning communities in secondary schools: ‘The learning community is the lamp but different things move around. At the moment the [specific subject] department is rising and is near the top of the lamp, but in three years’ time . . . it may look different’ (Stoll et al. 2006b, booklet 6: 3).

A second challenge within professional learning communities is brought into even sharper focus when their membership is extended beyond classroom teachers; that is the nurturing of social capital. Social capital is based on the quality of relationships among members of a social group and is facilitated by the extent and quality of internal and external networks. As Hargreaves (2003: 5) notes: ‘As a shorthand, intellectual capital is about know-what and know-how and social capital is about know-who.’ Social capital is often taken for granted in tightly knit communities. However, the more cohesive the internal ties are within a group, the less likely the members are to be densely networked with people in other groups. As those who study social networks have found, it is ties among groups that foster the most rapid spread of information (Granovetter 1973). Without due attention to fostering ties outside the school, strong professional communities can, paradoxically, become a barrier to change. If we take seriously the call to extend professional learning communities, going beyond schools as individual units of change, the situation becomes even more complex and
the need to address social capital even more imperative, finding ways to help people engage with each other, and remain engaged, in ‘relationships that have high degrees of satisfaction and achievement’ (West-Burnham and Otero 2004: 9).

Another key challenge, also explored in this book, is sustainability, described by Hargreaves and Fink (2006: 17) as being ‘basically concerned with developing and preserving what matters, spreads, and lasts and ways that create positive connections and development among people and do no harm to others in the present or in the future’. Sustainable development in all organizations, including schools, is premised on a number of principles, including inclusiveness, connectivity, equity, prudence, and consistent attention to the needs of human beings (Gladwin et al. 1995). What matters most in PLCs, however, is learning in the broadest sense (Delors et al. 1996); learning that is for all and is continuous (Stoll et al. 2003). For Hargreaves and Fink (2006: 17), and for us, sustainable improvement ‘preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts’. This raises tensions between the inevitable and necessary flexibility and moving, energized set of relationships and stability, because it is extremely hard to learn in unstable settings. Instability is a serious problem for schools which, as public institutions, have a limited ability to manage their own policies, even under school-based leadership and management. Instability that comes from outside the school is currently confounded by turnover among teachers and school leaders in many countries. Rather than worrying about lack of new blood, many school systems worry about how to create social connections and community under conditions in which every year brings a large number of new staff members, many of whom have little experience. Rapid changes in personnel may reinforce the experienced educators’ belief that they need to be self-reliant rather than counting on support from peers and school leaders (administrators).

Sustaining connections and community is made more complex by the explosion of technology, which permits the development of online groups that provide stimulating sources of information and safe, neutral arenas for support, but may also be unstable, more likely to involve imbalanced participation, and less amenable to the sustained, deep, reflective engagement that most of us associate with face-to-face relationships that endure over time (Trauth and Jessup 2000).

Do existing collections pay sufficient attention to varying national contexts?

For a number of years, the most widely cited research about professional community and how to develop professional learning communities emerged
from North America and, particularly, the USA. Professional learning communities, however, have been explored by colleagues in other countries for some time. As interest in PLCs’ potential grows internationally, it is important both to acknowledge the work coming out of other countries as well as attending to the nuances of different cultural contexts.

This collection pulls together people from different countries in the English-speaking world, many of whom have spent significant periods of time exploring professional learning communities. The book grew out of initial informal meetings among a group of colleagues involved in the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (www.icsei.net) who have been exchanging findings and insights for several years. As we found commonalities in our data that were reassuring, we also confronted similarities in the challenges that we face. As we began to organize the book, we also felt that it was important to include several of our North American colleagues whose recent work seemed central to addressing the common themes and challenges that emerged in ICSEI. Thus, we hope that the contributions in this book will be of value to readers in many countries, who seek to understand and develop professional learning communities without reverting to simplistic recipes. Our contributors are not papering over real differences in the educational systems and roles that characterize their different national contexts, but we have asked each of them to emphasize those findings that reflect what is shared rather than distinct. Furthermore, we wish to acknowledge colleagues in countries not represented in this volume who are making valuable headway in the development of understanding and critical, reflective and contextualized use of findings about professional learning communities. Space constraints have limited our ability to present a comprehensive overview of the state of the art.

Conclusion

We see professional learning communities as an integral part of today’s educational world – a world of greater connections – and planned this volume as a step in the direction of more divergent thinking. We therefore choose to include issues ranging from ‘who belongs’ in PLCs, to how to stimulate them in authentic rather than technocratic ways, to how to create meaningful connections within large, unwieldy networks of people who can meet face to face relatively rarely. We also probe the nuances of what is discussed in professional learning communities, and how it is discussed, because until we know how people work together in these unfamiliar contexts, it is hard to make recommendations about how to expand them. Getting deeper into the subtleties of translating the rhetoric of professional
learning communities into reality is also going to be critical to ensuring effective professional learning communities in a complex and changing world, as is really getting to grips with serious challenges that have the potential to derail the whole process.

The remainder of the book is divided into parts where the contributors tackle aspects of these three issues: divergence, depth and dilemmas. There is a short introduction to the contributions at the start of each part, and the book concludes with a short invited reflection on professional learning communities.

In the spirit of promoting professional learning communities, we conclude with four questions that you and fellow members of your professional learning community (or each of your professional learning communities) may wish to consider before you read the contributions and four to consider after your reading.

Questions for reflection and dialogue before reading the book

- What is your interpretation of the expression ‘professional learning community’?
- Who do you think of when you say ‘our professional learning community’?
- What are the two or three aspects of developing your professional learning community or of professional learning communities you know that you would like to explore in more depth?
- What are the key challenges as you see them in developing professional learning communities?

Questions for reflection and dialogue after reading the book

- Has your interpretation of the expression ‘professional learning community’ changed? If so, why? Which author(s) challenged you most?
- Who do you now think of when you say ‘our professional learning community’?
- Have contributions in the book provided any insights into the aspects of developing your professional learning community or of professional learning communities you know you want to explore? If so, how might you use these insights? If no, where might you go to seek out further knowledge?
- Have contributions in the book identified ways in which some of your challenges might be resolved? Where else might you seek further knowledge?
References


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