
Feature Article

Professional Learning Communities: A Model for Curriculum Reform in Japan?

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本論は、日本の大学における言語教育プログラム再生手法としてのプロフェッショナルラーニングコミュニティ（PLC）の可能性について論じる。PLCとは、会社組織及び教育の両分野における研究に基づいて構築された教育機関のための組織論である。本稿では特に、PLCとは何か、それは本当に新しい理論なのか、そしてその理論を日本の大学教育に適用することの妥当性と現実性について論説を試みる。PLCは以下の三つの基本的思想によって特徴付けられる。教育より学習に焦点を当てること、コラボレーション手法に力点を置くこと、そして個人の成果に焦点を当てることである。PLCのどの要素にも取り立てて革新的な新規性は見出せないものの、その特徴のすべてを備えた言語教育プログラムを見出すことは容易ではないだろう。PLC理論は教育改革における有意なモデルとなり得るが、その効果を適正かつ最大限に引き出すためには、特定の条件を満たした教育環境が必要である。PLCについての評価を行うためには、更なる調査研究が必要とされる。

Introduction

A recent educational trend cutting across educational sectors in North America is Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Its origins lie both in the fields of corporate research (Deming, 1986; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Seng, 1990) and educational research (Little, 1987; Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1989). More recently, the introduction of the standards based movement in the U.S. has granted impetus to the

PLC trend in educational circles (Elmore, 2000; Reeves, 2005) and the movement has caught on north of the border. Alberta's Commission on Learning has gone so far as to recommend Alberta "require every school to operate as a professional learning community dedicated to continuous improvement in students' achievement" (2003, Recommendation 13). The quotes below provide some indication of current optimism among proponents:

"Professional learning communities may very well be the context we need to truly enhance second language learning for all children in our schools" (Seaward-Gagnon, 2000, ¶7).

"(PLCs) ...improve the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting" (Schmoker, 2005a, p. xii).

"My personal experience in the process tells me that when teachers work in this type of environment, great things are possible. Professional learning communities will empower teachers to be the leaders in school improvement" (Skytt, 2002, p. 1).

Determining whether this kind of exuberant optimism is warranted from a tertiary level EFL perspective in Japan requires looking at three related questions:

- What are PLCs?
- Are they really new?
- Can they be effectively and appropriately applied to our teaching context here at universities in Japan?

I will briefly look at the three questions and draw some tentative conclusions.

What Are PLCs?

Corporate and Educational Research

On the corporate side, contributions to the development of PLCs come from researchers such as Peters and Waterman (1982), who noted the critical importance of effective corporate teams. In these teams they noted a focus on continued collective effort, guided by measurable goals as well as the celebration of successes. Successful corporations were defined by successful management teams that incorporate individual as well as team accountability and “provide abundant opportunities for individuals to share their collective and complementary skills and abilities toward better results” (Schmoker, 2005b, p. 146). On the educational side, research by Rosenholtz (1989) seemed to find similar evidence of goal-directed teamwork in successful schools. Her research indicated that high achieving schools differ fundamentally from other schools in the level of goal-congruence and teacher collaboration. Proponents of PLCs have worked to combine the results of corporate and educational research into a coherent organizational framework which would allow schools to implement key aspects.

PLCs and Learning Communities

As the popularity of PLCs has grown the meaning has lost some of its clarity and its proponents have been struggling to reassert their own definition: “Many schools and districts that proudly proclaim they are professional learning communities have shown little evidence of either understanding the core concepts or implementing the practices of PLCs” (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005, p. 9). Some of the misunderstanding probably results from confusion over the difference between PLCs and often more vaguely defined “learning communities.” Mitchell and Sackney (2001) write that a learning community “consists in a group of

people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward both the mysteries and the problems of teaching and learning” (Underpinnings of the learning community sectiond. ¶4), PLCs take a more organizational approach as is evident in the following common themes identified by DuFour et al. (2005) and Hord (1997):

- ⊙ Sustaining the hard work of change
- ⊙ Transforming school culture
- ⊙ Supportive and shared leadership
- ⊙ Shared value and visions
- ⊙ Learning for all vs. teaching for all
- ⊙ Collaborative culture vs. teacher isolation
- ⊙ Shared personal practice
- ⊙ Collective creativity
- ⊙ Collective capacity vs. individual development
- ⊙ Developing and applying shared knowledge
- ⊙ Supportive conditions (to facilitate meeting and sharing)
- ⊙ A focus on results not activities
- ⊙ Assessment for learning vs. assessment of learning
- ⊙ Widespread leadership vs. charismatic leadership
- ⊙ Self-efficacy vs. dependency

Three Key Parameters in PLCs

DuFour (2005) seeks to specifically address the problem of defining PLCs by specifying three key parameters or “big ideas”:

- a. There is a focus on student learning rather than teaching. DuFour further identifies three crucial questions (p. 33):
 - What do we want each student to learn?
 - How will we know when each student has learned it?
 - How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

DuFour (2005) claims that it is the response to the last question

that differentiates PLCs from regular schools:

When a school begins to function as a professional learning community... teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn. (p. 34)

He goes on to elaborate that a school needs to identify students who need additional support and to intervene in a timely fashion. In addition, "Instead of inviting students to seek additional help, the systematic plan requires students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered the necessary concepts" (p. 34).

- b. There is a "culture of collaboration" in which teachers systematically work together to analyze and try to improve what they do in the classroom. Teachers regularly meet and discuss what worked, what didn't work, and any problems and/or successes they may be having. DuFour (2005) specifies the kinds of collaboration he envisions as an ongoing systematic process of analysis and collaboration by teams of teachers (p. 36). A key part of this collaborative effort is openness, in which teachers willingly share all aspects of their teaching practices (p. 38).
- c. Teachers and administrators make their judgements about what works or doesn't work on the basis of results, defined in terms of measurable student learning. In addition assessment, in this paradigm, is not simply a one-time end of course action but a continuous, interactive, system of assessment for learning. DuFour (2005) writes: "every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress" (p. 39-40). A focus on individual students' progress, rather than

overall averages, is central to a PLC, as is the direct confrontation of “unfavourable data” wherever it appears. Similarly teaching practices that are demonstrably effective are given due recognition and replicated in team members’ classes.

Are PLCs New?

It would probably be difficult to describe any specific component of PLCs as radically new. By proposing a focus on student learning DuFour (2005) is, in essence, advocating the introduction of goals and objectives, a common theme in the literature on curriculum development (Richards, 2001, p. 112). As for a “collaborative culture,” teacher collaboration is generally recognized as a critical component of teacher development programs (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Similarly educators have been advocating for increased openness of the classroom for decades since Lieberman and Miller (1978) noted that teaching isolation defined the professional life of most teachers. Finally, Richards has described two means of assessing a course’s effectiveness, “mastery of objectives” and “performance on tests” (p. 292) that also encourage a focus on measurable results.

Are PLCs Common in Japanese Universities?

While no single component of PLCs is revolutionarily new, this certainly does not mean that they are regularly applied in tertiary language programs in Japan. Ask yourself the following questions about your program:

- Does your program, and all courses, have clear objectives defined in terms of student learning goals?
- Does your program have a system to continuously assess students’ mastery of the objectives of the program and the courses they take?
- In the case students are failing to meet the objectives of the

program or courses, is there a systematic plan to actively intervene in helping students attain them?

- Do all teachers, part-time and full-time, regularly meet to share information on what they are doing in their courses?
- Do the teachers and coordinators in your program base syllabus and pedagogical decisions on the regular compilation of data regarding individual student achievement?
- Does your program directly confront and deal with “negative data,” and are demonstrably effective teaching practices shared and implemented by all teachers?

If you can answer yes to all the questions above, you would indeed appear to be a member of a PLC, whether you have elected to call it so or not. In fact, this would require a level of curriculum coordination, as well as teacher collaboration, which is quite rare in the Japanese university context. As a model for the systematic and collaborative incorporation of objectives and accountability, as well as ongoing teacher and curriculum development, PLCs do have something to offer language programs at Japanese universities. The question remains whether the model is realistic or even appropriate in the Japanese tertiary education system.

Can & Should PLCs Be Incorporated in English Education in Japanese Universities?

Differing Educational Contexts

The context in which many PLCs are currently taking root is the primary and secondary education system of the U.S., particularly schools adapting to the standards reform movement. Much of the concern over the decline in education voiced in the U.S., which prompted the introduction of national standards, would probably resonate with complaints now being expressed here in Japan. However, there are a

number of key differences between the teaching situation in a primary or secondary school in the United States and that of university teachers in Japan, including the following:

- Departments at universities in Japan generally have a department head who is less involved in educational issues than a school principal.
- Part-time teachers often teach half the classes or more in many departments, and there is typically no tradition of holding regular meetings, involving all teachers, with a primary focus on education.
- Research plays a far more important role than teacher development in day-to-day life and career advancement in the tertiary context.
- While there have been calls for reform at the tertiary level in Japan, there has been no movement toward the systematic incorporation of standards that have contributed to the development of PLCs in the United States.
- Post-secondary education is non-compulsory.
- The student-teacher ratio is generally higher at universities in Japan. In addition, the number of class contact hours between teachers and students is considerably less, particularly compared to primary schools where the students have the same teacher much of the day.

Are PLCs Feasible in the Japanese Tertiary System?

The first issue, when considering PLCs in the Japanese university context, is whether it would be feasible to incorporate them in language programs. By and large, I suspect most university teachers here in Japan would see tremendous hurdles in doing so in their own teaching context. PLCs demand a level of coordination, of both the curriculum and teachers, which might defy most post-secondary language programs. In addition PLCs require a single-minded focus on

education, with an accompanying teacher and student accountability that might conflict with aspects of traditional university culture, where the professor's primary role is often seen as that of scholar (Kelly & Adachi, 1993, p. 161), and even students may not see learning as their primary goal (Kelly, 1993, p. 177). However, due to demographics and declining student numbers, many universities are now engaging in a level of soul-searching that may make the present era an opportune one in which to implement systematic and extensive program reforms, including increased coordination and a renewed focus on education (Gossman & Cisar, 1997; Kelly, 1998). That has, indeed, been the case at my university, which has allowed for a level of curriculum and teacher coordination never seen before. The changes to the program have included the implementation of clear and specific objectives for all courses as well as the introduction of "coordinating meetings". To allow for part-time teacher involvement in the meetings, all teachers for a given course are asked to finish class thirty minutes early, twice a semester, in order to meet and share information and ideas on the course they are teaching.

In the present competitive environment among universities in Japan PLCs may be able to offer language programs, with the will and flexibility to pursue wide-ranging reform, an effective and comprehensive model based on the successes of schools in North America. However the effective implementation will involve, as Skytt (2002) notes, both structural and cultural changes. The structural changes would include the development of objectives and teacher teams as well as the allocation of time and resources, while the cultural changes would include a renewed focus on education and an atmosphere that encourages collaborative dialogue and reflective teaching practice. There can be little doubt that the introduction of these changes would present a real paradigm shift for many tertiary language programs.

Are PLCs Appropriate in Japanese Universities?

A second, related, issue is whether it would be appropriate to employ PLCs in the context of Japanese universities. A strong theme running through the literature on PLCs is the development of a common 'organizational vision' in the form of a collective commitment to coordinated learning goals. Tarnoczi (2006) argues that, instead of facilitating educational creativity or learning, PLCs actually operate primarily as a means of organizational control over its individuals, the teachers. This criticism might strike a strong chord with university professors in Japan, where any move towards increased curriculum coordination is sometimes viewed as interference in the traditional domain of the lecturer. In PLCs collaboration is a key and critical component, a point Eaker (2002) makes quite strongly: "Collaboration by invitation will not work. It is never enough. This is a key point. In a professional learning community, collaboration is embedded into every aspect of school culture" (p. 11). This, of course, begs the question as to whether true and effective collaboration can be *induced* from participants. However, setting aside for the moment the *process* of implementing PLCs and bringing everyone on board, it would probably be difficult to find anything particularly controversial with any of the following core characteristics:

- Clear and measurable goals, defined in terms of student learning, and determined by teachers and program coordinators at the local level.
- A strong culture of collaboration, with teachers working together and sharing ideas on how to help students achieve learning goals.
- Clear accountability for learning as well as teaching, where students' and teachers' actions are guided by data on the actual learning progress of students.

No doubt, though, the movement towards the increased collaboration demanded by PLCs would require negotiation, patience, and tact, and

will probably not take place in the absence of strong and committed leadership, a fact of which PLC proponents are well aware. In fact, advocates of PLCs are quite specific regarding the kind of leadership required: "The PLC concept operates from the premise that leadership should be widely dispersed throughout a school, and thus developing the leadership potential of all staff members is imperative" (DuFour et al., 2005, p. 23). This does not appear to mean that PLCs can take place in the absence of committed administrative leaders. Louis and Kruse (1994) write that the supportive leadership of principals in schools is crucial in the process of becoming a PLC. While the importance of the school principal, particularly in a transition stage, is widely recognized in the literature on PLCs, one cannot simply substitute the department head in the Japanese tertiary context, as they occupy quite different roles. It would appear that, at the very outset, a department would need strong support amounting to a near consensus of full-time language teachers before taking steps to implement the characteristics of PLCs.

Another issue is the direct and active intervention in the case of students who are failing to meet specific learning goals. At the tertiary level, many might argue that students have significantly more responsibility for their own learning than, say, primary school students. In addition, can teachers of large language classes that meet once a week, be really held accountable for dealing directly and immediately with those who are failing to meet specific learning targets? While teacher options may be more limited at the tertiary level, teachers could certainly draw students' attention to areas of concern and, ultimately, withhold credit for those who fail to meet course objectives.

In our own program absolute minimum standards have been introduced in the form of a "four strikes and you're out" system. Students acquire strikes for such things as failing weekly quizzes, incomplete homework, or simply failing to show up for class without adequate reason and advance notice. In addition, students in all courses are

presented with learning objectives, as well as the means by which they will be assessed, at the start of a semester. Such clear course-wide standards have been successful in raising the performance of many students who might have simply attained credit in the past based solely on minimum attendance. In addition, by agreeing on course-wide standards, individual teachers have been relieved to a certain degree of the subjective burden of determining whether or not to grant credit to border line students. Where teachers lack the time to work with students having particular difficulties, the students in question have been encouraged to solicit help at the Self-Access Center, where they have the option of consulting a full time language-study counsellor. In general, for students and language programs, the systematic incorporation of learning objectives and accountability would be a significant improvement on a curriculum involving simply the “superficial collection of titles” (Gatton, 1999).

Do Teachers Stand to Gain?

As a movement focused on improving schools and programs at the organizational level the advantages for teachers might be less apparent. Proponents have argued the following:

- PLCs provide the opportunity to break down the isolation that typifies the work environment of many teachers. Teachers would be able to confront “failures,” share their own successes, and benefit from the successes of peers in an environment where innovation and risk-taking are encouraged.
- PLCs operate at the local level and allow for teacher input in the syllabus as well as pedagogical decisions. In this context teachers regularly meet to work together to establish learning targets, methods of assessment, and responses to results. A common assumption underlying PLCs is that teachers already have all the skills necessary and that disciplined, collective effort can serve to make maximum use of those knowledge

and skills.

- PLCs demystify the teaching-learning process. Focusing on measurable learning results, and continuously acting on those results, serves to professionalize the practices of all teachers who take part.

The key question is whether these advantages would be enough to persuade teachers in Japan to willingly give up on a strong tradition of teacher autonomy and the sanctity of the individual classroom.

Conclusion

Is the PLC movement an appropriate model for reviving education and teaching practices? I suspect that, for many teachers, there are few ideas that are revolutionarily new. Perhaps an analogy can be made between PLCs and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Could anyone seriously claim that language teachers before CLT didn't realize that languages served a communicative purpose? Its importance was in applying what educators already knew to teaching practices. Yet, despite the hallowed position CLT occupies in the minds of many teachers today, educators are increasingly recognizing the importance of context in mitigating the ultimate appropriateness and effectiveness of CLT methodology (Bax, 2003; Hu, 2005). Similarly, while PLCs may offer a model for program reform, ultimately their feasibility and effectiveness will depend to a large degree on the specific organizational and teaching environment. We would probably do well to approach PLCs in the same way Swan (1985) suggested we approach CLT. Instead of asking, "Is it true?" ask "What good does it do?" (p. 87) Tentative steps taken in our own department have been promising, but any determination on the ultimate success of PLCs as a model for program reform in the Japanese tertiary education context requires more research. At the very least, PLCs warrant a closer look from those language programs with the will and means to introduce comprehensive reforms.

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