The Role of the Learning Community in the Professional Development of Literacy Teachers

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University of South Carolina - Columbia

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The Role of the Learning Community in the Professional Development of Literacy Teachers

by

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Bachelor of Science
Bowling Green State University, 2002

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University of South Carolina, 2007

Master of Education
University of South Carolina, 2010

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Language and Literacy
College of Education
University of South Carolina
2014

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Dedication

for

Kevin & Maxwell

“But I tried so hard, and we tried so hard
And it's a long long road, that you told me so

And all we do is laugh and we sing

And we laughed
and we cried and thought
oh, what a life”

American Authors, Track 11, 2014
Acknowledgements

My dear friend Rohan once told me that great achievement does not come from being smart; it is, instead, the result of having stamina. I would like to acknowledge the following people who nurtured that spirit of stamina in me throughout this long doctoral journey.

I am so grateful for the amazing educators who dedicated so much of their time to guide me and grow me as members of my committee. I can see the impact each had on my thinking and my writing in various places in this work. I was lucky to have spectacular co-chairs for this dissertation. Dr. Tasha Laman: your belief in me and my work made me believe in myself. Dr. Heidi Mills, thank you for your patience, your questioning, your time, your unending belief in me. You both grew me into the thinker and writer you knew I could be, and I am grateful for that. I could not have imagined a stronger or more dynamic committee. Dr. Toni Williams, your enthusiasm and support meant so much and Dr. Lynn Harrill, your insight and advice motivated me. Dr. Pam Jewett, my first chair in this dissertation journey, thank you for gently nudging me to persevere.

I also wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Jennifer Wilson, my first advisor in this program: I hope all I learned from you is evident in my work with kids and teachers. The passion you had for literacy in general and middle schoolers in particular first drew me to this program and made you such an amazing mentor. You once told me that anticipation
of something can oftentimes be better than the actual event. Granted, you were talking about popping open a Diet Coke and how the sound is better than the sip. But that idea holds true in this situation, too: the struggle leading up to the completion of this dissertation was richer and more exciting than being done writing the words on the pages. You always said no matter where you were when I finished, you would come to South Carolina for my hooding ceremony. I know that you will be there.

   To the participants of this study: thanks for letting me into your meetings, classrooms, and lives. It was a pleasure and an honor. I learned so much from each of you.

   I would also like to thank my amazing and supportive colleagues and friends in education. I am fortunate to work alongside people who are smart and kind and who keep students at the center of all they do. Specifically, I am appreciative of my friend and mentor, Shawn Clark, who has always pushed me to work harder than I thought I could.

   Finally, I wish to thank my family. I am especially grateful for my big sister, Anne, who always knew I would finish this degree. I am also thankful for Max, who was little enough to nap in my lap as I wrote, but silly enough to remind me when it was time to stop writing to play. And to Kev, whose support as I pursued this degree was unwavering. Thank you for believing in me.
Abstract

This qualitative case study explored a learning community in action. The purpose of this study was to investigate the professional conversations that teachers in a learning community had and the impact of those conversations on the practices and beliefs of the individual teachers in the community. Specifically, the study sought to discover how and why facets of professional learning transferred (or did not transfer) into classroom practice. The researcher spent five months with a learning community comprised of six middle school literacy teachers and attended their learning community meetings, visited their classrooms, and videotaped them teaching. Each classroom visit was followed with a one-on-one guided reflection conversation. These guided reflection conversations were semi-structured interviews during which the teacher and the researcher watched teacher-selected clips of the filmed observations.

The findings in this study expanded and complicated understandings about professional learning. Elements of narrative analysis were utilized in order to capture the voice of teachers and the stories they told about their teaching and learning experiences in order to reveal a deeper understanding of effective professional development: professional development that honors teachers as professionals, creates space for teacher collaboration, and values reflection as a means for growth and learning. Analysis of the data led to deeper understandings about teachers’ professional needs, about the dynamic relationships teachers form, and about the importance of creating multiple spaces for professional learning. Through data analysis, three professional learning spaces emerged.
and were described in detail: 1) inside - the professional learning within the learning community, 2) outside - what teachers took back to their classrooms, and 3) around - the professional learning settings that surrounded the learning community and the teachers’ classrooms, including: spaces for reflection, school-based professional development, graduate school, one-on-one professional settings.

The study explored data collected during learning community meetings, from teachers’ classrooms, and through guided reflection conversation. The subsequent findings provided support for the continued creation of learning communities; however, findings also indicated that learning communities cannot stand alone as a singular approach to professional learning. In other words, learning communities, while necessary, were not a total solution. While the findings of this study do not provide a simple solution, they do honor the complexity inherent in all human endeavors and the belief that a comprehensive professional learning plan can be designed to include multiple spaces to meet the diverse needs of teachers.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

I investigated the professional conversations that teachers in a learning community had and the impact of those conversations on the practices and beliefs of the individual teachers in the community. Specifically, this study sought to discover how and why facets of professional development through teacher participation in a professional learning community transferred into classroom practice. Therefore, I explored the following research questions:

1. What went on in the teachers’ learning community when teachers discussed their teaching?
2. What impact, if any, did on-going collaboration within a learning community have on teacher practice?
3. What did guided reflection reveal about teacher beliefs and practices?

I came to these research questions through a number of professional experiences that have shaped my twelve-year career as an educator. I began my career in education in 2002 as an eighth-grade English language arts (ELA) teacher at Silver Middle School (SMS) in South Carolina (name of school is a pseudonym). In January 2006, I began work on my Master’s degree in Language and Literacy at the University of South Carolina. I had spent months researching potential degree programs and kept coming back to this particular one because the course descriptions seemed to describe the kind of democratic, student-centered classroom and school I wanted to help create (Beane, 1997; Eisner, 1994; Dewey, 1916, 1938). After three semesters of coursework, the
position of literacy coach came open at SMS, and I applied for and was moved into that role. I continued to teach one ninety-minute class of English language arts a day. This helped my work with teachers as I was still in the classroom in some capacity and colleagues considered me a peer as opposed to an administrator who was removed from the classroom. The majority of my time outside the classroom was spent working with teachers, conducting classroom observations, and designing professional development.

Over the next two years, the ELA teachers at SMS and I met as a literacy team twice a month, but our meetings were not very focused. With regard to professional development, I facilitated book studies on texts such as Beers’ (2003) *When Kids Can’t Read, What Teachers Can Do* and Johnston’s (2004) *Choice Words*, but oftentimes our meetings consisted of unstructured talk about the goings-on in our classrooms. Philosophically I believed in the importance of teachers meeting in teams in order to collaborate through their reflections on teaching. I also believed that professional development should be an on-going process. However, the lack of focus left the succession of meetings with an aimless, random feeling.

During this time, I was also a member of the school leadership team, which consisted of one representative from each content area (English, Mathematics, Special Education, Science, Social Studies, Related Arts), the assistant principal, guidance counselor, and principal. During the 2008-2009 school year, a consultant started working with the leadership team at SMS. His objective was to provide professional development regarding the creation of what he called authentic Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Venables, 2011). He provided the following definition of authentic PLCs:
When PLCs are authentic, the teacher culture of a school shifts from one of teachers working in isolation and competition to one in which teachers not only collaborate effectively but grow interdependent on each other, improving their individual and collective effect on learning. (Venables, 2011, p. 18)

This professional development model stressed the importance of a structured approach to creating a learning community through the use of protocols. As a leadership team, we engaged in several protocols:

- The first of these protocols was designed to set group norms, “a set of mutually decided upon expectations regarding how meeting time will be spent, how disagreements will be addressed, and how all discourse among participants will be conducted” (Venables, 2011, p. 26).
- We also began to set goals for our meetings, which brought a sense of purpose to our group.
- Tuning Protocols were used to structure our discussions of student work and teacher-created units and assessments.
- Consultancy Protocols were used in order to discuss dilemmas we were facing instructionally or professionally.

These structures were emphasized at first as we all learned to work together to create a learning community, and structure also helped to maintain fidelity as each leadership team member was expected to replicate the on-going professional development with his or her content-area learning community. This school-wide professional development helped me begin to see the powerful potential teacher learning communities held. As the literacy team’s representative, I began to replicate the professional development on PLCs with the literacy team. We worked collaboratively to restructure ourselves as a PLC.
After an academic year (2008-2009) of functioning as a PLC, we moved to a shared leadership model during the 2009-2010 school year. Each member of the literacy team took responsibility for planning the topics for each of our bi-monthly meetings. The topics were supposed to address the goals that had been set by the group at the beginning of the academic year. Topics during the 2009-2010 academic year included: increasing the amount of text-based writing, teaching research through an inquiry-based model, and the benefits of teaching Greek and Latin roots. The structure that seemed so critical during our first year of implementation began to loosen and our meetings took on a more natural feel as evidenced by the replacement of protocol structures with conversation that instinctively adhered to the set group norms. We were able to take the structured PLC model and mold it into a more natural learning community configuration, which was a positive shift.

For the 2010-2011 school year, district administrators asked me to fulfill the role of instructional coach for both Silver Middle School and Silver High School (SHS). At this point, I had to step down as the official leader of the literacy team; however, since we had moved to a shared leadership model that title had been in name alone. I still attended the SMS literacy team PLC meetings as often as my split-schedule allowed (at least once a month). In July 2011, I was promoted to Assistant Principal for Instruction at SHS and my responsibilities were focused solely at SHS. PLCs continued to function at SMS, though I was no longer able to attend the meetings.

After spending four years in professional development that focused on the creation and sustainment of PLCs, I began to wonder how often the ideas and beliefs discussed within the PLC professional conversations transferred into individual
teacher’s classroom practice. I believed in the powerful act of teachers building relationships and creating space for professional conversations to flourish, but was this enough? Were the beliefs verbalized in PLC meetings reflected in classroom practice? It was here that the ideas for this dissertation study began to take shape.

**Rationale for the Study**

There is a need for additional studies of learning communities, specifically those that explore the transfer of the professional growth teachers undergo within their communities and the impact of that growth on their practices and beliefs about teaching. My study seeks to provide opportunities for participating teachers to engage in: 1) professional conversations about instructional strategies, teaching practices, and beliefs about teaching; and 2) reflective talk that focuses on the teachers’ analysis of videotapes of themselves teaching. I called this analysis guided reflection. During guided reflection, the teacher and I watched clips of the videotaped observation and discussed the actions and instructional decisions that were made. As the researcher, I asked questions to guide the teacher’s reflection of the videotape. The guided reflection form can be found in Appendix A. I also examined the impact of this guided reflection on individual teacher beliefs and how those beliefs might impact the practice of teaching. The guided reflection questions specific to each observation can be found in Appendix B. Through guided reflection, my hope was that teachers would be more likely to transfer what they learn with their learning community to their classroom planning and instruction.

In the literature, one body of research examines the process of creating learning communities or provides insight regarding the work in which learning communities engage (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald,
2007; Venables, 2011, Wells, 2008). Another body of literature examines learning communities as an effective professional development model (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hollins, et. al, 2004; Phillips, 2003; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Additionally, a third body of professional literature explores the impact of learning communities on aspects such as school culture and student achievement (Little, 2002; Little, 2003; Nelson, 2009; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002). I have summarized these studies and others in the Review of Related Studies and Relevant Literature. Through this review, I found few studies that explore how professional conversations in learning communities and reflection on those conversations and on teacher beliefs transfer or not into teachers’ practices. This is the gap in the literature that my study helped to address.

**Overview of my Theoretical Frame**

The framework that was the foundation for this study was defined by my belief in the importance of effective professional development opportunities for teachers. By effective I meant professional development that honored teachers as professionals (Cochran-Smith & Lytle,1990), addressed the social nature of learning (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978, Wells, 1999), and valued the power of reflection (Barth, 2003; Short & Burke, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). When space is created in professional development experiences for these three components to flourish, teacher growth and learning is likely. As an educator and teacher leader for twelve years, designing professional development opportunities that possessed those characteristics was at the foundation of my beliefs.
My theoretical beliefs about effective professional development are best represented in Figure 1.1 below and will be discussed in-depth in the Review of Related Studies and Relevant Literature of this proposal:

![Figure 1.1 Theoretical beliefs about effective professional development](image)

**Overview of the Study**

I used a case study design in order to “gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). I considered the projected participants for my study as a single case: a team of six literacy teachers who are members of the same learning community. I attended the learning community meetings in an attempt to capture professional conversations as data. My role at these meetings was that of a moderate participant, defined by Spradley (1980) as “maintaining
a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation” (p. 60). The data I collected included transcriptions of videotaped professional conversations that took place during bi-monthly literacy learning community meetings. Concurrently, I conducted videotaped classroom observations and engaged the teachers in reflective conversation, which I called guided reflection, in order to discern their beliefs about teaching. I videotaped the classroom observations because, as Heap (1992) challenged researchers, this method allowed me to consider more than what “can be captured with once-only, fix-choice, observational methods” (p. 23). The teacher and I watched clips of the videotape together, and through a guided reflection protocol (found in Appendix A), during which I asked the teacher questions to encourage analysis of the videotape (found in Appendix B), the teacher was able to examine the ways in which his or her actions and the language he or she chose to use the classroom mirrored the stated beliefs.

This study had the potential to expand the way teachers thought about the professional development in which they engaged in learning communities. However, as the researcher, I worked to avoid framing this teacher change as necessary because the teachers involved were previously doing something “wrong” (Short & Burke, 1996, p. 102). Short and Burke stated, “Change is the result of continuous inquiry as educators—we view ourselves and other teachers as professional learners” (p. 102). Transformation in this study was not about correcting “wrong” practices; it was about growing professionally.

This study investigated teacher learning communities, professional conversations, and reflection, and it looked beyond those conversations to examine if what happens in
the learning community transferred into individual teacher’s classroom practice. Little (2003) stated that the argument for the creation of learning communities “founder[s] on evidence that not much has changed at the level of teaching and learning in the classroom” (p. 940). This work contributed to the growing body of literature that provides evidence that the work of learning communities can have an important impact on teaching and learning in the classroom.

This dissertation study created space for teachers to examine: 1) their individual beliefs about teaching, 2) how they articulate these beliefs to their teaching peers during learning community meetings, 3) how their actions reflect or do not reflect their stated beliefs about teaching, and 4) how/if there are changes in their practice.

To review, I explored the following research questions:

1. What went on in the teachers’ learning community when teachers discussed their teaching?
2. What impact, if any, did on-going collaboration within a learning community have on teacher practice?
3. What did guided reflection reveal about teacher beliefs and practices?

Specifically, this study sought to discover how and why facets of professional development through teacher participation in a professional learning community transferred into classroom practice. These research questions sought to understand the role of professional development in teacher growth and change in individual beliefs and instructional practices.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Studies

and Relevant Literature

The framework that was the foundation for this study was defined by my belief in the importance of effective professional development opportunities for teachers. By effective I meant professional development that honored teachers as professionals (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990), addressed the social nature of learning (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978, Wells, 1999), and valued the power of reflection (Barth, 2003; Short & Burke, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). In the following sections, I will describe these theoretical frameworks and then will examine studies and literature related to these concepts.

Theoretical Frame

Teachers as professionals. Barth (2003) wrote, “I have become fascinated by the power of storytelling as a form of personal and professional development” (p. 2). I, too, was drawn to the idea of capturing teachers’ experiences in order to better understand the effectiveness of the professional work and growth constructed within a learning community. Stories within a learning community can be powerful stimuli for growth because as Short and Burke (1991) noted:

Learners’ stories empower collaborative relationships. At the same time that learners’ stories enable them to recognize their own authority, they aid them in recognizing the storytelling authority of others. It is through the stories that learners tell each other that the option of alternative perspectives becomes available, that these options may be critically evaluated, and that we as learners come to see ourselves as empowered to act upon the world. (p. 31)
To encourage professional growth, a space must be created that honors storytelling. The learning community professional development structure may be just that space. For learning communities to be effective, “to create a culture of storytelling, we need to create a culture of listening” (Barth, 2003, p. 3). Further, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) noted that “missing from the knowledge base for teaching are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretative frames teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices” (p. 2). It was this—the voice of teachers and the stories they tell about their teaching and learning experiences—that I hoped to capture through this study.

**Learning as a social process.** I believed that learning is a social process (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978) and that professional development for teachers should be designed to reflect that. Professional development opportunities cannot be the simple transmission of new information to a silent audience of teachers. Vygotsky taught us that we learn from and with others; therefore I believed teachers must be given the opportunity to talk with one another, work with and process new information, and reflect upon new understandings during and after professional development opportunities. This collaboration is essential, because, as Wells (1999) wrote, “Joint activity, by definition, requires us to think of the participants not simply as a collection of individuals but also as a community that works toward shared goals, the achievement of which depends on collaboration” (p. 60). Dewey (1916) also stressed the importance of collaboration when he wrote:
To have the same ideas about things which others have, to be like-minded with them, and thus to be really members of a social group, is therefore to attach the same meanings to things and to acts which others attach. Otherwise, there is no common understanding, and no community life. (p. 36)

Collaboration is critical for professional learning (John-Steiner & Meehan, 1999). The space for teacher collaboration must be carefully constructed, because “conceptual forms structure how places are organized and organize people in their thinking and movement” (Schmidt, 2011, p. 20). Wells (1999) encouraged the exploration of the social environment because it is “necessary to look not only at individuals but also at the social and material environment with which they interacted in the course of their development” (p. 53). The creation of space through a teacher learning community is ideal because in it, “everyone gets to share their knowledge and expertise. Nobody knows it all when it comes to teaching: teaching is infinitely complex and ever-changing” (Darling-Hammond, 2011, p. 13). The potential power of the learning community is that it is social in nature and allows teachers to form a “community group” (Dewey, 1938, p. 58). Dewey defined this community group as “an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something” (p. 56).

The more I have learned about professional development in general and learning communities specifically, the more I have realized that learning communities have to be created very intentionally. Dewey (1916) stated: “No experience having a meaning is possible without some element of thought…thinking, in other words, is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two become continuous” (p. 169). This thinking can occur within a learning community as teachers work together to reflect while making connections between their beliefs and new understandings. Short and Burke (1991)
identified three critical components of a community of learners: risk-taking, reflection, and collaboration. Short and Burke (1991) extended Dewey’s theory in their description of a learning community:

We are encouraged to develop our social nature into formal relationships by the recognition that supportive others can extend and expand the potential of our intellectual searches for questions and explanations. The social setting within which these relationships are formed has a major impact on the potentials and the constraints that any learner perceives for risk-taking and reflection within a community of learners. (p. 23)

Short and Burke addressed the willingness of learners to take risks within a group. A learning community creates a space where participants are able to take risks necessary for growth. Short and Burke wrote about the importance of taking risks together when they wrote, “Together we form a community, ready to receive others’ thoughts and to share our own” (p. 19). Risk-taking is critical because it allows participants to both vocalize and hear various perceptions. Short and Burke wrote, “Within any experience, we have to accept that there are alternative interpretations available concerning the physical characteristics of the actual situation, and the perceptions of other people who might be involved in that learning experience…We have to accept that in many situations there will never be right or wrong answers, only a series of possible answers” (p. 17). My exploration of a learning community would allow for the analysis of the social learning process during professional development.

**Reflection as a means for growth and learning.** My views of teaching and learning were also grounded in the notion that reflection is a powerful means for learning and professional growth. Barth (2003) wrote:

Reflection is nothing less than an internal dialogue with oneself. It is the process of bringing past experiences to a conscious level, analyzing them, and determining better ways to think and behave in the future…and sometimes
reflection invites us to share the fruits of this internal conversation with others. (p. xxii)

Teachers who reflect on their practice are more likely to grow professionally. Zeichner & Liston (1996) noted that unreflective teachers:

lose sight of the purposes and ends toward which they are working and become merely the agents of others. They forget that there is more than one way to frame every problem. Unreflective teachers automatically accept the view of the problem that is the commonly accepted one in a given situation. (p. 9)

Powerful professional growth can occur when teachers have the opportunity to share their reflective learning with their peers. The ideal place to share this internal conversation can be within a learning community of other teachers. Short and Burke (1991) wrote that “the uniqueness of school is that it is a place where a community of learners can be given opportunities to be reflective about what and how they are learning” (p. 9). I believed this to be true about adult learners as well as the students they serve. A learning community could provide a place in which teachers can reflect and take charge of their own professional growth, for, as Zeichner & Liston (1996) noted:

The reflective practice movement involves a recognition that teachers should be active in formulating the purposes and ends of their work, that they examine their own values and assumptions, and that they need to play leadership roles in curriculum development and school reform. (p. 5)

A learning community could be a place in which teachers share their reflections on teaching as well as a place to reflect together. Oftentimes professional development encourages some type of change: a change to a new strategy, a change in instructional practices, a change in a grading policy. Yet, as Zeichner & Liston (1996) noted, “many staff development and school improvement initiatives still ignore the knowledge and expertise of teachers and rely primarily on top-down models of school reform that try to get teachers to comply with some externally generated and allegedly research-based
solution to school problems” (p. 5). Learning communities have the potential to become spaces in which teachers share their knowledge and expertise. In order for professional development to be effective, it is not enough to talk about change; teachers must also reflect on their own beliefs and instructional practices in order for that talk to transform their practices and beliefs (McIntyre & O’Hair, 1996). After reflection, new understandings are developed (Shulman, 1987). Short and Burke (1991) wrote the following about reflection:

As teachers, we often get so immersed in the daily “doing” of classroom life that we fail to find the time for ourselves and our students to think and reflect on that “doing.” With the loss of reflection also comes the loss of control over change in our classrooms. Reflection generates and supports our sense of authority concerning our engagements in the world. Being an authority does not make us reflective thinkers. Instead, being reflective thinkers in a community of learners allows us to develop our own authority. We are in control of ourselves and of our intentions. We have a sense of our future because we have an understanding of our past. (p. 23)

This type of reflection can lead to powerful changes in teachers’ beliefs and practices, and it is this type of reflection that I hoped to explore and capture in this dissertation study.

**Teachers as Professionals: A Review of Literature about Learning Communities**

The learning community structure I was interested in exploring is often called different names. In an attempt to avoid setting limits to my exploration of the literature, I considered any study that described groups of teachers working together purposefully toward a common goal a learning community. Some of these structure names included Community of Teachers (Starnes, Saderholm, & Webb, 2010), Professional Networks (Langer, 2000), Critical Friends (National Reform Faculty; Silva, 2003), Professional Learning Communities (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008; Darling-Hammond &
Richardson, 2009; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Wells, 2008), Collaborative Work Cultures (Fullan, 2000), and Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998). See figure 2.1 for an overview of how these terms were defined in the literature cited. To avoid excluding any one group, and for clarification purposes in my writing, from this point on I refer to all as learning communities.

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<td>Community of Teachers</td>
<td>Starnes, Saderholm, &amp; Webb, 2010</td>
<td>“Community of Teacher members, including both secondary teachers and college faculty, work as partners to develop curricula, to support experiences and assessments, and to constantly revisit program goals, assessments, and coursework” (p. 18).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Networks</td>
<td>Langer, 2000</td>
<td>“although professional networks differ, they can provide purpose, collaboration, commitment, and community. They also provide participants with a language to discuss their work, a group of colleagues with whom tacit knowledge can become overt, new modes of professionally shared inquiry, and a renewed sense of purpose and efficacy” (p. 399).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Friends, teacher-led study groups</td>
<td>National Reform Faculty <a href="http://www.nsrfharity.org">http://www.nsrfharity.org</a> Silva, 2003</td>
<td>“Our faculty meets monthly in small groups to engage in collaborative study to improve student learning and enhance teacher practice” (Silva, 2003, p. 32).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Communities</td>
<td>Dana &amp; Yendol-Hoppey, 2008</td>
<td>“PLCs serve to connect and network groups of professionals to do just what their name entails—learn from practice. PLCs meet on a regular basis and their time together is often structured by the use of protocols to ensure focused, deliberate conversation and dialogue by teachers about student work and student learning” (Dana &amp; Yendol-Hoppey, p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Darling-Hammond &amp; Richardson, 2009</td>
<td>“In this model [the PLC], teachers work together and engage in continual dialogue to examine their practice and student performance and to develop and implement more effective instructional practices. In ongoing opportunities for</td>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DuFour, Eaker, &amp; DuFour, 2005</td>
<td>Define PLCs through “three core principles: 1) Ensuring that students learn 2) Culture of Collaboration 3) A focus on results (pp. 32-39)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venables, 2011</td>
<td>“When PLCs are authentic, the teacher culture of a school shifts from one of teachers working in isolation and competition to one in which teachers not only collaborate effectively but grow interdependent on each other, improving their individual and collective effect on learning” (Venables, p. 18)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wells, 2008</td>
<td>“The PLC, an effort to create schools that respond to student learning with an emphasis on success for every student, through the intentional, collegial, learning of staff” (p. 26).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Communities</td>
<td>Darling-Hammond, 2011</td>
<td>“Teachers who are able to collaborate with other teachers are really engaged in it—in work where they are rolling up their sleeves to design and evaluate curriculum and instruction together in a way that allows them to share their expertise deeply and in a sustained and ongoing fashion” (p. 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities of Practice</td>
<td>Wenger, 1998</td>
<td>General term for group of people who share a craft, purpose, or profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Communities of Practice, Teacher Learning Community</td>
<td>McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, &amp; McDonald, 2007</td>
<td>Defined professional communities of practice as places “where educators can learn and unlearn whatever scrutiny, responsiveness, and strategy flexibility require…where they can educate themselves accordingly. Professional communities of practice inevitably need learning that only its own members can supply” (p. 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Work Cultures (or professional learning)</td>
<td>Fullan, 2000</td>
<td>Drew on others’ work to determine that “more successful schools had teachers and administrators who 1) formed professional learning communities 2) focused on student work (through assessment) and 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communities)</td>
<td>changed their instructional practice accordingly to get better results. They did all this on a continuing basis” (p. 581).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Study Groups</td>
<td>Mills, 2001</td>
<td>Consists of all professional community members participating in curricular conversations, those which “reflect critical features of classroom practices that the faculty find most compelling” (Mills, 2001, p. 21), around qualitative classroom data such as videotapes, notes, and student work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Groups</td>
<td>Little, 2003</td>
<td>“My focus is on teacher groups that 1) have some clear collective identity (the teachers describe and name themselves in collective terms, sometimes in relation to a formal unit such as a department and sometimes with respect to more informal affiliations such as the “Algebra Group” or “Academic Literacy Group” and 2) profess a clear task orientation (the teachers see themselves as engaged in improvement-oriented professional work together” (p. 915).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.1 Definitions of Versions of Learning Communities

Much of the research that was being published about learning communities at the time of this study focused on the process of creating learning communities (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008; DuFour, et al., 2005; McDonald, et. al, 2007; Venables, 2011). This type of writing generally illustrated ways to build a foundation for learning communities through the teaching and subsequent use of tools such as team building exercises, coaches, and protocols (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008; DuFour, et al., 2005; McDonald, et. al, 2007; Venables, 2011). In the following sections, I will first review relevant literature that explores the process of creating learning communities or provides insight regarding the work in which learning communities engage. I will then review related studies that explore learning communities as an effective professional
development model and the impact of learning communities on aspects such as school culture and student achievement.

**Definition and process of creating learning communities.** Historically, learning communities have been called many different names. Some of these labels have been assigned in order to formalize a particular structure; others were created in order to, in a sense, *brand* a particular professional development design. An example of this is the Professional Learning Community (PLC) structure defined by DuFour and Eaker (1998, 2005) as groups of teachers who intentionally focus their work on student learning, results, and collaboration. However, DuFour, et al. (2005) stressed that over-labeling groups of teachers as PLCs would result in the term “losing all meaning” (p. 31). I agree that the term PLC has become such a “buzz word” in education that it is incorrectly or over-applied to any group of teachers working together; it has even been used to describe non-learning community endeavors such as faculty meetings (DuFour, et al., 2005; Venables, 2011). That being said, I do not believe that only those groups identified as PLCs are learning communities. Collaborative learning communities look, sound, and feel different in various contexts. In fact, Fullan (2000) argued “even if you knew how a particular school became collaborative, you could never tell precisely how you should go about it in your own school. There is no magic bullet” (p. 582). Limiting my exploration to only structures that adhere strictly to one definition of a learning community would result in a diminished view of the phenomenon.

**Elements of learning communities.** What is a learning community? Specifically, what are the common elements of each of these structures that allow me to term them *learning communities*? And more importantly, what are the fundamentals that must be in
place to make a learning community effective? After conducting an initial review of the literature, I came to understand that the following elements must be in place: collegial relationships, a spirit of collaboration, a space for authentic conversation, and a place for individual reflection. I developed the following reflective checklist to gauge the authenticity of a learning community (see figure 2.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of an Effective Learning Community</th>
<th>Essential Question</th>
<th>Guiding Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collegial Relationships</td>
<td>To what extent do community members have collegial relationships?</td>
<td>• Do the relationships go beyond congenial, where everyone is nice, to collegial, where colleagues are working together and pushing each other to greatness in order to achieve a shared vision? • Do members know that when feedback is offered the intent is support others in order to achieve common goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>To what extent do members collaborate?</td>
<td>• Is there a shared commitment to school improvement and student achievement? • Are leadership roles shared? • Do members feel a sense of ownership in their work within the learning community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>To what extent does the community strive for authentic conversation?</td>
<td>• Are the different perspectives and experiences that each member brings valued? • Is every voice heard? • Are norms established simply as an exercise or as a way to provide a common language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>To what extent do members reflect?</td>
<td>• Do members reflect on their own practice/work? • Are members open to peer observations and subsequent feedback? • Do members take information/feedback from meetings and apply new understandings to their practice?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.2 Reflective questions to determine the effectiveness of a learning community
Learning communities in the literature. In the following sections, I review literature and studies that have focus on learning communities. The organization of this review reflects the elements of learning communities described in figure 2.2.

Collegial relationships. Relationships are essential if people are going to take the risks necessary for growth. Relationships are not built spontaneously, though; they must be developed intentionally. In learning communities, these relationships must be collegial. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2009) defined collegial relationships as “characterized by purposeful adult interactions about improving school-wide teaching and learning” (p. 6). Glickman et al. observed that teachers in collegial schools are able to discuss issues free from judgment and accept disagreements and use these disagreements as an opportunity for change. Further, the collegial faculty as a whole respects the wisdom of colleagues. In collegial schools, learning goals are established and the faculty purposefully studies teaching and learning. Working together, common priorities, goals, and objectives are focused on raising student achievement.

Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) echoed the importance of collegial relationships in their analysis of effective professional development. They found that “collaborative and collegial learning environments that help develop communities of practice promote school change beyond individual classrooms” (p. 47). Creating a community in which members can push one another’s learning in a collegial manner is critical, for “collaboration without deliberate learning takes teachers only so far; people reinforce what they already know without moving to a higher level of knowledge” (Wells, 2008, p. 34). The result of this work might be a move from a congenial community that “generally avoided professional confrontations” (Silva & Contreras,
to a collegial one which is able to provide both warm and “critically constructive” feedback (Silva & Contreras, p. 57).

In her survey of teachers and the contexts in which they work, McLaughlin (1993) found:

Professional communities that are cohesive, highly collegial environments are also settings in which teachers report a high level of innovativeness, high levels of energy and enthusiasm, and support for personal growth and learning. Teachers who belong to communities of this sort also report a high level of commitment to teaching and to all of the students with whom they work. (p. 94)

Conversely,

Teachers who work in sequestered and noncollegial settings…tend to stick with what they know, despite a lack of student success or engagement and despite their own frustration and discouragement. These are the teachers who burn out, who believe teaching has become an impossible job. (McLaughlin, p. 94-95)

Learning communities have the potential to become a place of support to prevent teacher “burn out”—a place where teachers can leave feeling smarter and as if they have accomplished something for their students and for themselves professionally.

Little (2002) examined the conversations among members of high school learning communities during professional development as well as the informal talk in which they engaged as they went about their school days. One finding from this study was that learning communities can contribute to “instructional improvement” of teacher practice (p. 917). Little wrote, “From the perspective of teacher development and school reform, a central interest in teacher collaboration or community resides in its potential for teachers to learn from and with one another in ways that support instructional improvement” (p. 932). Schmoker (2005) echoed this thought by suggesting, “Teachers learn best from other teachers, in setting where they literally teach each other the art of teaching” (p. 141). In her analysis of three reported research studies about teacher growth through co-
learning situations, Jaworski (2003) looked at knowledge growth as it relates to interactions with others in a learning community and found individual knowledge growth to be “most evident” (p. 273). In my mind, this question remains: How is that individual knowledge growth chronicled, and how does it translate—or not—into practice?

**Spirit of collaboration.** Writing about effective professional development, Schmoker (2005) stressed, “What we need is to work in teams to apply what we know and support each other as we implement and refine implementation” (p. 149). In her study of 44 English teachers in 25 different middle and high schools, Langer (2000) defined a learning community as “the people with whom the teachers shared and gained professional ideas and knowledge, both within and apart from their workplace, both close to home and afar” (p. 403). Langer found that the most effective professional development—professional development that transferred to classroom practice—was when teachers worked together to present and create ideas, discuss them, critique them, and revise or dismiss them; in other words, “the teachers never worked in a vacuum” (p. 435). The collective mind can be very powerful. Likewise, Venables (2011) wrote, “It’s about using to the fullest extent the talent and wisdom of a collective, an existing faculty of teachers that can, with intense and sustained focus on a few important things, bring about the most significant change and improvements in student learning” (p. 5). Members of learning communities “work as partners to develop curricula, to support experiences and assessments, and to constantly revisit program goals, assessments, and coursework” (Starnes, Saderholm, & Webb, 2010, p. 18). This type of collaborative sharing of knowledge might include peer observations and feedback and text-based discussions on professional literature or book studies.
Sharing leadership roles within the learning community is one way to strengthen the spirit of collaboration. In her study of one urban middle school’s creation of learning communities, Phillips (2003) wrote about the importance of a shared leadership model when creating *authentic* learning communities. In this study, learning communities set goals for themselves and their students and focused their work on achieving those goals. As a result of this focused work, students showed growth in reading and mathematics, moving from 50% of students passing their state assessments to 90% just three years later. However, Phillips stressed that these results are not typical nor are they likely to be replicated. The key to this drastic increase in student achievement, in her opinion, lies in the ways in which the learning communities were created. Phillips stated the success in meeting their goals was “because leadership was shared, or distributed, among formal and informal leaders” (p. 257). Since teachers had voice in their professional development, they owned it. The beliefs they held regarding their professional growth had an impact on their classroom practice, and students benefited as a result.

Likewise, in their summary of the professional development provided to the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI) literacy coaches, Donnelly et al. (2005) found that shared leadership in the form of co-planning led the participating literacy coaches to feel a sense of ownership, thus deepening the professional development experience. They wrote: “personal investment increases ownership and that co-planning honors coaches’ learning needs and develops professional voice” (p. 344). This kind of shared leadership, which honors what teachers bring to the community, can strengthen teachers’ willingness to collaborate.
In the summary of their five-year study of professional learning communities, Kennedy, Deuel, Nelson, and Slavit (2011) found that a shared leadership model that was developed and nurtured in learning communities had a positive impact on teachers’ sense of both professionalism and responsibility. They found three attributes of shared leadership to be most supportive:

1. Tapping internal resources
2. Considering decision-making processes (both top-down and lateral)
3. Purposefully creating a collaborative, inquiry-based culture

This system of shared leadership brings a sense of ownership and professionalism to the work in which teachers engage. These three attributes should be considered by those guiding a learning community because they allow for teacher growth. Kennedy et al. found that when teachers felt their voices were heard—and more importantly, valued—they were more likely to find worth in their work with colleagues. In an effective learning community, teachers bring their experiences and thus a wealth of knowledge, which means that these internal resources are available for all to access. The ways in which decisions are considered and made further allows teachers to gain a sense of ownership over the work in which they engage, as long as teachers are truly allowed to contribute to a school’s decision-making endeavors. Kennedy et al.’s study further found that an inquiry-based culture aides in the development of this effective learning community as well because this culture creates a place for teachers to explore the real questions and dilemmas with which they are grappling in their own practice. The teachers’ questions drive the work of the learning community when it is inquiry-based.
Odden (2009) wrote about the strategies that he found to be necessary in order to help low-performing schools be successful. One of the strategies identified was to create a “dense” leadership system, in which “teachers led grade-level and subject-based professional learning communities” (Odden, p. 23). The notion of a teacher-led learning community is an important one when looking at the role of shared leadership or, as Hollins et al. (2004) termed it in their two-year study of teachers working in low-performing, high-poverty schools, a self-sustaining learning community. These self-sustaining learning communities were similar to the learning communities in the study conducted by Kennedy et al. (2011) due to their focus on teacher inquiry. In fact, Hollins et al. defined their research goal in their study of professional development as exploring “the potential of a structured dialogue problem-solving approach, where teachers rely on collaboration and within-group directed inquiry” (p. 255). The authors described this structured dialogue model as a five-step process. Teachers first brought a challenge, question, or dilemma and presented it to their learning community. The learning community then suggested strategies or advice to support the teacher with her inquiry. The teacher self-selected suggestions to implement in her classroom, then implemented them, and brought the results back to the learning community. At that point, the teacher, with the support of her colleagues, evaluated the success of the strategies, which lead to the learning community “formulating theory to guide future practices” (Hollins et al., p. 255). Hollins et al. found that teachers “were reassured when they were empowered to determine the direction of the discussions in ways that would help meet their goals and improve classroom practices” (p. 258). The quantitative data presented in the findings chapter of this study led the researchers to believe that the “internal model for
professional development had potential for influencing teaching practices” (Hollins et al., p. 259). Further,

The dialogue during study-group meetings progressed from a focus on daily challenges and defending their own practices to seeking insights from the research literature, sharing suggestions for instructional strategies, collaborating to develop new approaches and expressing appreciation for time to dialogue and plan together. (p. 260)

This spirit of collaboration was integral to the success of the learning community in this study.

**Space for authentic conversation.** Learning communities can be a place in which teachers learn and grow from professional conversation. In fact, Phillips (2003) noted, “Professional development also creates forums for teachers to have collegial conversations about curriculum programs as well as instructional problems and solutions” (p. 243). A learning community can become the place in which teachers can tackle, discuss, and work through their dilemmas with the support of colleagues. In their review of professional development models, Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) cited the importance of “sustained, job-embedded, collaborative teacher learning strategies” (p. 49) – in other words, learning communities. Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) described the learning community model as follows:

In this model, teachers work together and engage in continual dialogue to examine their practice and student performance and to develop and implement more effective instructional practices. In ongoing opportunities for collegial work, teachers learn about, try out, and reflect on new practices in their specific context, sharing their individual knowledge and expertise (p. 49).

Silva (2003) stated that her learning community gives her the space to “engage in collaborative study to improve student learning and enhance teacher practice…a place to wrestle with my questions” (p. 32). One way to create such a space – a space in which
participants can “wrestle” (Silva, p. 32) with tough topics -- is to set group norms (Venables, 2011). Group norms are an important foundational tool for creating community. Venables defined group norms as “a set of mutually decided upon expectations regarding how meeting time will be spent, how disagreements will be addressed, and how all discourse among participants will be conducted” (p. 26). Setting group norms is a proactive move, rather than a reactive one. The common language developed as the learning community sets their norms helps to keep each member true to the ideals. Group norms may feel artificial at first, but if every community member plays a role in setting the norms, they can create a safe place for authentic conversation to flourish.

Authentic conversation, conversation in which teachers are reflective and collaborative, can be nurtured in a learning community and will hopefully begin to permeate talk throughout the school. Aseltine, Farynierz, and Rigazio-DiGilio (2006) found this very phenomenon, teachers “talking about teaching and learning in ways that demonstrate deeper understanding and enthusiasm for their work,” (p. 169) as an indicator of a cultural shift within their school.

**Place for individual reflection.** Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2008) defined the purpose of learning communities as a place where “groups of professionals do just what their name entails—*learn* from practice” (p. 7). They differentiated their model of a learning community from other structures by focusing on creating an inquiry-oriented community. They listed ten “essential elements” of an inquiry-oriented PLC that include vision, trust, recognition of diversity, attention to power dynamics, collaboration, use of data, and accountability (p. 50). I would add individual reflection to this list of elements.
This may seem counter-intuitive, as the very name -- *learning community* -- brings to mind a group mentality. However, as Jaworski (2003) said, “The community provides supportive structures for individual inquiry, and acts to mediate knowledge through sharing of experiences and developing of norms so that knowledge grows within the community as well as for each individual” (p. 263). This individual reflection as a result of the work of the community is critical. In fact, Darling-Hammond & Richardson (2009) suggested “Collective work in trusting environments provides a basis for inquiry and reflection, allowing teachers to raise issues, take risks, and address dilemmas in their own practice” (p. 47). The community can provide a support role for individual members as they explore their beliefs and practice.

**What do we still need to know?** Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), after conducting their review of related research, concluded, “Professional learning communities can change practice and transform student learning—when they have in place the processes and structures that make true joint work possible and desirable” (p. 50). So what do we still need to know in order to create these powerful communities?

Most writing about learning communities focuses on the process of creating learning communities or the work in which learning communities engage (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; McDonald, et. al, 2007; Venables, 2011, Wells, 2008). There is also a body of literature that examines learning communities as an effective professional development model (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hollins, et. al, 2004; Phillips, 2003; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Studies are being conducted that explore the impact of learning communities on aspects such as school culture and student achievement (Little, 2002; Little, 2003; Nelson, 2009; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002).
The knowing-doing gap. Teachers know a lot, but do they apply what they know in the classroom? This question has been explored as a concept often termed the knowing-doing gap. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) are credited with popularizing this term in the business world; the phrase is now applied in educational research, as well (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Reeves, 2009, Schmoker, 2005). Schmoker articulated the importance of closing the knowing-doing gap: “The problem is not that we do not know enough—it is that we do not do what we already know” (p. 148). In her five-year study of teachers’ professional networks, Langer (2000) explored the professional communities (or lack of) in 25 schools. She found that the most effective schools had, among other factors, established learning communities. They looked different in nearly every setting, but “community is the common thread…There is no one predominant set of networks; rather, it is the teachers’ opportunity to select among a variety of networks that makes the difference” (p. 416). This is just one of many research studies that points to learning communities as being one of the most effective professional development models. However, it is not enough to know that learning communities are an effective place for teachers to grow as professionals; instead, these learning communities must be given space to flourish in schools. Leonardo da Vinci has been credited with saying, “I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough. We must do.” Teachers must be encouraged and prepared to take what they learn through the work in which they engage with their learning communities and transfer those new understandings into their classrooms.

According to Little (2002), “The field of education has not developed the kinds of fine-grained investigations of teachers’ collegial workplace practices that have begun to
emerge in other occupational arenas” (p. 919). Little investigated the following question in her case study of learning communities: “how are the imperatives, dilemmas, routines, and resources of classroom practice made evident in these out-of-classroom teacher-to-teacher interactions? (p. 932). This study, and studies that seek to answer similar questions, seek to find meaning about the missing piece of the learning community puzzle. It is not enough to develop and sustain learning communities; educators and researchers must also examine the impact the work of the learning community is having on teacher practice. Odden (2009) reminded educators of the importance of having the “will and persistence to fix the system, drawing on knowledge that exists now” (p. 23). My study will focus on the transfer of the work of the learning communities, specifically the professional conversations among the members of the learning communities, into individual teacher practice.

**Learning as a Social Process: A Review of Literature of Professional Talk in Learning Communities**

In this section, I review research on talk, focusing specifically on professional conversation in learning communities comprised of teachers. I discuss the work of learning communities, which I defined broadly as a professional development structure comprised of collegial groups of teachers working collaboratively and purposefully toward a common goal. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2009) defined collegial relationships as “characterized by purposeful adult interactions about improving school-wide teaching and learning” (p. 6). Further, I explore the transformative potential of the conversations in which teachers engage in this specific professional development model, the learning community. In order to capture what I mean by *transformative*, I borrow
from Short and Burke (1996) who wrote that “change is the result of continuous inquiry as educators” (p. 102). Inquiry that occurs through reflection on one’s practice and one’s work and conversations with others can, in this sense, be transformative.

**Creating space and place for talk.** I explored the professional talk that takes place in learning community meetings. This talk is often called curricular conversation (Mills, 2001) or professional dialogue (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009; Hollins et al., 2004; Jennings & Smith, 2002). I was interested in research that uses both of these terms and referred to such talk as *professional conversations.*

Learning communities have the potential to become a powerful professional development model in which teachers can collaborate and grow through professional conversations (Darling-Hammond, 2009, Phillips, 2003; Silva & Contreras, 2011). Professional conversations can be powerful because “different individuals represent their experience in different ways; and because they do, the culture at large is enriched. . . Our experiences as individuals are significantly influenced by the contributions of others” (Eisner, 1994, p. 86, 89). Space for teacher conversation must be created because, as Eisner reminded us, “A culture in the biological sense is a set of living organisms that can grow only if the medium in which they reside is hospitable to their growth” (pp. 10-11). Eisner went on to articulate the critical reasoning for creating and maintaining a collaborative culture in schools:

Teaching itself is unlikely to be refined as long as teachers remain in a school structure that insulates them from their colleagues or is governed by norms that are inhospitable to constructive but critical feedback. I suppose the principle I am trying to articulate here is an aesthetic principle: works of art require attention to wholes; configuration is central; everything matters. Applied to schools, it means that the school as a whole must be addressed. What we are dealing with is the creation of a culture (p. 10).
This collaborative culture is key to the success of a learning community (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). The importance of individual commitment to learning is a precursor to the successful creation of a learning community (Wenger, 1998).

The importance of engaging in conversations with other teachers. In a study of preservice teachers and their mentors, researchers (Tillema & Orland-Barak, 2006,) investigated this question: “Do professionals’ views on knowledge and knowing relate to the understandings gained through collaborative knowledge construction?” (p. 595). The researchers collected data as participant observers (Spradley, 1980) at the meetings the preservice teachers and their mentors attended. The data collection of this study centered on the talk in which the teachers engaged, since “through informed participation in discourse among colleagues, knowledge acquires value and meaning” (Tillema & Orland-Barak, p. 594). In fact, Tillema and Orland-Barak found that “knowledge construction was enhanced by the infrastructure of engagement (i.e. study teams), where participants worked together towards the instructional goal of solving specific problems in their practice” (p. 604). These conversations about problem-solving became the basis for the teachers’ professional growth.

In her summary of the first four years of the Center for Inquiry, a K-5 school based on a philosophy of inquiry in Columbia, SC, Mills (2001), writing with other researchers and faculty members, described the role of curricular conversations in the development of the school as well as the professional development of the faculty and staff. Mills wrote of the importance of developing as both a learning community (group) and as individuals:

Our development of individuals grows out of and contributes to our growth as a learning community. In other words, we look closely, listen carefully, and bring
the insights, questions, and expertise of individuals to the group so that all might benefit from the growth of one. (p. 21)

Similarly, Darling-Hammond (2011), in an interview advocating the need for teacher learning communities, suggested, “The opportunity to share what they know with each other also allows them [teachers] to be individually successful and successful as a team—and teaching is definitely a team sport” (p. 13). However, in order for that growth to occur, certain elements of a learning community had to be in place, primarily the building of trusting relationships before being able to “truly inquire into each other’s beliefs and practices” (Mills, p. 23). Mills wrote, “We learned how to listen to one another, how to consider multiple perspectives, how community building is at the heart of curriculum development, and how to make connections between our practices and the professional literature” (p. 23). Once these skills are learned, the members of the learning community can support each other’s growth.

In her in-depth analysis of three professional conversations among teachers that took place outside of classrooms, Little (2003) identified several features that she determined to be illustrative of learning communities. These features included setting aside “time to identify and examine problems of practice,” questioning “those problems in ways that open up new considerations and possibilities,” and inviting “comments and advice from others” (p. 938). In essence, the learning community structure provided a space for teachers to grow through professional conversation.

Nelson (2009) collected qualitative data on mathematics and science teachers’ participation in what she labeled professional learning communities (PLCs). These data were analyzed for three themes: “1) collective activities, 2) questions raised, and 3) knowledge generated” (Nelson, p. 548). Nelson explored the ways in which teachers
were willing and unwilling to ask critical questions, questions that are explored to
“surface the different beliefs and values that frame each person’s actions” (p. 551), with
regard to their own and others’ instructional practices. This analysis of critical questions
was important, because, as Nelson stated, “Most powerfully, teachers working together
may generate knowledge that can contribute to reculturing within their department and
school” (p. 558). Even though teachers working together may generate such
transformative knowledge, Nelson found through her analysis of one of the three learning
communities, “theoretically, through teachers’ participation in this PLC there were many
dialogic interactions that could lead to transformation of beliefs, actions, and tools or
practices…however, it was difficult to see where their PLC work led to collective
change” (p. 566). Actually, just one of the three learning communities was successful, in
her opinion, at transferring the work of the learning community into individual’s
classroom practices. Nelson attributed the success of this learning community to an
authentic adoption of an inquiry stance as a framework for all learning community
discussions (p. 575). Nelson wrote that these teachers “dialogically shifted from a
traditional mode of teacher interaction characterized by sharing ideas about classroom
activities and individual students to function as learners questioning and reflecting upon
relationships between their teaching and their students’ subsequent learning” (p. 576).
Additionally, this successful learning community, had constructed the kind of trusting
relationships other researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Mills, 2001) advocated.

**The role of reflection.** It is not enough to talk about change; teachers must also
reflect on their own beliefs and instructional practices in order for that talk to transform
the way they teach (McIntyre & O’Hair, 1996). This notion is reflected in a study
conducted by Jennings and Smith (2002). This study examined the work completed by teachers in a multicultural education course in order to determine if their new understandings would transfer into their classrooms. Jennings and Smith found, among other insights, that “although there was a shift in students’ conceptualizations of multicultural education that included talk of a transformational approach, their action plans did not convey a full understanding of them” (p. 465). After examining a semester’s worth of writing and talk in the course, the researchers identified several more insights, two of which are especially relevant to my future work: 1) continuous reflection can result in transformation; and 2) inquiry through dialogue can have powerful results (Jennings & Smith).

Shulman (1987) was also interested in transformation and reflection, particularly as they applied to teaching methods. He noted that teachers begin with a foundational base of content knowledge. However, he stated, “Comprehension alone is not sufficient. The usefulness of such knowledge lies in its value for judgment and action” (p. 14). Thus, Shulman developed a “Model of Pedagogical Reasoning and Action” which consists of the following components: comprehension, transformation, instruction, evaluation, reflection, and new comprehensions (p. 15). Comprehension is essentially what the teacher knows and plans to teach. The teacher must then transform that knowledge to make it accessible to students. Instruction is the sharing of the transformed knowledge, and during and after instruction, the teacher evaluates or checks for student understanding. Reflection is defined as

what a teacher does when he or she looks back at the teaching and learning that has occurred, and reconstructs, reenacts, and/or recaptures the events, the emotions, and the accomplishments. It is that set of processes through which a
professional learns from experience. It can be done alone or in concert, with the help of recording devices or solely through memory. (Shulman, p. 19)

After reflection, new understandings are developed. However, “new comprehension does not automatically occur, even after evaluation and reflection. Specific strategies for documentation, analysis, and discussion are needed” (Shulman, p. 19). Individuals and learning communities can be guided to use these strategies to further professional growth.

Additionally, York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie (2001) stated, “Learning requires reflection” (p. 1). York-Barr et al. defined reflective practice as “an inquiry approach to teaching that involves a personal commitment to continuous learning and improvement” (p. 3). While this reflection can be done individually, York-Barr et al. encouraged educators to reflect with partners or in small groups, as these verbal interactions “provide a means of understanding who we are in our world around us—our professional and personal lives” with the added benefit of “a safeguard against perpetuating only our own thoughts” (p. 59). York-Barr et al. provided several formal and informal frameworks for reflection with partners or in small groups. Cruickshank and Applegate (1981) reinforced this message of reflecting through dialogue with others in their Reflective Teaching model:

Teachers find themselves engaged in a meaningful process of inquiry which leads them toward renewed self-esteem and interest in teaching. As a result, teachers become more reflective about teaching and more interested in self-improvement. Reflective Teaching is an opportunity for meaningful teacher growth (p. 554).

Though the frameworks varied, the theme of building a trusting relationship early on in this reflective practice pervaded.

Concluding thoughts about talk in learning communities. Mewborn (1999), who studied the reflective thinking of four preservice mathematics teachers, drew the
following conclusion: “Reflection and action together are seen as a bridge across the chasm between educational theory and practice” (p. 317). Guided reflection is important as “not all thinking about teaching constitutes reflective teaching” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 1). Research shows that learning communities can be a powerful place for teachers to engage in professional talk. This talk can lead to transformation in the way teachers think about teaching and learning. Further, reflection about teaching and learning is an effective way to enact teacher growth. Many researchers and theorists (Cruickshank & Applegate, 1981; Shulman, 1987; York-Barr et al., 2001) advocate for reflection through conversations with partners or in small groups.

**Reflection as a Means for Growth: A Review of Literature about the Use of Video**

In this section, I examine research and related studies that encourage the use of videotaped observations. Fukkink, Noortje, and Kramer (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 33 experimental studies that looked at the use of video in professional development and found “the very first review study into the effects of video feedback on the interaction skills of professionals dates back to 1973” (p. 47). After analyzing these studies, the authors concluded that professionals who were given some sort of rubric by which to judge instructional videotapes of themselves resulted in greater professional growth. The assumption Fukkink et al. made was “such a form structures the observation, thereby focusing the participants’ attention on the aspects of their own behavior” (p. 56). While I do not intend to use a rubric, I do intend to engage participants in guided reflection using a semi-structured interview guide.

**The use of video in the classroom.** The studies reviewed in this section have shown videotaping lessons can lead to teacher professional growth, especially when the
teachers involved in the studies are encouraged to reflect in some structured or semi-structured way. The use of video in education is often considered to be a novel and contemporary practice; however, educational studies using video recorders have been conducted since the device was invented. One such study was conducted by Ellett and Smith (1975). They stated, “studies in the last half of the sixties have yielded few reports oriented specifically to the utilization of videotape recording for the self-improvement of teachers in the classroom” (p. 277). Their study, published in 1975, sought to fill that gap. They conducted a 16-week study of public school teachers of grades 1-12. In this study, one group of teachers evaluated themselves using a tool called the Basic Evaluation Scale for Teachers (BEST) while viewing a previously recorded video of their teaching. The BEST tool listed sixty criteria by which the teachers judged themselves. The second group of teachers viewed themselves teaching, but did not use the BEST tool. The stated purpose of the study was:

To determine the extent to which teachers modify their classroom performance with the use of a self-analysis instrument and videotape replay. The purpose was also to determine whether or not teachers using the videotape replay and the self-rating instrument modified their performance significantly more than did teachers who did not use the self-rating instrument. (p. 287)

Ellett and Smith found that the teachers that did not use the self-rating tool made only “minimal performance gains from tape to tape” (p. 287). The most significant professional growth found in the study was the result of a combination of videotaping and the use of the self-rating tool.

Much more recently, Sherin and van Es (2009) conducted a year-long study of middle school mathematics teachers who participated in video clubs. These video clubs met once a month; during these meetings, the participants viewed and discussed
videotaped clips from each other’s classrooms. The purpose of the video clubs was to use video “to support learning to notice” (Sherin & van Es, p. 22). The researchers first studied the conversation the teachers had around the videos and looked to see how those conversations shifted over time. The researchers also examined, through interviews, how the video club may have had an impact on the teachers’ thinking outside the meetings, which they termed the teachers’ “professional vision” (Sherin & van Es, p. 22). Their study stemmed from a trend the researchers noticed in studies that examined the use of videotaping in professional development: “watching and reflecting on video is thought to be a valuable activity for teachers, one that has the potential to foster teacher learning” (Sherin & van Es, p. 20). The findings of their study did, in fact, support that trend of greater professional growth through the use of videotaping.

Studies have also been conducted to determine the effectiveness of videotaped lessons when implementing new instructional strategies. In one such study, Kpanja (2001) studied forty Nigerian preservice teachers to determine whether or not the use of videotape would be an effective method of teacher education for preservice teachers. Twenty of the preservice teachers practiced the skills they were learning in their program with the aid of videotape; twenty of the students practiced teaching without video playback. The researcher was driven to explore this question after reviewing conflicting literature: some that supported the use of videotape and some that claimed teachers who are “aware that the lesson is being recorded by video will behave artificially” (Kpanja, p. 484). All participants were given a pretest and post-test that assessed student understanding of teaching skills. The researcher concluded “the group which used the video recording equipment had more significant progress in the mastery of teaching
skills” (Kpanja, p. 483). Therefore, the findings of this study supported the use of videotaping and dispelled the notion that all teachers will act “artificially” when videotaped.

Studies have also looked at the relationship between videotaped lessons and collaborative reflection. Hennessy and Deaney (2009) paired eight high school teachers (two each of science, history, math, and English) with university researchers in the United Kingdom. The purpose of the study was to “illustrate how collaborative analysis of lesson videos can be used to engage teachers in deep reflection, critique and debate” (p. 617). The researchers found, “The video analysis offered a potential trigger for change in both pedagogical thinking and practice” (p. 623). Through interviews with the participants, Hennessy and Deaney further found that the teachers believed that the video reflection and analysis with a university researcher resulted in changes in their practice and thinking, increased their level of reflectiveness, and had an impact on collaboration with colleagues.

**Conclusion to the Review of Literature**

My study not only examined the talk in which the learning community engages, but also explored the transfer of that talk into individual classrooms. This exploration of professional conversation in learning communities, as well as the transfer of these ideas into teacher practice and the emphasis on guided reflection, allowed my study to contribute to the growing body of literature of qualitative studies that explored the work of learning communities.

The use of videotaped classroom observations is not a new professional development tool. However, Sherin and van Es (2009) found that while a number of
studies have been conducted in recent years about the use of video as a professional
development tool, “few studies examine the effects of viewing video on teachers’
practices outside of the professional development environment” (p. 20). Their study of
middle school math teachers sought to do just that, as will my study of middle school
literacy teachers. Many other studies (Kpanja, 2001; Mewborn, 1999) look at preservice
teachers and the value of videotaped observations as a professional development method
as a teaching tool. Based on my review of the literature, few studies had been done with
middle school learning communities that have examined the impact on literacy practice.

I attempted to go beyond examining the structure of a learning community, in
order to explore the impact the learning community model can have on individual
teachers and their beliefs and practices. I worked with individual members of a literacy
learning community to attempt to capture the transfer of the professional development
teachers undergo within their communities into their individual classrooms and beliefs
about the practice of teaching. I not only examined the learning community in action, but
I also explored the transition of learning community conversation into individual
classrooms. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) suggested that “missing from the
knowledge base for teaching are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions
teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and
the interpretative frames teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom
practices” (p. 2). It was this—the voice of teachers—that I hoped to capture through this
study.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) advised researchers to “consider what we want to
know before determining our ways of knowing it” (p. 305). With this in mind, I designed
a study to investigate the impact of professional development on the practices and beliefs
of teachers in a learning community.

This study sought to discover how and why facets of professional development
through teacher participation in a professional learning community transferred into
classroom practice. Therefore, I explored the following research questions:

1. What went on in the teachers’ learning community when teachers discussed their
teaching?

2. What impact, if any, did on-going collaboration within a learning community
have on teacher practice?

3. What did guided reflection reveal about teacher beliefs and practices?

My research questions sought to understand the impact of professional development on a
learning community and on teacher professional growth and change with regard to beliefs
and instructional practices.

The Researcher: Beliefs and Biases

At the time of the study, I had worked in education for twelve years. I began my
career as an eighth grade English language arts teacher at Silver Middle School (SMS)
and have also served SMS as an instructional coach. At the time of the study, I was the
assistant principal for instruction at Silver High School (SHS), the school into which SMS feeds. These leadership roles led to a great personal and professional investment in the professional development structures at both schools. As described in the introduction to this study, I played a pivotal role in the implementation of learning communities at SMS and therefore acknowledged at the onset of the study my biased hope for their success. However, my purpose in designing this study was to seek understanding of the learning community, not to influence how it was formed or how it functioned.

Further, I had worked closely with three of the six teachers in this study, one for my entire professional career and two others for varying amounts of time (two to seven years). I genuinely respected and cared about these educators personally and professionally. Three of the participants were first-year teachers, so I had no previous experiences with them. At the time of the study, I was working at a different school with different-aged students, but cannot overlook my history with both the participants in this study as well as the school as a whole. I explore further the impact of these relationships and my role as researcher in the subjectivity section.

**Methodological Stance**

**Qualitative research.** In an attempt to secure a foundational definition of qualitative research, I consulted Merriam’s (1988, 1998, 2002) work. Three basic tenets regarding qualitative research emerged: 1) the researcher is the data collection and analysis instrument; 2) fieldwork is necessary; 3) qualitative research is inductive: theories are built, not tested (Merriam, 1998). Further, Merriam stated, “Qualitative researchers *are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is,
how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have had in the world” (p. 6). As I reflect on the type of study I want to conduct, it becomes clear that qualitative methodologies are most consistent with my goals.

**Case study.** Within the qualitative research paradigm, I used a case study design in order to “gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). I considered the projected participants for my study as a single case: a team of literacy teachers (Merriam). Merriam (1988) wrote, “A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 21). This explanation of what constitutes a case was extended in a later edition of her text (Merriam, 1998). She wrote:

> The case is a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. I can ‘fence in’ what I am going to study. The case then, could be a person such as a student, a teacher, a principal; a program; a group such as a class, a school, a community; a specific policy, and so on. (Merriam, 1998, p. 27)

I used a case study design that explored a group of teachers who functioned, as Merriam (1998) suggested, as a single case, a learning community.

Some researchers argue that all qualitative studies are case studies in some fashion (Barone, 2004). In her summary of well-known case studies, Barone shared Baghban’s rationale for the methodology: “Case study is the best method to use when learning about individuals and it is particularly effective when studying complex phenomena in real-life situations” (p. 14). Merriam (1998) provided another reason to use a case study design: it is appropriate for researchers interested in process. Case study designs are an advantage, Merriam continued, “Because they are anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meaning that expands its readers’ experiences” (p. 41). Case
study, as a methodological design, fit well with my research question, as I explored the interactions of a group, or case, of professionals as they engaged in and reflected on professional conversations. Further, I was most interested in the transfer of knowledge gained and revealed in professional conversations into classroom practice, which made process very important to my study. Merriam (1998) stated it best when she wrote:

A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research (p. 19).

**Narrative analysis.** Ochs and Capps (2001) defined personal narrative as “a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience” (p. 2). Narrative analysis clearly aligns with the data I collected: transcripts of teachers engaging in professional conversation and transcripts of teacher reflection of their videotaped classroom observations. With regard to professional conversations, I captured members of a professional learning community engaged in talk about their educational beliefs. Participants had other opportunities to share their perspectives and interpretations. After videotaping classroom observations, I viewed clips of the videotape with the teachers and engaged in guided reflection around the videotaped observations. As such, “narrative activity becomes a tool for collaboratively reflecting upon specific situations” (p. 2), in this case, the observation. Analysis of those conversations had great data collection potential. Florio-Ruane (1986), in her study of writing teachers, enforced this notion when she wrote, “Conversation as a research method is very likely to yield stories as data. If we want to understand people’s
understanding, we are apt to discover meaning in their stories” (p. 12). Similarly, Wolcott (1994) noted that a qualitative researcher who attempts to provide a descriptive account must “think like a storyteller” (p. 58). Therefore, I drew from case study methodologies to design my study, and also drew from methodological components of narrative analysis to analyze my data.

**Methodology**

**Research design.** The participants in my study were members of the literacy learning community at Silver Middle School (SMS) and consisted of two sixth-grade English language arts (ELA) teachers, two seventh-grade ELA teachers, and two eighth-grade ELA teachers. I attended two learning community meeting per month in the fall of 2013 (August-December for a total of nine meetings). I visited classrooms and videotaped each participating teacher two times during the data collection period (a total of twelve observations, two for each of the six participating teachers). After each observation, I conducted a guided reflection semi-structured interview with the individual teachers (a total of twelve interviews). These observations and guided reflection conversations that followed each observation took place during the same time period, August 2013-December 2013. During that time I also attended the learning community meetings, so I was able to see how or if the videotaped observations and guided reflection conversations had an impact on the professional conversations that occurred at subsequent learning community meetings. See Figure 3.1 for a calendar of data collection events.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 28, 2013</td>
<td>Learning Community Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 11, 2013</td>
<td>Learning Community Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 17, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Clarence (1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 17, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Bryson (2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 23, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Annabell (1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 25, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Annabell</td>
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<td>September 25, 2013</td>
<td>Learning Community Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 26, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Clarence</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 26, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Bryson</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 8, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Anne (3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 8, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Anne</td>
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<td>October 9, 2013</td>
<td>Learning Community Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 10, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Alissa (3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 10, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Alissa</td>
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<td>October 11, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Joyce (2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; &amp; 5th periods)</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 15, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Joyce</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Learning Community Meeting</td>
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<td>Learning Community Meeting</td>
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<td>November 6, 2013</td>
<td>Learning Community Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 7, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Annabell (1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<td>November 7, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Anne (2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<td>November 7, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Alissa (3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<td>November 7, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Alissa</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 11, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Joyce (1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<td>November 11, 2013</td>
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<td>November 13, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Joyce</td>
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<td>November 18, 2013</td>
<td>Observe Bryson (1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; period)</td>
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<td>November 19, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 21, 2013</td>
<td>Guided Reflection Conversation with Clarence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1 Calendar of data collection events

**Site selection.** My selected site was Silver Middle School (SMS). This site was ideal because for the past five years, teachers at SMS have been participating in professional development that centers on the development of learning communities. This sustained, on-going professional development had a direct impact on the culture of the school. Prior to this study, I saw SMS’s teacher culture shift from one of congeniality to
one of true collaboration and collegiality as evidenced by the teachers’ commitment to their learning communities and the dedication with which teachers prepare for and participate in the learning community meetings. In addition, teachers had begun planning in teams and providing support for one another in the development of lesson plans, assessments, and teaching practices in general.

When teachers commit to participating in a study they face the potential of taking on a huge burden in their already-busy teacher lives. The nature of my intended data collection had the potential to add to that burden. I knew that I wanted to attend learning community meetings and videotape them, and this method had the potential to shut down talk or put teachers in vulnerable positions. However, the teachers at SMS were used to having visitors join their meetings. SMS was the first school in the district to establish learning communities, and as a result, the superintendent requested that the other schools use SMS as a model for creating their own teacher learning communities. Over the five years prior to this study, SMS learning communities had been observed as well as videotaped so other teachers within the district could see the potential teacher learning communities held.

I further knew that I wanted to not only observe and interview teachers individually, but I also wanted to video- and audiotape those engagements as well. SMS teachers were also used to being videotaped in those contexts as well. The principal at SMS had begun videotaping teachers teaching for use in professional development, and this practice expanded to the teachers, some of who chose to interview students on film themselves or requested that the principal or instructional coach (me) interview and film
students for reflective purposes. Examples of these professional development purposes included:

- asking students on video to define the objective of the day’s lesson so teachers could reflect to discover if their intended objective was clear
- videotaping a teacher’s lesson at the teacher’s request to capture techniques like wait time or formative assessment strategies
- videotaping a teacher’s lesson at the teacher’s request so the teacher could gain perspective into classroom management issues
- interviewing students and asking questions like: *Were you successful in class today? How do you know?* so teachers were able to reflect on the quality of feedback they provided.

As a result of these previous learning experiences, both teachers and students were used to being videotaped for professional development purposes.

**Silver Middle School (SMS).** SMS is a public middle school in a rural town in the southeastern United States. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Silver County has 19,875 residents. The Silver School District is a rural district that serves 2,046 students in its schools. There is one primary school, two elementary schools, a middle and high school that share one campus, and an alternative school. SMS serves students in grades 6-8. The student body consists of 477 students. Of those, 49.4% of students are white, 33.8% are African-American, and 16.8% are Hispanic. Other student groups consist of: special education students (15%), gifted and talented students (14%), and English Language Learners (12%). Sixty percent of the student body qualifies for and receives subsidized meals. The average daily attendance is 95.53%.
Learning communities at SMS met twice a month during teacher planning periods. The school schedule was designed so teachers of the same content would have common planning; therefore, there was a learning community that focused its work on each of the major content areas: literacy, social studies, math, science, and related arts. The school administration expected teacher learning communities to meet twice a month during planning. Sometimes learning communities chose to meet more often; at other times, teachers chose to hold additional meetings after school in order to have professional conversations across content areas (e.g. by grade level).

**Participants: Local Teachers**

The participants were selected using a convenience sampling method (Patton, 2002) in which the researcher selected participants based on convenience. Although this sampling method is often criticized for being “neither purposeful nor strategic” (Patton, p. 242) I believe my use of this sampling method was both purposeful and strategic, while admittedly being convenient as well. The participants and the learning community they comprised provided an information-rich case that allowed me to explore the work of the learning community. My selection of this particular learning community was also due to the subject area the teachers teach (literacy) as well as my pre-established connections to the teachers and both the district and the school in which the learning community operated.

After securing approval for this study and obtaining IRB approval, the six literacy teachers were invited to participate in the study. The informed consent letter, which can be found in Appendix C of this proposal, provided a summary of the goals and intentions of the study. After the teachers committed to this study, I worked with
them to draft a description of who they are, including pertinent background information and personal and professional information they wanted to include in this section. After this was drafted, I took it back to each individual participant for member-checking purposes to ensure the participant description was an accurate reflection.

**Alissa.** Alissa was a European-American woman in her early twenties. She was a first-year teacher who taught sixth-grade ELA. Her area of certification was elementary education. She grew up in a neighboring town that was very similar to the town in which she taught, which she described as very tiny. Alissa stated that after taking part in teacher cadet courses her senior year of high school, she started to think about a teaching career. She moved to a large town about an hour from home to attend a large university and graduated Cum Laude in 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Elementary Education.

**Joyce.** Joyce was a European-American woman in her early twenties. She was a first-year teacher who taught sixth-grade ELA. Her area of certification was elementary education. Joyce grew up in a small northern town and later moved to a mid-sized town in the Southeastern United States. Teaching had always been a career she considered. After taking a teacher cadet course in high school, teaching became her passion. She later attended a smaller branch of a large university, where she was a student-athlete, which required many long nights and busy days of intense studying and practice. She taught in a small rural town not far from where she graduated college.

**Clarence.** Clarence was a European-American man in his early twenties. He was a first-year teacher who taught seventh-grade ELA. Clarence was an English major at a smaller branch of a large university, where he was also a student-athlete. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in business administration. Since his
degree was in English, not education, he was a part of an alternate certification program for educators. He was an assistant football coach at the middle school, as well as an assistant varsity baseball coach at the high school. Clarence grew up in a small neighboring town.

**Bryson.** Bryson was a European-American man in his early twenties. He was a third-year teacher who taught seventh-grade ELA. He taught visual arts classes during his first two years at SMS. He graduated from a small college with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Visual Arts (K-12 teacher certification). He was working on a Master’s Degree in Curriculum and Instruction as well as taking courses to add-on middle level English and math certification. He was the sponsor of the Junior Beta Club as well as the head coach for the cross country team. Bryson was born and raised in a rural community approximately 30 miles from Silver.

**Annabell.** Annabell was a European-American woman in her late twenties. She was a seventh-year teacher who taught eighth-grade ELA. She double-majored in Education (AYA 7-12/ English) and English (writing) at a small university in the Midwest. She is originally from Central Ohio and relocated to the Southeastern United States after completing her bachelor’s degree. She knew from a young age that she wanted to be either a teacher or a writer. She was working on her Master’s Degree in Integrated Curriculum and Instruction at the time of the study.

**Anne.** Anne was a European-American woman in her late thirties. Anne was in her seventeenth year of teaching eighth-grade ELA. Anne graduated from an all-female college with a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education. She went on to earn her master's degree from the same college, also in elementary education. She thought she
wanted to teach elementary school but was really glad she ended up in middle school.

Anne worked with the Real World Math and Reading Applications program and sponsored the eighth grade student council. She also served as the chair for the 8th grade team and sponsored a school-wide poetry club.

**Sources of Data**

To understand the translation of professional conversation into teacher practice, I collected the following data:

- Transcriptions of videotaped conversations from learning community meetings
- Learning community documents and artifacts, e.g. meeting agendas, exit slips, group norms.
- Field notes of classroom observations
- Transcriptions of videotaped post-observation guided reflection conversations
- Analytic memos kept in my researcher’s journal

Conversations from the learning community meetings as well as the guided reflection conversations that took place while watching the clips of taped classroom observations were transcribed by the researcher.

**Transcriptions of videotaped conversations.** My role at literacy learning community meetings was that of a moderate participant, defined by Spradley (1980) as “maintaining a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation” (p. 60). I attended the meetings twice a month and videotaped the professional conversations that took place. Conversation was a significant piece of the data collected, as it helped me “uncover and communicate” (Florio-Ruane, 1986, p. 12) teachers’ beliefs and understandings. This conversation in a group setting became critical
as the teachers made “their practice public to colleagues and take an inquiry stance” (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p. 50) regarding instructional practices and beliefs. As such, my attendance at these meetings and the capturing of the conversations that took place was an integral part of my data collection process. Even though I videotaped the conversations held during the learning community meetings, I additionally took notes. These notes served as my researcher’s journal, which I referred to as I analyzed data.

**Learning community documents and artifacts.** In addition to my field notes from the learning community meetings and the transcripts of the conversations that occurred during the meetings, I analyzed documents and artifacts produced or used by the literacy learning community. Documents and artifacts included: meeting agendas, groups norms, exit slips, and texts chosen for study. It was important to analyze texts critically, as “texts can bring about changes in our knowledge, our beliefs, our attitudes, values and so forth” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 8). These documents and artifacts allowed for another level of analysis of the learning community.

**Classroom observations.** I conducted two classroom observations of each participant. These observations were videotaped, and I watched the footage with the classroom teacher. I constructed a tentative interview guide (King & Horrocks, 2010) for the post-observation guided reflection conversations (see Appendix A). As we viewed, I asked questions like, *Talk about that clip. What do you notice? What surprised you? What message does that send? What would you do differently?* to encourage the teacher to examine his or her beliefs in practice. The focused, reflective nature of the post-observation conversations was critical, because as Darling-Hammond and Richardson...
(2009) noted, “The content of professional development can make the difference between enhancing teachers’ competence and simply providing a forum for teachers to talk. The most useful professional development emphasizes active teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection rather than abstract discussions” (p. 46) and as van Manen (1977) reminded us, “teachers freely engage in much talk about their everyday curriculum practices. But…it seldom displays the level of deliberate reflectivity that one might hope to hear” (p. 206). Viewing video of themselves teaching so soon after the lesson gave the participants the chance to reflect. In fact, Sherin (2004), in her review of case studies involving the use of videotaping in education, found that the practice of recording teachers teaching as they teach has been used for more than thirty years, and that in many cases, videotaped classroom observations became “the basis for reflection and for the development of teachers’ professional knowledge base” (p. 7). Sherin cited several reasons for the consistent use of this practice, among them the opportunity to grant the participant access to her own practice and to rely not only on memory, but on actual video footage that could be played and replayed, allowing the participant to reflect and clarify. Since “qualitative research interviews give voice to people in expressing their opinions, hopes, and worries in their own words” (Kvale & Brinkmann, p. 311) interviews of the qualitative nature were a justifiable data collection method as I sought to understand the reasons why teachers do or do not take ideas discussed as a learning community and put them into place in their classrooms.

**Analytic memos.** Throughout the data collection and analysis period, I wrote analytic memos. According to Saldaña, “Analytic memo writing serves as an additional code- and category-generating method” (p. 41). Further, Saldaña noted:
The purpose of analytic memo writing is to document and reflect on: your coding process and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data—all possibly leading toward theory. (p. 32)

Wolcott (1994) stated, “The idea persists that categories should (will?) emerge from the data. My experience is that they cannot do it on their own” (p. 63). My use of analytic memos assisted in the emergence of these categories.

**Organizing and Managing Data**

In their review of qualitative research, Freeman, de Marrais, Preissle, Roulston, and St. Pierre (2007) advocated for a “systematic and careful documentation of procedures” (p. 26). Much of the data I collected was done via digital recording. Video recordings were uploaded to my password-protected home computer and saved to both the hard drive and a back-up external hard drive. The video recordings were transcribed; I completed the transcriptions of all video footage myself, because, as Seidman (2006) suggested, “Interviewers who transcribe their own tapes come to know their interviews better” (p. 115). I planned to use Ochs and Capps’ (2001) transcription symbols, but I developed my own symbols as I began the transcription process. In order to maintain consistency, I created a legend of transcription symbols, as listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…</td>
<td>pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>notes regarding actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--</td>
<td>participants cutting each other off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O.C.</td>
<td>observer’s comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>speaker thinking aloud, quote within the quote</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.2 Transcription symbols

Transcriptions were typed into Word documents, and then were also saved on the hard drive and a back-up external drive. These transcriptions were imported into and then
coded using a qualitative data analysis software program, NVIVO. Hard copies of all data collected (e.g. artifacts from meetings such as agendas) were scanned into and organized in NVIVO, which also served as my digital researcher’s notebook.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed my data through a coding process, with the end goal of determining themes in the data. Kvale & Brinkmann (2008) defined coding as “breaking a text down into manageable segments and attaching one or more keywords to a text segment in order to permit later retrieval of the segment” (p. 323). Specifically, I employed descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009; Wolcott, 1994) to determine trends in the data and derived themes from the data. Saldaña noted that descriptive coding “summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often as a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (p. 70). Descriptive coding made sense for my study, because as Wolcott declared, “Description… is at the heart of qualitative inquiry” (p. 55). I used NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software program, to assist me as I coded. My codes initially attempted to make sense of and summarize the data because as Saldaña noted, “Just as a title represents and captures a book or film or poem’s primary content and essence, so does a code represent and capture a datum’s primary content and essence” (p. 3). Saldaña went on to state that “coding is analysis” (p. 7); as such, I coded my data as I collected it, and revisited it throughout the data collection and writing periods of my study timeline.

**The coding process.** I used Auerbach & Silverstein’s (2003) coding process as a framework for my data analysis. I adopted their terms to describe my coding process and, in this section as I describe the process, have placed their terms in italics the first time I use them.
Auerbach & Silverstein’s (2003) coding process is conducted in three phases, each of which requires a different level of analysis. During the first phase, *Making the Text Manageable*, I worked with the text to determine which pieces of data were relevant to my study. Auerbach & Silverstein considered this a “filtering process” (p. 42). I read through the *raw text*, the data collected, and pulled out the *relevant text*, or “Text that is related to your specific research concerns” (p. 37). I quickly made the decision to code all transcripts of the learning community meetings. I first went through every transcript of the meetings and coded participant talk. Any time any of the six teachers in the study spoke, I coded their words as “participant—name.” I then went through the data a second time and coded for extended turns, which I defined as any chunk of text that was five lines or longer. I went through the transcripts a third time and coded for type of talk. I set several predetermined codes, but many other types of talk I coded on the fly. I wanted to allow space for the patterns to emerge from the data, as opposed to allowing preconceived notions I may have had drive my analysis. See Figure 3.3 for information regarding the coding of types of talk.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Refs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>extended turn in learning community</td>
<td>talk that was longer than five (5) lines once transcribed and imported into NVIVO</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>answering questions*</td>
<td>instances when a participant answered or attempted to answer another's question</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coaching others*</td>
<td>instances when a participant offered advice of the non-instructional sort to another teacher</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>directing</td>
<td>instances when a participant issues a directive to either another participant or the learning community as a whole</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dominating*</td>
<td>instances when a participant cut another teacher off or shut another teacher down in a learning community meeting</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extending another's idea*</td>
<td>instances when a participant extended another's idea in a learning community meeting by &quot;piggy-backing&quot; off the initial statement</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>narrating one's own experiences*</td>
<td>instances when a participant told a story about his or her own experiences; &quot;Well, in my classroom&quot;-type stories</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posing questions*</td>
<td>broken into the following subcodes in PLC analysis: asking for opinion (28); asking for resource (11); taking care of business (27); rhetorical i.e. talking through something; thinking aloud (6); asking for clarification (32)</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suggesting resources or solutions</td>
<td>instances when a participant suggested another teacher check out a resource or employ a solution in a learning community meeting. These suggestions were sometimes in response to a request for help and were at other times unprompted</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>summarizing</td>
<td>instances when a participant provided an objective recap of happenings in the classroom or in the learning community</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supporting another</td>
<td>instances when a participant &quot;backed up&quot; another teacher in a learning community meetings</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taking care of business*</td>
<td>talk that took place in learning community meetings that addressed the &quot;business&quot; of the community (e.g. meeting times, agenda items)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*predetermined codes

Figure 3.3 Types of talk in the learning community

On my fourth pass of the data, I coded for components of professional development, such as PLC structures or the implementation of recommended resources.

I followed the same process while coding the transcripts of the guided reflection conversations I had with teachers around their videotaped classroom observations.
However, I set fewer predetermined codes. I wanted to let the codes emerge from the data instead of trying to fit the data into preset codes. I found myself creating codes while transcribing that focused on references participants made. See Figure 3.4 for information regarding the coding of the guided reflection conversations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Anything else?” moments</th>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Naming an instructional strategy*</th>
<th>PLC structures*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference to another PD experience (e.g. Induction class)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to collaboration with grade level partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to dysfunction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to graduate school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to researcher support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to work of the learning community*</td>
<td>Reflection†</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* predetermined codes  † after the initial coding, this code was split into prompted and unprompted reflection

Figure 3.4 Content of the guided reflection conversations

After completing the first round of coding the guided reflection conversations, I realized that I wanted to take a closer look at the types of reflecting that was taking place in these conversations. I recoded all transcripts of the guided reflection conversation, then, and looked specifically for instances of prompted and unprompted reflections.

In the second phase, Hearing What Was Said, the selected relevant text was read through again to find repeating ideas, or instances where participants “used the same or similar words or phrases to express the same idea” (p. 37). Repeating ideas can occur within groups or across groups. An example of a repeating idea occurring within a group would be a phrase being used during a learning community meeting. An example of a repeating idea occurring across a group would be participants using the same phrase.
during individual interviews. Repeating ideas are then named. The data is then reviewed again, and repeating ideas are grouped into themes. As themes emerged, questions arose that I needed to clarify. I sent these questions to participants via Google Docs, which provided a platform through which participants could clarify and add their interpretations of events or dialogue.

Clarifying questions that I asked participants to respond were:

- In your opinion/experience, would the sharing of ideas and/or resources still occur if your learning community didn't meet regularly?
- Many of you referred to professional development opportunities other than your learning community (e.g. graduate courses, district-wide PD, school-wide PD, vertical teaming). What impact did those PD experiences have on your instructional practice?
- I recommended titles and resources to some of you. Did you access these or use them in subsequent planning or individual professional development? If yes, what were your thoughts?
- Some of you viewed the entire lesson, either with me or on your own later. Do you have any additional thoughts to share about your instructional practices?

Participants were given the option to answer any or all (or none) of the questions. I included participants’ responses to these questions in my data collection and responses were analyzed following the same coding process described in this section.

Auerbach & Silverstein defined a theme as an “implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas” (p. 38). The researcher also names these themes. Auerbach & Silverstein recommended that at this point, it makes sense for the researcher to read back
through the relevant text through the lens of new understandings that have been
developed and named as themes. Member checking would also make sense at this point,
to ensure the researcher has accurately captured the participants’ intentions (p. 65). In the
third phase, *Developing Theory*, themes are then grouped into *theoretical constructs*, or
“abstract concepts that organize a group of themes by fitting them into a theoretical
framework” (p. 67). Data is then reviewed again through the lens of the theoretical
constructs, keeping in mind the researcher’s theoretical framework as well. Auerbach &
Silverstein noted that researchers must acknowledge the theoretical framework that
“influences what you choose to include and exclude from your analyses” (p. 46). The
researcher then attempts to summarize the theoretical constructs in a *theoretical
narrative*, which is “the culminating step that provides the bridge between the
researchers’ concerns and the participants’ subjective experience” (p. 40). Auerbach &
Silverstein expanded the definition of theoretical narrative as such:

> A theoretical narrative described the process that the research participants reported in terms of your theoretical constructs. It uses your theoretical constructs to organize people’s subjective experience into a coherent story. It employs people’s own language to make their story vivid and real. (p. 73)

Auerbach & Silverstein noted that researchers will find themselves revisiting the different
phases of the coding process again and again as they work through the data.

**Summary of the data collection and coding process.** Saldaña (2009) noted
“Coding is not a precise science; it’s primarily an interpretive act…coding is the
transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (p. 4). The
researcher revisits the data again and again as she works to interpret it. I reviewed and
reflected upon the data I collected because “qualitative inquiry demands meticulous
attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of
human experience” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 10). Reviewing both the transcripts of and the actual videotapes was critical to my process. Wolcott (1994) stressed the value in a researcher having access to “audio- or videotaped materials that allow one to return again and again to an original source rather than having to depend on what has been filtered through headnotes or fieldnotes” (p. 65). This process strengthened my analysis of collected data.

**Triangulation**

I increased the trustworthiness of this study through triangulation. Graue and Walsh (1998) cautioned that the use of “only one research strategy—for example, only observation, or worse, only one kind of observation—introduces bias into the data record” (p. 102). I achieved triangulation not only through the use of a variety of data collection methods (e.g. conducting interviews, videotaping classroom observations, researcher memos), but also through the use of a variety of data sources (Glense, 2011), such as teacher observation reflections and document analyses. The addition of videotaped observations that the teachers reflected upon as a data collection method served to strengthen a study such as this because, as Maxwell (2005) contended, “Observation can enable you to draw inferences about this perspective that you couldn’t obtain by relying exclusively on interview data” (p. 94). This was especially important, because as Graue and Walsh (1998) reminded us:

The danger in not looking in many ways, it is that human beings are pattern and narrative constructors. They will construct coherent narratives to explain the world from whatever data are available. They will construct patterns and explanations even when faced with chaos and randomness. (p. 102)

This triangulation through the variety of data collection methods and sources allowed me to capture a true picture of a learning community and its members’ professional growth.
Member Checking

As I was writing up the participant description section of the study, I asked each participant to share with me life facts they would like included. I also pulled in information I had learned about each participant during the study and consulted their posted faculty webpages for additional information. After I had drafted the participant descriptions, I shared each one individually via Google Docs. Participants, at that point, had the opportunity to suggest edits, additions, or deletions to their individual description. I honored their revisions and the participant descriptions in this chapter are a result of that collaborative effort.

I shared my tentative findings with the participants separately. I encouraged an open conversation about the interpretations I made and the transcript excerpts I planned to include. I asked the participants if they thought what I wrote paralleled what they said and how they felt. I worked to maintain a sense of equality by framing our roles as co-explorers of the data. This form of member-checking was one way to increase the trustworthiness of this qualitative study (Glesne, 2011). I also strived to keep an open mind with regard to the participants’ reactions to my writing. Wolcott (1994) reflected on a study he conducted and “was reminded again that informants and researchers can have quite different views as to what constitute sensitive issues and whether or not anonymity is one of them” (p. 64). Member checking allowed me to honor these potentially differing views.

Trustworthiness and Generalizability

Generalizability is neither a goal of qualitative research in general nor of my study specifically. Maxwell (2005) stated, “Qualitative researchers usually study a single
setting or a small number of individuals or sites, using theoretical or purposeful rather than probability sampling, and they rarely make explicit claims about the generalizability of their accounts” (p. 115). However, qualitative researchers do have an obligation to ensure the validity of internal generalizability, which Maxwell defined as “the generalizability of a conclusion within the setting or group studied” (p. 115). I worked to ensure trustworthiness through the validity of internal generalizability by including descriptive accounts of all interactions instead of “selectively” focusing on particular interactions and ignoring others (Maxwell, p. 115). Another advantage of qualitative research is, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) wrote regarding generalizability, “Understanding one classroom helps us better to understand all classrooms” (p. 6).

Issues to Consider

Subjectivity. Drawing on recommendations made by qualitative researchers (Glesne, 2011; King & Horrocks, 2010; Peskin, 1988), I felt it important to examine my own subjectivity in light of this study. Peskin recommends researchers take a look at their own subjectivity, or “qualities that have emerged during the research” (p. 17), in order to explain to their audience the relationships between researcher and participants.

I have worked at the high school for the past four years. Three of the teacher participants were first-year teachers, and a fourth teacher was a second-year teacher, so I had not worked directly with them in the past. I had worked closely with the other two as a colleague and instructional coach at the middle school. Additionally, Silver is a small school district, so even though I may not have worked at the middle school for the past four years, I was still in contact with the participants at professional development events, district-wide meetings, and other school-related events. Taking all of this into
consideration, I worked to position myself and the teacher participants as co-learners. By framing this study as an endeavor in which we learned together, I worked to dispel the feeling that the participants were simply “research subjects” (Wagner, 1997). Teachers were invited to participate via letter and only those who responded were interviewed and observed. I was diligent in my efforts to avoid pressuring teachers to participate. I communicated with all participants that this would be a learning experience for all involved, and made sure all know that I was seeking new understandings and did not hold any preconceived expectations.

At the time of the study, I no longer worked directly with the middle school; I did, however, serve the high school in the same district as the assistant principal for instruction. I maintained awareness of my position as a former colleague and coach of some of the participants and the role that relationship might have played in data collection and interpretation. I was also aware of the role my administrative position and the implied power (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) associated with such a position may have played. Even though I did not supervise the teachers involved, I needed to ensure the teachers did not see my interviews and observations as evaluative. I believe their view of me as “administrator” shifted as I carefully positioned myself as a co-learner and the study as a co-learning experience. I further believe that my efforts to include member checking of the analyses solidified my role as co-researcher as opposed to evaluator. I kept this all in mind as I coded and analyzed the data I collected, because, as Saldaña (2009) noted, “your level of personal involvement as a participant observer—as a peripheral, active, or complete member during fieldwork—filters how you perceive, document, and thus code your data” (p. 7). My real hope was that my previously
established relationships with the participants resulted in a richer data collection, as
“qualitative research, and more particularly qualitative interviewing, involves entering
meaningful relationships with people. With this kind of personal activity the researcher is
ever present and therefore they will, without doubt, influence how the research develops”
(King & Horrocks, 2010 p. 130). I worked to ensure this research development was a
positive experience for all involved.

Risks. All videotaped interviews and classroom observations were uploaded to a
password-protected computer. All transcription data was also stored on a password-
protected computer. Although I used pseudonyms for participants, there was a slight risk
that participants could be identified since the site selected was the only middle school in a
small county. However, every precaution was taken to protect the identity of participants.

Benefits. While there were no direct benefits for the participants, there were
indirect benefits as they had the opportunity to engage in reflective practices as the
interview questions required thoughtful reflection. Further, teachers had the opportunity
to explore the whys and hows of their teaching practice and beliefs. Cochran-Smith and
Lytle (1990) stated:

There is little disagreement that teachers who engage in self-directed inquiry
about their own work in classrooms find the process intellectually satisfying; they
testify to the power of their own research to help them better understand and
ultimately to transform their teaching practices. (p. 8)

While the teachers in this study were not conducting inquiry-based research, the element
of self-reflection built into the observations and interviews of this study provided a
similar opportunity for teachers to grow in their teaching practices.
This study may have a long-term, indirect, beneficial impact on the school. As individual teachers began to reflect on their beliefs and practices, this culture of reflection could eventually permeate the entire school, which would result in a more positive learning and work environment for students and teachers.

**Considerations.** Merriam (1998) warned, “Qualitative case studies are limited by the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator. The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (p. 42). Since this is the case, I examined and self-evaluated my role as researcher. Having a set of procedures for collecting, managing, and analyzing data helped to alleviate these limitations and also strengthened my integrity as researcher.

Barone (2004) provided three ways to strengthen quality of case study: 1) the use of multiple data sources to build a “compelling case” for results; 2) length of time in the field to ensure reasonable amount of data can be collected; 3) consider ethical considerations and obligation to report these to the reader (p. 23). These three aspects were built into my case study design, and were re-examined throughout the study, thus strengthening the research process overall.

**Timeline**

My study followed this timeline:

- June/July 2013—Secure IRB approval, as well as school district approval
- July 2013—Secure signed consent forms
- August 2013-December 2013—Attend bi-monthly learning community meetings and transcribe the professional conversations that take place within the community
• September 2013-December 2013—Conduct classroom observations and engage in guided reflection around the videotaped observations with teachers. 

Transcribe the guided reflection conversations

• September 2013-January 2014—Analyze data (e.g. transcriptions, documents, memos). Data analysis will be on-going throughout the course of this study.

• January 2014-May 2012—Write and revise dissertation

• February 2014-May 2014—Conduct follow-up semi-structured interviews and member check analyses

**Conclusion to Research Design**

To review, I used a case study design to investigate teacher learning communities and professional conversations. I looked beyond those conversations to examine if what happens in the learning community transferred into individual teacher’s classroom practice. This dissertation study created space for teachers to examine: 1) their individual beliefs about teaching, 2) how they articulate these beliefs to their teaching peers during learning community meetings, 3) how their actions reflect or do not reflect their stated beliefs about teaching, and 4) how/if there are changes in their practice.

This study sought to discover how and why facets of professional development through teacher participation in a professional learning community transferred into classroom practice. I explored the following research questions:

1. What went on in the teachers’ learning community when teachers discussed their teaching?

2. What impact, if any, did on-going collaboration within a learning community have on teacher practice?
3. What did guided reflection reveal about teacher beliefs and practices?

In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how this work will contribute to the growing body of literature that provides evidence that the work of learning communities can have an important impact on teaching and learning in the classroom.
Chapter 4: Findings

Over the course of a semester, I spent time with a learning community comprised of six mid-level English language arts teachers. In this chapter, I will discuss what I observed in their bi-monthly learning community meetings. I will also discuss what happened when I was invited into their individual classrooms to videotape observations and when I was able to have individual reflective conversations after those classroom observations.

Having been a part of learning communities before, and specifically learning communities in the school where I was collecting data, I held preconceived notions of what the learning community meetings I would attend would look like. I was excited and anxious to begin data collection and felt honored to be able to see this learning community in action. Since I knew that I held assumptions about learning communities in general, I acknowledged that I would have to look carefully at how this specific learning community operated instead of resorting back to those assumptions; otherwise, I could run the risk of drawing comparisons between what I observed and what I thought I should be observing.

When I first began learning about learning communities, I thought of them as very narrowly defined. I had the impression that in order to really be a learning community, certain components and structures had to be in place all the time. So, for example, if learning communities were supposed to be collegial instead of congenial, as I discussed
in Chapter 2 of this study, learning communities could never be congenial. Congenial was wimpy and not what real learning communities would be. Before beginning my study of a learning community, I wanted to explore learning communities and deepen my understanding of what learning communities could look like and the potential they held for creating a space for professional growth and learning. I developed the Reflective Questions to Determine the Effectiveness of a Learning Community (Figure 2.2) as I read deeply and widely related studies and literature about learning communities. I collected and compiled the trends in the literature and used those trends to develop essential and guiding questions related to the components that trended in the literature. I worked to use language that reflected the idea that this was a tool to develop understanding of the community, not a rubric by which to judge the community as being good or bad.

With that process in mind, I began to analyze the data I collected from the learning community meetings. As I analyzed and coded data and grouped those coded excerpts into themes, I began to look for the best examples for each theme and resulting major finding. Those were the data samples I included in the dissertation. As I explored the transcribed data from the learning community meetings as well as the transcripts of the guided reflection conversations, I began to recognize and attempted to name the spaces around the learning community. Three spaces emerged:

1. Inside: the professional conversations within the learning community
2. Outside: what teachers took back to their classrooms
3. Around: the professional learning settings that surrounded the learning community and the teachers’ classrooms, including: spaces for reflection,
school-based professional development, graduate school, one-on-one professional settings

This structure was reflected in the research questions, too, so, for example, my first research question looked at what went on within the learning community, the second research question explored the transfer of the professional work done in the learning community back to the teachers’ classrooms, and the third research question, pertaining to teacher reflection, revealed the spaces around the learning community and individual teacher’s classroom.

From the literature, there were four components that came up again and again as necessary to the success of a learning community: collegial relationships, collaboration, conversation, and reflection. I looked at these components carefully as I analyzed the data I collected during my time at learning community meetings, in teachers’ classrooms, and while engaged in one-on-one guided reflection conversations with the teachers. This chapter is divided into three sections: one for each of my three research questions. Two of the components, relationships and conversation, are explored in response to the first research question I posed. My findings related to collaboration are explored the second section of this chapter and finally, the fourth component, reflection, is explored in the third section of this chapter. Please see Figure 4.1 for a list of the research questions, findings, and themes to be discussed in this chapter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What went on in the teachers’ learning community when teachers discussed their teaching?</td>
<td>Teachers assumed roles, which were either self-imposed or projected</td>
<td>Experienced teachers felt pressure to lead and support others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What impact, if any, did on-going collaboration within a learning community have on teacher practice?</td>
<td>The learning community practices were enacted within teachers’ classrooms</td>
<td>Setting group norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What did guided reflection reveal about teacher beliefs and practices?</td>
<td>Most reflection was the result of prompting by the researcher, but when space was created, reflection transpired</td>
<td>Prompted reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning communities alone do not satisfy teachers’ professional needs</td>
<td>Unprompted reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Anything else” reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School-based professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One-on-one professional settings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.1: Overview of findings

**Inside: Relationships and Conversation within the Teacher Learning Community**

I specifically used the Guiding Questions from Figure 2.2 as I considered my first research question: What went on in the teachers’ learning community when teachers discussed their teaching? Analysis of the data for this research question resulted in one
major finding: Teachers assumed roles, which were either self-imposed or projected. Analysis of data related to this finding was not done in an attempt to label teachers or to place them into a static role; instead, I explored the roles teachers moved into and out of over the course of the semester. The roles that participants in the study took on were dynamic and often shifted. Roles that were assumed during learning community meetings were often abandoned during one-on-one guided reflection conversations. Sometimes roles were self-imposed, as evidenced by instances in which teachers made statements that revealed roles and responsibilities they felt obligated to fulfill. One general example of a self-imposed role might be: *As a veteran teacher, I feel a sense of obligation to serve as a mentor to a novice teacher.* Self-imposed roles often had a direct impact on the roles taken on by others in the learning community. In other words, sometimes roles were projected by other teachers’ actions, which may have required or encouraged teachers to assume roles. A general example of a projected role might be a first-year teacher’s self-imposed role of being a novice and therefore having little to contribute, leaving space for experienced teachers to fill with their narratives of experience. Participants in this study often moved from role to role; roles changed as contexts changed. Additionally, the role of the learning community also shifted as the semester progressed. The three most oft-assumed roles are described in the following sections.

**Experienced teachers felt pressure to lead and support others.** One category of teacher I identified was the experienced teacher. Two participants fell into this category: Anne, with seventeen years of experience, and Annabell, with seven. These experienced teachers typically assumed one of two roles: leader or mentor. At various times, in various interactions, they each moved in and out of these roles. Their
assumption of these two roles was dependent on the context in which they were operating.

**Leader.** Annabell clearly felt pressure to assume the role of leader, specifically leader of the learning community. She was the one who created and sent out the agendas in advance, and she facilitated each of the meetings I attended. Early on in the semester she made an attempt to introduce the notion of shared leadership, in which each learning community member would set the agenda and facilitate meetings in a rotating fashion, but this idea appeared to overwhelm the first-year teachers so that proposal was abandoned. Of the thirty coded instances of taking care of business, twenty-six of these were Annabell’s.

In an email exchange following a guided reflection conversation with Annabell, she shared the following:

Annabell: Yes. I'm going to be super honest. I feel like I still have a very broken PLC, and that we have [felt broken] the last three years. A lot of that is likely attributed to my leadership---I don't know how to lead my peers and I'm too much of a softie to step on some toes. This year, with so many people new to the profession and to the content, we haven't really shared ideas and resources in a way that has benefited *me* because I'm the one who is helping to share.

[email December 4, 2013]

The pressure Annabell felt to lead the learning community is evident in this excerpt, as is her insecurity in her leadership abilities. She bore the burden of leading this learning community that was comprised of so many first-year teachers.
Further evidence of the assumption of the leadership role emerged when I analyzed transcripts of learning community meetings for extended turns, which I defined as any talk that was longer than five lines once transcribed and imported into NVIVO. There were 52 instances of extended turns; a breakdown of each participants’ number of extended turns can be found in Figure 4.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th># of Extended Turns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alissa</td>
<td>first-year teacher</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annabell</td>
<td>seven years</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>seventeen years</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryson</td>
<td>three years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarence</td>
<td>first-year teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>first-year teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2 Extended turns

A closer analysis of Annabell’s extended turns revealed that she spent a significant amount of this talk time taking care of business, directing, and attempting to fill silences. Anne’s extended turns were comprised of suggesting resources or solutions and narrating her classroom experiences.

**Supporter.** The term “supporter” sounds quite lovely, but when the experienced teachers assumed this role, it came at the expense of their own professional development. Annabell alluded to this conundrum in the previous excerpt when she stated, “This year, with so many people new to the profession and to the content, we haven't really shared ideas and resources in a way that has benefited me because I'm the one who is helping to share.”

In a guided reflection conversation with Anne [October 8, 2013], she echoed this notion of sacrificing her own professional development in order to support the first year teachers’. After viewing a clip of her teaching, Anne shared with me her concerns about
building in time for students to read as well as finding authentic tasks for students who finish assigned work before others. Anne sought my advice to find possible solutions for these dilemmas. Near the end of this excerpt, I encouraged Anne to take these dilemmas back to her learning community for discussion:

Abbey: Is there a particular part of today’s lesson that you would like to see?

Anne: My biggest concern when we have testing days is what happens when they’re done. I know I have this pod of people who are done twenty minutes before this group, and they just sit there and read. Which is fantastic: they need time to read. But I just worry that they should be doing something forward—like I should be moving them forward into the next thing. But I feel like if I do give them something to do, they’ll never have time to just read. I don’t know where the balance is between here you need to be working on this and here you need to be reading.

Abbey: Have you ever tried giving them a “moving forward” assignment?

Anne: I did last year. I haven’t this year. I would have two students who would be forever behind.

Abbey: Does the forward assignment have to be something that everyone does?

Anne: I’m not sure. I feel like if I’m going to give them something forward, something needs to happen with it. And for something to happen with it, everyone needs to do it. But is that fair that I give
Jennifer the assignment and say, here, do this for homework? It’s not her fault that it takes her forever to get something finished.

Abbey: The assessment today, they read an article about male and female athletes. And you mentioned that last week they read an article about Venus Williams. So are you doing—

Anne: --Opposing views. So last week her viewpoint is that men and women should be paid equally, and today’s was that they, male and female athletes, don’t deserve to make the same. So where we’re going from here is them writing and using the articles, one for the claim and the other for the counterclaim, this sort of backs my view. So that’s why they had the opposing articles.

Abbey: Could you, and I don’t know, but could you give the early finishers additional articles on the same topic? So some students will draw from two sources and others would draw from more?

Anne: Yea, that could work.

Abbey: And you would just have to be aware of that when you’re grading. So Ashley wouldn’t earn more points just for citing more sources, so it’s still connected, she’s going to use it—

Anne: --But it wouldn’t matter if Jennifer didn’t have that article because she would already have those two because we did those in class.

Yea, that’s a thought.

Abbey: OK, going back to your original thought, one thing I noticed is that your early finishers, they were engaged in their books.
Anne: This particular group—Mia, for example, is reading a book that I was recently reading. And she kept hounding me to finish. And Alex? Alex eats up a book. But most of them, yea, when they get to read, they read. And I don’t think the majority of them leave her and read, so I like giving them that time to read here.

Abbey: Since you are doing so much authentic reading and annotating, giving them that release to read for pleasure is nice. Have you thought about taking this to PLC as a consultancy dilemma?

Anne: We don’t have time. We pretty know what we need to do from here on out is help the sixth & seventh grade teachers understand the standards. So, like sixth grade has been very, Help, we’re clueless. Tell us what to do.

The amount of talk leading up to that closing statement is evidence of Anne’s struggle with practices to best support her students. She began our conversation with jumping right into her concerns: her concerns about testing days, the worthiness of assignments, the importance of reading. She then talked about strategies she had tried in the past, how they worked, and what she may try in the future. I offered her some advice, and then Anne moved on and discussed individual students’ needs. Anne revealed how thoughtful she was about the instructional decisions she made and how well she knew the students in her classroom. Even though Anne had a wealth of experience and knowledge to draw on, she still questioned her instructional decisions and her practice. In other words: Anne still needed support. However, Anne concluded this part of our conversation by directly stating that there was no time for the learning community to tackle her dilemmas or
provide support for her professional development because they needed to support new teachers in their understanding of the standards. Later on in that guided reflection conversation, Anne discussed one way she supported her struggling readers by reading passages aloud to students, and she asked my opinion about gradual release of control. She then made the following transition from her needs back to those of the learning community:

Anne: Yea, usually I’ll taper off as the year progresses, I just don’t know when to begin that. So with PLCs, though, we’re going to look at the standards. I asked the sixth and seventh grade teachers where they needed to start. And the first Wednesday of the month is going to be pulling out 2-3 indicators and maybe just talk about it. And then the third Wednesday is going to be unit planning. So Annabell and I will work together, Joyce and Alissa, and so on. But we’ll all be together. So when you get to a point where they say, I have this standard, I’m thinking of doing this. Does this fit? So we’ll talk at the first meeting and then work.

Anne expressed, again, her uncertainty regarding an instructional decision, but then delved right into a description of the structure of the learning community meetings as a way to communicate that there was no time for the learning community to address her questions or support her professional development. Anne’s professional needs were not met by the learning community. It is interesting to note that while I tried to honor my participants’ time but limiting post-observation guided reflection conversations to just 15 minutes, Anne and I always exceeded that time limit. This was the result of the “anything
“else” question I ended each conversation with, which created space for each participant to either end the conversation or take it any direction he or she chose. Anne opted to extend our time together, which indicated her need for an additional space to grow professionally. I explore this concept more deeply in response to the third research question in this study.

Novice teachers looked to experienced teachers for support. Another category of teacher I explored was the novice teacher. Three of the six participants were first-year teachers and a fourth was new to the ELA curriculum. The three first-year teachers were novice teachers; the fourth moved in and out of the role of novice.

Each first-year teacher was assigned a mentor by the building principal. The state department of education mandates that these mentors go through a state-sponsored training program, so while these mentors are qualified in the state’s eyes, they may not be the most appropriate match for individual first-year teachers. Since none of the more experienced ELA teachers were certified mentors, the building principal was forced to assign mentors from other subject areas. Clarence’s mentor was a seventh grade math teacher, Joyce’s mentor was the school instructional coach and former sixth grade math teacher, and Alissa’s mentor was the career education teacher. As a result, the three novice ELA teachers looked to the two experienced teachers in their learning community for support. Novice teachers were supported in the learning community in two significant ways: 1) through a mid-semester revision of the structure of learning community meetings, and 2) through encouraged question and answer sessions.

Meeting structures. Early in the semester, Anne and Annabell, after consulting with the building principal, devised and described a new meeting structure that they
thought would better support the novice teachers in their community. In addition to three of the six ELA teachers being first-year teachers, a fourth teacher, Bryson, was new to the content area. He had taught art for his first two years as a middle school teacher and had secured licensure in ELA through a master’s degree program. In the first three learning community meetings, as well as through more casual conversation with colleagues, the two experienced ELA teachers learned that the novice teachers required and requested support with developing their understanding of the ELA standards. Annabell described their vision for learning community meetings in the October 9, 2013 meeting:

Annabell: We’ll take a look at the standards and what they mean and how to apply them. So this is what we came up with for today. And if you guys don’t like this format, or if it’s not working for anyone at any time all you have to do is let us know and we will revamp it and do whatever works best for everyone. Our thought—and you guys can feel free to give suggestions on this—was that we meet as an SMS PLC twice a month. So at the first time of the month, we’ll look at some standards and deconstruct them. You guys suggested a couple very different things so we are trying to incorporate them. So we’ll look at the standards and talk about how to—what they mean, what they look like in practice. And then the second time we meet, we’ll meet in the media center. Ms. Collins has already said this is OK. So we’ll meet in the media center and we’ll work on unit planning. So all of us will have the opportunity to be in the same room together and do unit planning, whether it be the unit
you are currently working on or your next unit. And we’ll all be
together to give each other ideas and feedback. So we’ll all have
that little extra planning time and support. Does this sound like
something beneficial?

Clarence: Absolutely.

Bryson: And we will be together if anyone has any questions.

Annabell outlined the structure for the next several learning community meetings: at the
first meeting of the month, the learning community would work together to analyze an
ELA standard or standards. At the second meeting that month, the learning community
would break into grade-level partnerships and work to put those standards into their
practice. The three pairs would still meet in a common location (the media center) in
order to ask and answer questions of each other as needed. Three times within this one
extended turn Annabell communicated that the plan was flexible and could be brought up
for revision at any point if the structure was not working for learning community
members. Before describing the format, Annabell said, “And if you guys don’t like this
format, or if it’s not working for anyone at any time all you have to do is let us know and
we will revamp it and do whatever works best for everyone.” She also asked for
suggestions, asked if the plan sounded beneficial. She also let her colleagues know that
the proposed structure was based on their suggestions when she said, “You guys
suggested a couple very different things so we are trying to incorporate them.” The plan
Anne and Annabell constructed for the community was responsive to the needs of the
community, and, further, the way in which the plan was presented to the community was
supportive in Annabell’s choice of language.
The role of questions. When I analyzed the first-year teachers’ contributions to learning community meetings, 25% of their interactions were posing questions. An additional 25% of their verbal contributions were answering questions that were directly posed to them. See Figure 4.3 for an overview of first-year teachers’ contributions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbal Contributions</th>
<th>Questions Posed</th>
<th>Questions Answered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allisa</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarence</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.3 First-year teachers’ verbal contributions

An example of this questions and answer exchange occurred at a learning community meeting in October. One agenda item was the discussion of upcoming parent-teacher conferences. The three teachers who had taught at SMS in previous years described for the three first-year teachers the format for parent teacher conferences. At the conclusion of those businesslike details, Annabell opened the floor for questions:

Annabell: Any other concerns about conferences? Do any of the new teachers have questions about IEP students [students who have been identified as qualifying for an Individualized Education Plan]?

Alissa: So what should I say if a parent asks me about an IEP?

Annabell: If a parent asks about an IEP, you can let them know that you received their accommodations the first week of school and how you are meeting those accommodations.

Joyce: What are effective exit strategies if a conference gets tense or just goes too long? Can I just say that we have a sign-up sheet to set up another conference?
Anne: You can let them know that we only allotted 15 minutes per conference, so if we were able to set up another time to come since there are other parents waiting. Also, were things discussed with you like you should always leave your door open when you have a parent, because you never know if they are going to get confrontational. If they do get confrontational, end that meeting immediately. Don’t let it get confrontational. It does happen.

Joyce: [makes scared face]

Anne: And it’s not the norm. But you may have one or two. And if you’re worried about it being confrontational before the parent even gets there, ask someone to be in there with you.

Anne and Annabell supported the novice teachers and prepared them for parent-teacher conferences through this question and response exchange. Annabell even supplied the initial questions to get the conversation about potential concerns started. The novice teachers, who had not yet experienced parent-teacher conferences, were unsure of what questions to ask their learning community colleagues in preparation for the conferences. When Annabell opened the question and answer exchange with a possible question, “Do any of the new teachers have questions about IEP students?” Alissa restated that question and posed it to the community. Anne answered it, which led to Joyce asking an unrelated question, one she may have been pondering but did not feel comfortable asking until Annabell intentionally—or perhaps unintentionally—modeled the exchange.

The learning community played a shifting role for both experienced and **novice teachers**. For both experienced and novice teachers, there was a trend in the “we
don’t need a community” statements that were made in guided reflection conversations and email exchanges with me. Some of these statements were made in a positive manner; others took on a negative slant.

**A positive role.** Even though teachers sometimes felt they did not need to be a part of a learning community, they often qualified these statements with a positive detail, as Alissa did when she informed me via email that the “sharing of ideas and resources would still occur if our community didn't meet regularly. We are a close learning community and we share resources over email, even now, along with our meetings.” Although she did not see the importance of frequent meetings, she noted that the learning community is a close one that would still collaborate. Anne, on the other hand, thought that collaboration would still occur on grade level teams because, as she stated, “Outside of PLC meetings, we discuss with other grades only if they seek out advice or feedback, so that probably would be the case if the PLC meetings went away.”

Annabell saw the learning community as the place for professional development (PD) to take place and take root. She stated:

PD drives my professional practice. Honestly, without further PD, the resources that we do and would share in an engaged PLC would probably be less likely to come to light. In previous years, when we did book studies, the PLC was a PD session. Later, when we shared skills and ideas, the information often came from resources we were given at a different PD or that someone had read for their own continued growth and development… I like both, and I think it's important to do both.
Annabell recognized that professional learning occurred in different settings, but that learning really “came to light” in the learning community. Teachers may have read about a new strategy on their own, or attended a professional development session with a different group, and the learning community was the place where teachers brought these new ideas and understandings and shared them with their peers. Annabell noted that she felt it was important to engage in professional development in both settings, and that the part of the process that solidified the learning for her was when the new understanding (e.g. the new resource, idea, skill, strategy) was brought back to the learning community to be shared with colleagues.

**A negative role.** Through my semester-long interactions with the six members of this learning community, I captured the occasional negative statement. I analyzed each negative statement that was coded to determine if there were any trends in the comments. The negativity most often stemmed from other factors, such as already being inundated with meetings, grading responsibilities, and other “side effects” of teaching, rather than being a part of the learning community. I explored some examples of teachers projecting negative feelings due to other teaching pressures.

Bryson, in an email to me, wrote, “The learning community is rather beneficial, but implementation of these ideas/resources is limited due to the frequency of meeting.” At the point of this statement, Bryson saw the learning community as a roadblock to developing his practice, instead of a place in which he could strengthen his practice with the support of colleagues. Similarly, in a conversation Annabell and I had around the notion of meeting too much, she revealed, “What Anne shares is usually new to me, but she would be sharing these resources with me even if we did not meet [bi-] monthly.”
Annabell indicated that the professional learning relationship she shared with Anne would continue even if the community did not meet together as a whole. Remember, too, that Anne and Annabell were the most experienced teachers at this point and likely felt that their greatest opportunity for professional growth was through each other.

Lack of time as a roadblock to professional learning was mentioned in other situations, too. For example, Clarence had requested the opportunity to observe Anne. She had shared a questioning strategy with the learning community at a meeting and Clarence wanted to see it in action. She later shared the following with me in a guided reflection conversation (October 8, 2013): “Yea, like Clarence says he wants to come observe me. But to do that, he would have to miss class. And no one wants to do that.” These comments are not a direct reflection on learning communities as a concept, but it is interesting to note that I assumed the learning community would be the place for teachers to come together and collaborate in order to lessen the “side effects” of teaching. Instead, the learning community, at times, became another burden. This notion will be discussed further in the implications section of this paper.

**Outside: Transfer of Teacher Collaboration into Individual Teacher Practice**

My second research question was: What impact, if any, did on-going collaboration within a learning community have on teacher practice? Analysis of the data for this research question resulted in one major finding: the structural practices of the learning community permeated teacher classrooms. As I spent time in learning community meetings and teachers’ classrooms, I recorded 40 instances of learning community structures transferring to classroom practice. Although I saw evidence of many learning community practices permeating classroom practice, I will highlight the
three most common: 1) setting group norms, 2) implementing discussion techniques, and 3) adhering to agendas.

**Setting group norms.** Group norms are “a set of mutually decided upon expectations regarding how meeting time will be spent, how disagreements will be addressed, and how all discourse among participants will be conducted” (Venables, 2011, p. 26). Setting group norms had been a professional practice at Silver Middle School since 2008, when the school formed a leadership team that, through professional learning, began to function as a learning community. Setting group norms was an important part of the functionality of the leadership team as a learning community. Each leadership team member voluntarily took the practice of setting group norms back to their content area learning communities and this practice continued since that time.

**In learning community meetings.** The primary focus of the first two learning community meetings of the year (August 28, 2013 and September 11, 2013) was to set group norms. Annabell facilitated the setting of group norms at these two meetings, and used a norm-setting protocol as described in the following excerpt:

Annabell: I would like to start today with norm setting. We are a new group this year, and this will take more time than we what we have left. I think this is really important for our group and it is something I do with my students. We are going to start with a Peeves and Traits (Venables, 2011) protocol. Everyone has two sheets of paper, two scraps of paper and a marker. The Peeves & Traits protocol was a Daniel Venables protocol given to us a while ago. This is to help us understand each other a little better as people who work
together and discuss together. You are going to write down one pet peeve. You only get one, so pick the one that is the biggest one you have. What is the biggest pet peeve you have when working in a setting like this one. And if you’d like, you can start it by saying, “It burns my butt when…” [the group laughs]. If you don’t want to say it like that you don’t have to.

Clarence: I want to say it like that [group laughs again; long silence as all group members write]

Anne: Do I just do one per page?

Annabell: You only get one! [group laughs]. OK, on the other scrap of paper, you are going to write one trait about yourself that you think everyone else needs to know about you. You can start this one with, “One thing you should know about me is…” Some examples that the protocol gives is “One thing you should know about me is that my silence doesn’t mean that I’m not interested; I just need process time.” Or, “One thing you should know about me is that I get excited sometimes and people are put off by my enthusiasm.” Or, “One thing you should know about me is that I am very visual and I need to see things.” So what do we need to know in order to work best with you? [silence while group members write]. So since we only have five minutes left, what I would like to spend our time doing is going around and just sharing, not really discussing unless we need clarification, sharing the things that irritate us and the
things that we need to know about each other. And the next time we meet together, we will hang these up and keep them in mind as we set our group norms. So is there anybody that will start? We’ll start with what burns our butts.

Annabell relied on a protocol that the school had used in professional learning in the past as a framework to set this learning community’s group norms. The protocol had a humorous slant built in with the sentence starter “It burns my butt when…” and Annabell maintained a humorous tone when she used humor to redirect one teacher who wanted to submit more than one peeve. She provided examples to focus her colleagues’ thinking, which was helpful to the three community members who had never engaged in this particular protocol before.

At the subsequent learning community meeting (September 11, 2013) the group finalized their norms. Annabell facilitated this meeting as well:

Annabell: So our main focus today is going on and setting our group norms so we have those in place for our next meeting. All of the work we did last week, not last week but two weeks ago, is up on the board. You did two things: your “it burns my butt” statement and then one piece of “things you need to know about me.” They are grouped as such. But we need to group the things that irritate us and come up with common themes. Then we’ll wordsmith them into norms we can all live with. And that usually takes a lot of discussion because we all like words, so it takes a while to get things right.

The norms that were finalized at the conclusion of this meeting were as follows:
1. Maintain organization by coming prepared and following the agenda

2. Be a respectful participant and an active listener

3. Take responsibility for maintaining a focused discussion

4. Keep a positive attitude and atmosphere

5. All decisions will be made in the best interests of students

These norms reflected beliefs that transferred into the teachers’ classrooms. I witnessed each of these beliefs in place in the six classrooms in general, and observed the greatest evidence in two other specific areas: the implementation of intentional discussion techniques and adherence to an agenda. These two practices will be discussed later in this chapter.

Annabell mentioned in the first excerpt that setting norms is a practice she valued with her professional peers as well as with her students. However, she shared this information in passing, never explicitly advising her colleagues to set norms with their own students. I was surprised, then, that this practice carried over into not only her classroom, but those of every one of her colleagues as well. As I began classroom observations, I saw class norms posted in each of the English language arts classrooms I visited.

**In the classroom.** Each participant set norms with his or her students. In each classroom, these norms were set collaboratively; students shared what they needed to be successful in the classroom and what their expectations were for themselves and others. After filming classroom observations and engaging in guided reflection conversations with participants, it was evident that the reasons for setting group norms varied from teacher to teacher. In some classrooms, norms were set as a management technique, a
way for teachers to manage the behaviors of students in the classroom. The norms in these classrooms created a common language through which the teacher could hold students accountable for their behavioral choices and the ways in which they participated—or not—in classroom discussions and activities. In other classes, norms were created as a way to give students agency and independence. Teachers were looking for ways to honor student voice by allowing them to create and live into the collaboratively set norms. I have provided examples of each.

Alissa, a first-year teacher, did not set norms with her students immediately. In fact, when she invited me into her classroom for the first observation on October 10, 2013, her students were setting norms that day. During our guided reflection conversation after that observation, Alissa brought up norm setting:

Abbey: Is there a part of the video you’d like to watch?
Alissa: Setting the norms. [video plays]. There. [points at screen] I felt like I could have had them doing something while we were setting norms because I hated that they were just sitting there while we discussed. [approximately one-third of the students appeared to be actively listening while individual students shared their proposed norms one-by-one. The rest of the students were disengaged as evidenced by heads down or blank stares]. But I knew we needed to set norms. I think there could have been a better way to get them engaged. They’re thinking, but obviously not everyone is thinking.
Abbey: It’s interesting that that is where you started your comments, because one of my questions was about setting group norms. I was wondering why you made the decision to set group norms.

Alissa: Well, I feel like it is good to have them to say, well, this is what we came up with, this is what we agreed on, you’re not doing that right now. To have that as a way to keep them on task.

Alissa explicitly stated that norms were a way to keep students “on task.” As a novice teacher, classroom management was a topic that Alissa was very cognizant of. On four occasions, once in a learning community meeting and three times in guided reflection conversations with me, Alissa sought advice regarding classroom management techniques, including ways to keep students engaged and on task as well as wondering aloud how certain practices might work with “her students.”

Another novice teacher, Alissa’s grade-level partner Joyce, set group norms for a different reason: to honor student voice. During a classroom observation in Joyce’s classroom just a few days after I filmed Alissa, I captured Joyce’s students making reference to group norms. At the subsequent guided reflection conversation (October 14, 2013), I asked Joyce about the norms and her purpose for setting them with her students:

Abbey: And so you mentioned group norms again, and that was something I noticed. I heard them talked about, I saw them posted…why did you decide to put norms in place?

Joyce: Because I felt like this is their group discussion, these are their norms, their words. So if I was able to point to them and say, these are the norms that you guys created they would follow them since
they set the norms. Those are theirs. They can redirect their classmates and it’s not up to me. I can redirect the classroom rules, but the group norms are up to you guys, your responsibility. And it kinda gets them—they got a little excited because they started doing all these hand movements like this [motions hands upward] and this [motions hands downward] to keep people quiet while trying to be respectful. Which helps them outside of class, you know, to come up with a nice way to tell people to be quiet. You know they like to say shut up and I’m trying to eliminate that, let’s come up with something else. So the norms are theirs.

Abbey: Where did you first hear about group norms?

Joyce: Here at Silver. The first day…I think it was at Induction. I didn’t even know what norms were before.

Abbey: We did set those at the first Induction class.

Joyce: Yea, so we did it at Induction, and then we did it in PLC. So I was thinking, OK, that’s good practice. How do you get middle schoolers to do it? So Annabell, the way she led it in our PLC, I really liked that: think of things that annoy you and you don’t want to happen, and think of what do you want to happen. It’s just great.

Figure 4.4 is a photograph of Joyce’s students’ norms. Joyce mentioned the importance of the students using their own words, and that notion is reflected in the norms in the photograph. I had to ask for clarification on some of the norms, such as “shoot the bird” (my—incorrect—initial interpretation of that one did not seem appropriate for middle
school!). Joyce explained that “shoot the bird” was one student’s way of saying “stay on topic.” Oftentimes people use the informal term “bird-walking” to indicate speakers straying off topic; this student’s family reminded each other to stay on topic by saying “shoot the bird!” whenever that happened. He shared this term with his class, who loved it and adopted it as part of their language. “Shut up,” which Joyce mentioned as language she did not allow, was replaced with a euphemism: Watch your airtime.

Figure 4.4 Joyce’s group norms, per class period

In this transcript, Joyce mentioned that she had never heard of setting norms until she began working in Silver School District. She stated that she set norms first in the district induction (first-year teacher) course, and then a second time with her learning community. It was not until her second engagement with a norm setting protocol that she then took the practice back into her classroom. Joyce stated that she liked the way Annabell led the norm setting engagement and made a connection to the way she felt when she was asked to help create the norms to which her community would adhere. By
instituting this practice in her own classroom, she was able to guide students to experience a similar community-building opportunity. The way Annabell led the learning community gave Joyce a vision to live into. It is interesting, then, that Annabell’s reasons for setting norms with her students fell into the same category as Joyce’s. Annabell also spoke of her desire to honor student voice:

Abbey: So, another follow-up question. When I attended the first two learning community meetings, you spent a lot of time taking your group through two protocols to set group norms. And then when I came to your classroom and looked around and read the room, I saw norms posted. Can you talk about that?

Annabell: Those are the English I Honors norms [pointed]

Abbey: OK.

Annabell: Those are directly from them, in their wording, their ideas, my terrible clip art [laughs].

Annabell’s students’ norms are pictured in Figure 4.5 below.

Figure 4.5 Annabell’s students’ norms

Though setting norms permeated all six teachers’ classrooms, teachers’ reasons for setting group norms generally fell into two categories: 1) behavior management and
2) agency. Regardless of the individual teacher’s reasons for setting norms, all six teachers allowed the students to set their own norms. They found the acknowledgement of the students using their own words to craft their class expectations to be a way of honoring student voice and creating classroom community, which, in turn, could lead to a more manageable group of students.

**Implementing discussion techniques.** Another structural element from learning community meetings that transferred into classroom practice was the use of discussion techniques. I defined discussion techniques as an intentional attempt to structure discussion among teachers or with students. See Figure 4.6 for a chart of discussion techniques I observed being used in the learning community and in the classrooms.

In the learning community, the semester began with very structured ways to talk, but as time passed, the community let go of some of that structure. In some cases, letting go of structure led to richer discussion; however, in others, an intentional discussion technique could have served to focus the work of the learning community and led to greater productivity.

Some discussion techniques were presented to the learning community by a member who explicitly stated that the technique would work well with students. Examples of these techniques are discussed deeply in the following section. However, there were also some discussion techniques used by the learning community that were naturally absorbed by teachers and implemented in individual teacher’s classrooms. Bryson spoke to this during a guided reflection conversation (November 19, 2013) when he stated, “So maybe that’s causing some of that. Because we do have a lot of conversation and we don’t realize sometimes that we take strategies back with us. But
just the conversation we have with each other can really give us a good clue as to what they’re expecting, what they need, how they run their classrooms. And it gives us some time to say, OK we want these kids to be ready for them, so let’s try to mirror their practices.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the Learning Community</th>
<th>In the Classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open discussion – informal, no structure, began with a question posed to the rest</td>
<td>Open discussion – informal, no structure, began with a question posed to the rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuning Protocol – “a facilitated process to support educators in sharing their students’ work and, with colleagues, reflecting upon the lessons that are embedded there. This collaborative reflection helps educators to design and refine their assessment systems, as well as to support higher quality student performance” (National School Reform Faculty, n.d.)</td>
<td>Discussion Rubric – used by SMS teachers to clarify expectations for discussion and guide student participation in discussion. Students also used this as a self-evaluation tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notecard Feedback – SMS teachers provided positive and constructive feedback to their colleagues on notecards in order to give and receive the greatest amount of feedback in a timely manner</td>
<td>Notecard Feedback – students provided positive and constructive feedback to their peers on notecards in order to give and receive the greatest amount of feedback in a timely manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socratic Seminar – structured conversations about selected texts and the important ideas imbedded within them” (Mangrum, 2010, p. 40)</td>
<td>Socratic Seminar – structured conversations about selected texts and the important ideas imbedded within them” (Mangrum, 2010, p. 40)</td>
</tr>
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Figure 4.6 Discussion techniques

**In the learning community.** Similar to the norm-setting protocol, the learning community looked to implement structured ways to talk about their practice. In four learning community meetings, September 11, September 25, October 30, and November 6, Annabell suggested different ways to structure their discussions about teacher-created assessments. Her suggestions ranged from very structured to open discussion. Early in the semester, at the September meetings, Annabell suggested the use of a tuning protocol, when she said, “Each grade level team could bring assessments to the table and we could do tuning protocols, which are kind of what we just did here but more structured” (September 11, 2013). The tuning protocol model adopted by Silver Middle
School and suggested by Annabell in September was developed by the National School Reform Faculty. The National School Reform Faculty defined the tuning protocol as “a facilitated process to support educators in sharing their students’ work and, with colleagues, reflecting upon the lessons that are embedded there. This collaborative reflection helps educators to design and refine their assessment systems, as well as to support higher quality student performance” (National School Reform Faculty, n.d.).

However, as the semester progressed, the learning community seemed to move away from the structure of protocols and implemented strategies such as giving and getting feedback via notecards (September 25, 2013) to open discussion (October 30, 2013). Many of these semi-structured methods of discussion led to richer conversation, but near the end of the semester, the community seemed to move too far from structure. In fact, at the November 6, 2013 meeting, Annabell offered the following musings as the community searched to find a discussion technique that might work for their task:

Annabell: So what’s the best way to do this? Do we want to break out into grade levels and talk about what this looks like at each grade level and then come back together? I don’t know the best way to be productive and hear everyone’s voice.

Annabell’s questions served as an entrée into thinking through possible ways to provide support to grow one another’s understanding of a writing standard and what it might look like at each grade level. However, in this instance, the community spent 7 minutes working through how they might analyze, discuss, and report back on the standard than actually engaging in the work of analysis and discussion. Even after beginning the discussion, Annabell questioned the direction of the discussion when she attempted to
redirect the learning community: “My hopes, and you guys take control of this, but my hopes are to go through the rubric and discuss it. There are definitely places where we need to discuss. Like under Elaboration of Evidence, first bullet.” Using an intentional discussion technique to focus the discussion and help with transitioning from topic to topic may have served them well in this instance.

In the classroom. When I was invited into the teachers’ classrooms to videotape observations, I saw examples of discussion techniques being implemented. Many of the techniques used in classrooms mirrored what I observed in learning community meetings. For instance, I observed two teachers modeling how to provide peer-to-peer feedback via notecards just as the learning community had on September 25. There was also evidence of open discussions, which Bryson described in a guided reflection conversation (November 19, 2013), in every classroom:

Abbey: Talk a little more about discussion in your class. Just tell me what discussion looks like in your class.

Bryson: Well we don’t have a really formal structure or strategies. At the end of the reading, we’ve created a chart like this [points to chart on board—see Figure 4.7] and we start with the questions, and before I answer the questions they had I give the students the chance to answer each other’s questions. And if nobody has a clue then I’ll step in. we aren’t real good with talking over each other, so right now they have to raise their hands. We’re just not at that point where they can handle it. But we mostly go through the chart, and when we finish the chart we go through and walk through the
chapter. Someone starts off with what happened and then we discuss questions. It takes a good 15-20 minutes to do a good chapter discussion.

Figure 4.7: Bryson’s board from 11.18.13 observation

After analyzing the filmed observations, there were two techniques teachers used to strategically guide discussion with their students that really stood out: 1) the use of a common discussion rubric, and 2) the use of Socratic seminar.

Discussion rubric. Two years ago, Silver Middle School literacy teachers created a common discussion rubric that teachers have used for a variety of instructional
purposes. By common I mean that the teachers created the rubric together and came to consensus on their expectations for participation in classroom discussions at SMS. They found this consistency to be critical in achieving smooth transitions from one grade level to the next because students would know what teachers expected classroom discussions to look like. Primarily, teachers taught students to use the rubric as a self-assessment tool; students used the rubric to reflect on their contributions to class discussions. Teachers also used the rubric to clarify their expectations for student participation in class discussions. Some teachers used the common discussion rubric more intentionally than others. For example, in a guided reflection conversation (September 26, 2013) with the two seventh grade ELA teachers, Clarence stated that he explicitly taught his students the discussion rubric. On the other hand, his grade level colleague, Bryson, stated, “They have done better with it [the rubric] than I thought. I wonder if last year’s sixth grade teachers taught it a lot. I’ve talked very little about discussion.” Clarence, as a first-year teacher, may have felt more of a sense of urgency to explicitly teach the rubric as opposed to Bryson, who had been at the school for three years and would have known that students had been taught the rubric in previous classes.

Alissa, in a guided reflection conversation that took place immediately after I filmed her teaching (October 10, 2013), explained why she decided to use the common discussion rubric with her students:

Abbey: Really impressive. Another thing I noticed is that you used the common discussion rubric. Why did you choose to use that particular rubric?
Alissa: Well, I actually think it is a good rubric. As far as it was pretty straight forward on, follows along with having them have the evidence, you know, can they use the evidence. It’s a good way to know if they read it. And I thought it was good on participation, and it just kind of hit the categories that I want, as far as grading a discussion.

Abbey: Who first introduced you to that rubric?

Alissa: It was actually Annabell. She gave me a copy of it.

Abbey: When she gave it to you did she give you any background? Like did she say it was something that was used district-wide?

Alissa: She did, but she also said it was what she used in eighth grade, so I knew she had done a lot of work with it, so I picked her brain about it. She recommended using it.

In this excerpt, Alissa explained her reasons for adopting the rubric: 1) it addressed the areas on which she wanted to assess students, and 2) a learning community colleague both recommended and explained it to her. This support, the recommendation of the rubric from a more experienced colleague coupled with an explanation, made the transfer into her classroom practice more seamless.

Socratic seminar. A second example of a discussion strategy from a learning community meeting transferring into classroom practice is the Socratic seminar. Mangrum (2010), who wrote about teacher use of Socratic seminars to discuss practice, defined Socratic seminars as “structured conversations about selected texts and the important ideas imbedded within them” (p. 40). At the October 9, 2013 learning
community meeting, Anne shared a video of students engaged in a Socratic Seminar from The Teaching Channel. The learning community discussed what they saw in the video and talked about how this discussion strategy might look in their classrooms. The very next day, on October 10, I was invited into Alissa’s classroom, and she showed the same video of the Socratic seminar to her sixth grade students. When we had our guided reflection conversation following the observation, I asked Alissa about her instructional choice:

Abbey: Great. My final question, and this was a really neat moment for me, was yesterday. I was in your learning community meeting and a video was used. Anne talked about it and presented it, and you all then watched it. And then I was here today and you used it. Why did you decide to use that video?

Alissa: Well, it helped me to see…like what is this supposed to look like? I’m visual, I have to know, I have to get it in my head what I’m supposed to do. And actually the discussion in first period…I wanted to cry, I wish we had taped it. They did wonderful. I think they followed that structure. It [the video] modeled for them and I think they just knew how it should sound, things they should be saying, they did great. I was so impressed. So I hope it continues. I think it’s just seeing it, how it’s supposed to look.

That same week, I was invited into Joyce’s classroom. Joyce and Alissa are both first-year, sixth-grade ELA teachers who often planned together. Joyce’s students engaged in a Socratic seminar discussion while I was in her class. The following
exchange is from our subsequent guided reflection conversation, three days after the classroom observation:

Abbey: Is there a part of the video you’d like to watch?

Joyce: The seminar [video plays]

Abbey: OK. That was actually when the first question came to my mind. On Wednesday, when I was in your PLC meeting, I saw Anne share the Socratic seminar video, and it was cool to see it in place in your classroom. So I was wondering why you decided to use that video this week with your kids?

Joyce: Well I wasn’t sure the best way to do group discussions. I didn’t even know where to start! I knew I needed to start with group norms, but from there I was like, how do I even explain to them how to do it? And really the best thing to do is to show them. So I showed them that video, the same one that I saw, and I told them: don’t worry about the content. Look at how they are discussing, look at how they are behaving, look not just the people talking, but at the people outside the seminar circle. And it was like the first day, they were mimicking kids in the video. I think if it gets rough I can just redirect them, remind them of their norms, and if I reshow that video…I just like that video! [laughs].

Joyce and Alissa both spoke to the importance of having a model: if the students could see what was expected of them, they would be more likely to emulate it and reach those expectations set forth in the discussion rubric. As teachers, they also now had a vision to
live into and realized modeling for all learners was a critical instructional practice. As learners themselves, being novice teachers, a more veteran colleague inadvertently reinforced that philosophy. Anne had done just that in the learning community meeting when she shared the Socratic seminar video with her colleagues. The two novice teachers who, as Joyce said, “Didn’t even know where to start!” were able to take the discussion technique that Anne shared with the community and implement it immediately in their classrooms.

**Adhering to agendas.** Agendas served as a structural component in both learning community meetings and teachers’ classrooms. Every learning community meeting began with an overview of that meeting’s agenda, and for the most part, the agenda was followed closely. Every classroom I visited had a posted agenda. These classroom agendas also provided a structure for the day’s lesson.

**In the learning community.** The learning community spent a significant amount of time on what I coded as “taking care of business.” I defined the “taking care of business” code as talk that took place in the learning community meetings that addressed the “business” of the community (e.g. meeting times, agenda items). Over the course of the semester, there were 30 instances of “taking care of business” in the nine learning community meetings I attended. Every meeting had an agenda that had been shared ahead of time via Google drive; every meeting began with reference to agenda; nearly every meeting concluded with Annabell, the teacher who created the agendas, asking if there were items to be put on the next meeting agenda. An example of Annabell talking through the creation of the next meeting agenda follows:
Annabell: The only other thing I have to ask is about the next meeting. It sounds like we want to put MAP testing on the agenda so that we know what to expect for that. What standards do we want to tackle next? I know vocabulary has been a topic of discussion. I know we also need to talk about inter-rater reliability and writing. Just remember the more topics we add to agendas, the more specific standards are going to be pushed back. So it’s up to you all. I’m nervous to let y’all walk out without making these decisions. Let me get my calendar. How many meetings…? I know our next meeting we need to talk about MAP for at least a part of it. We also need to talk about our ELA night. And we need time to practice inter-rater reliability because we have to help the faculty with that.

Annabell used questions to think aloud through the topics that may have needed to be addressed at the next learning community meeting. Many of the topics she listed in that excerpt were not directly related to the community’s goal of dedicating community time to analyzing standards. The meeting did adjourn before the agenda for the next meeting was set, but Annabell did seek feedback from the community via email and also sent the agenda out in advance so revisions could be made if necessary. This particular excerpt also demonstrated the overwhelming number of instructional and organizational topics teachers are faced with during the school year, which made adherence to agendas a critical component to keep learning community meetings focused and productive.
In the classroom. The practice of creating and adhering to agendas transferred into each teacher’s classroom as evidenced by the posted daily agendas I saw each time I observed. However, in the classroom, agendas served both structural and instructional roles.

When I was invited into Clarence’s classroom on November 18, 2013, he opened class by going over the agenda and clearly stating the purpose for that day’s lesson. Three days later, during our guided reflection conversation, we discussed this instructional decision:

Abbey: In the opening clip, you set the purpose for the class and I think that’s something we sometimes forget to do—going over the agenda—

Clarence: --and I think that I do forget that sometimes.

Abbey: You did it in this clip. Why do you think—

Clarence: --I do not know. Sometimes I do it and sometimes I’m just so anxious to get things organized to go it just slips my mind.

Abbey: What do you think setting the purpose does for your kids though?

Clarence: I think it gives them the expectation of, Ok, we’ve got to do this today. I stress the idea that I have a unit together and the timing—I’m very strict about timing and staying on task. And I’ve found that when I tell them—because I’ve found I cannot get them to read everything on that board—so I’ve noticed that I have to constantly go over that. But I’ve found I have more urgency from them when I go over that.
Clarence described his commitment to staying on task and keeping the class organized. The agenda, in his classroom, helped him do that. In Clarence’s classroom, the agenda served a secondary purpose as well: one of an instructional nature. Clarence noted that when he took the time to go over the agenda with students, it instilled a sense of urgency in the students. The agenda communicated to students that he was prepared for them and had taken the time to plan ahead, which may have contributed to the students’ willingness and “urgency” to complete the day’s objectives and tasks. See Figure 4.8 for photographs of daily agendas.

Figure 4.8 Clarence’s agenda (left) and Joyce’s agenda (right)
Around: The Role of Reflection in Revealing Teacher Beliefs and Practices

My third research question was: What did guided reflection reveal about teacher beliefs and practices? Analysis of the data for this research question resulted in two major findings: 1) Most reflection was the result of prompting by the researcher, but when space was created, reflection transpired; and 2) Learning communities alone do not satisfy teachers’ professional needs (i.e. other professional experiences and spaces are needed).

Most reflection was the result of prompting by the researcher, but when space was created, reflection transpired. Of the fifty-six instances of reflection in guided reflection conversations I coded in the data, thirty-nine (70%) of these reflections were the result of my prompting questions. The remaining seventeen were unprompted reflections, although ten of those seventeen were responses to what I called “anything else” reflections. I ended each guided reflection conversation with an open-ended space for participants to share with me “anything else” they wanted. I describe these “anything else” moments in greater detail later in this section.

One of my reasons for engaging participants in the guided reflection conversations around their filmed observations was to create with them the space for reflection. As I filmed participants teaching, I noted questions that I might ask during our post-observation conversation. I had informed participants that in order to value their time, I would limit post-observation guided reflection conversations to fifteen minutes. As a result, I knew each participant and I would view just a clip of the observation. I opened each guided reflection conversation by asking if there was a particular clip he or
she would like to watch. As a result, only those questions relevant to the selected clip would be posed to the participant.

I predicted that the questions I drafted while filming their teaching would serve as a guide if the conversation faltered, but I instead found that teachers did not naturally reflect, and the questions I drafted served to drive the guided reflection conversation, bringing truth to the term “guided reflection.” See Figure 4.9 for a list of the guided reflection questions I drafted while filming each classroom observation. While I had originally hoped that teachers would begin to engage in unprompted reflection, I realized that creating space for reflection through prompting was worthy on its own merits. Prompted reflection and open-ended questioning created insightful reflection and resulted in the most sharing from teachers.
Anne Observation: October 8, 2013; GR Conversation: October 8
At the last learning community meeting I attended, the group discussed assessments. Are any of those ideas reflected in the assessment you gave today?

Alissa Observation: October 10, 2013; GR Conversation: October 10
Yesterday [October 9], this video was presented and discussed. Why did you decide to use it today?
I noticed you used the CCSS Discussion Rubric created within this district. Why did you decide to use that particular rubric?
You and your students set group norms today. Why did you decide to put those into place?

Joyce Observation: October 11, 2013; GR Conversation: October 15
On Wednesday [October 9] in the PLC meeting, this Socratic seminar video was presented. Why did you decide to use it this week?
I noticed group norms posted and reviewed. Why did you decide to put these into place?
Were you satisfied with the Socratic seminar?

Anne Observation: November 7, 2013; GR Conversation: November 13
Why did you develop this particular Q&A structure?
What drove your choice of standards for today?

Joyce Observation: November 11, 2013; GR Conversation: November 13
You modeled the analysis of one theme: friendship. Why did you think this was an important practice?
You said to a student, "Do you want to speak it out before you go up there?" What does this say about your teaching beliefs?

Bryson Observation: November 18, 2013; GR Conversation: November 19
You stated in the first clip that you would not help students while they read and answered questions. What does this say about your teaching beliefs?
Follow-up Q: Last week in Anne’s class, she made a similar comment. Have y'all ever discussed letting students struggle?

Clarence Observation: November 18, 2013; GR Conversation: November 21
The students read The Hobbit on their own. Why did you decide to structure the reading on the text this way?

Figure 4.9 Sampling of guided reflection questions I noted during observations

Prompted reflection. Figure 4.9 provides a sampling of the questions I devised while filming classroom observations. A complete list of the questions drafted while filming observations can be found in Appendix B. I expected to use some of these
questions to enhance the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) I created before beginning data collection. During guided reflection conversations, the teacher and I viewed teacher-selected clips of the filmed observation. In addition to the generic questions on the interview guide, I asked the questions I drafted while filming that were relevant to the clip we viewed.

Although my original intent was for the guided reflection conversations to be teacher-driven, I recognize that this did not end up being the case since the guiding questions I wrote during observations became the driving force of the conversations. I kept some level of teacher-driven conversations by opening each conversation by asking the teachers if there were specific clips they would like to view.

Even though my questions served as the frame for the conversations, I did not have a specific agenda as I guided the post-observation reflections. In other words, as I asked the guiding questions drafted during the observations, I did not intentionally push the teachers to reflect on a certain area of practice such as classroom management or instructional practices. I worked to choose words and pose questions that were free of judgmental or evaluative language. However, as I analyzed transcripts of the guided reflection conversations, trends emerged. Reflection during these conversations fell into two main categories: 1) exploration of management issues; 2) insight into teachers’ beliefs about their own practice.

*Management issues.* Some of the prompting resulted in teacher reflection on two types of management issues: behavior and time. Classroom management in the behavioral sense was a topic that came up often in my interactions with Alissa, a first-year teacher. Before she invited me into her classroom to film observations, she and I had
had several informal conversations, both face-to-face and via email. These conversations were in passing, and during one she had asked me for advice regarding classroom management. At that time, I suggested we look at increasing student engagement as a way to manage her classroom. In a guided reflection conversation (October 10, 2013) we had after her first filmed observation, the following exchange occurred:

Abbey: And I did try to film the kids even more than you so you could see what was going on in the class. So in that clip you noticed that some kids were not engaged?

Alissa: Yea, and even look at the set up. Some kids have their back to me the way I set up the room. And normally that is not how my room is set up. I like to be able to see their faces so I know who is actually looking at me. I feel like even just having them copy it down would keep them…or make them…think about it.

I had made the intentional decision to film the students rather than focusing on Alissa because of the management issues she had inquired about before inviting me in. I knew this was an area on which Alissa would be interested in reflecting. After viewing the short clip, Alissa was able to see her students from another perspective and through this, learned that some of the lack of engagement was due to the physical set-up of the classroom, which is an easy fix. She also mentioned having students “copy it down.” She was referring to the students taking notes on information that she was presenting to them on the interactive whiteboard. She felt that holding the students accountable by taking notes would be a second way to keep them engaged and therefore well-managed.
One month later, Alissa invited me in for a second filmed observation. In the interim, she had made some changes to the physical environment of her classroom. Students were no longer seated in rows; instead, desks were grouped into pods. Previously, when Alissa would present from the center of the room, some students had their backs to her. With the new arrangement, students were all centrally focused. I asked her about this move as well as other engagement techniques at the subsequent guided reflection conversation (November 7, 2013):

Abbey: Yea. OK, so the last time I was in here, afterward, we talked about ways to engage your students more. And I saw some ways today that you were doing that. I was wondering if some of the things you did today—like the SmartBoard activity and the note-taking—were those instructional decisions a result of you noticing in the video that the kids weren’t engaged all period?

Alissa: Definitely. Specifically when I asked the kids to tally it. Because it can take them a long time, so I was just like tally to show me if you think it is first-person or third-person or whatever. Even if only one kid is answering it aloud, everyone is involved in noting their own answer, responsible for what we’re learning in class.

Abbey: So have you been using engagement strategies pretty consistently?

Alissa: Whenever we do activities.

Abbey: Have you noticed a difference in the engagement level? Do you feel like your students are more on task during your instruction?
Alissa: I feel like they are. They’re not looking around and daydreaming as much anymore. It just keeps their attention and they feel like they are a part of it.

Abbey: Good. That’s one reason I kept the camera on your kids most of the lesson, so you would be able to see what they were doing during the lesson.

Alissa: Good, yes, I liked that.

Alissa was motivated to find ways to engage her students after viewing her first observation video. After viewing clips of the second filmed observation, she saw that her students were more engaged because they were not “looking around and daydreaming.” It is also interesting to note that the term classroom management was not used in the second guided reflection conversation Alissa and I shared. Alissa’s focus on increasing student engagement through the instructional decisions she made (e.g. requiring students to take notes, making them responsible for their own learning) Alissa was able to solve some of the behavioral classroom management issues she had faced previously.

In addition to classroom management in the behavioral sense, another issue related to management was the notion of time. Time management was a topic of discussion during guided reflection conversations with two participants: Annabell and Bryson. During a guided reflection conversation (September 25, 2013) with Annabell, she talked at length about the pressures she felt to cover material, specifically in the honors English I course she taught for high school credit to eighth graders who had been placed in this advanced course after earning high scores on standardized tests:
Abbey: OK, two questions come to mind. Um, when you talked about going off in tangents, in your opinion, are they worthy or when you reflect back do you think, “That was a waste of time”?

Annabell: They are usually worthy. Sometimes the kids go off on tangents and I feel rude interrupting them, but my tangents are usually worthy. We’ll call it a 70/30 mix [laughs]. So, it’s not a waste of time, it just makes it difficult to meet my objective. Especially with the English I class I try to keep us on a tight schedule because I worry about time constantly. It’s the end of September and we’re not technically halfway through my first unit. And I’m supposed to be doing two extra books this year and that worries me.

Annabell, who felt pressure to meet objectives, stated that she worried about time “constantly” and as a result, tried to remain cognizant of what she termed as tangents. However, when she thought back to those tangents, she deemed going off on those tangents worthy. I observed this happen twice while filming this particular lesson, and I categorized those moments as teachable ones: moments in which a student asked a question that all would benefit from deeper exploration. Annabell’s consideration of those moments as tangents could be perceived as a result of the pressure she felt to meet objectives and cover material. In fact, Annabell brought the time management issue up a second time within this guided reflection conversation. I posed an open-ended generic question after that exchange to give her the chance to guide the topic of conversation. Annabell responded by saying, “Um. I can’t think of anything in particular that I’d like to focus on. I’ve been trying to think about…what we might talk about. And I couldn’t pull
anything out in my head, other than the fact that I stink at pacing [laughs].” After prompted reflection, though, Annabell acknowledged that these “tangents” were indeed worthy of the time spent exploring them.

Bryson also mentioned time management in our second guided reflection conversation (November 19, 2013). In the clip, Bryson was teaching students about different types of sentences using the novel the class was using as a shared text. He explained:

Bryson: That was advice that Ms. Mitchell [the principal] actually gave us after an observation. The connection between what we’re reading and what we’re writing. We did ten sentences and it just took so long.

Abbey: Looking back, would you do that the same way?

Bryson: No. I’m not sure how I would do it. I’ve come up with one activity. The four corners? And I’ll label each corner: not a sentence, simple sentence, compound, complex. And then each student takes a sentence and goes to the corner. Once there, they discuss with the others why their sentences go in that particular corner. And that will get them moving around and engaged.

After observing Bryson teach a lesson on simple and complex sentences, the principal had suggested to Bryson that he teach grammar in context, specifically by analyzing the variety of sentences in the novel the class was reading. In the clip we viewed, he noted that it “just took so long.” In the moment, it is often difficult for teachers to gauge the amount of time spent on a certain activity. However, the camera does not lie, so when
teachers watch themselves teaching they become more aware of time. When I asked him if he would teach that lesson differently, he responded that he would, but was unsure how he would teach it. He then went on to describe an activity that he might try in order to teach that content and engage students. Bryson recognized that a different instructional approach would address two of his concerns: time management and student engagement. Unlike Annabell, who was very critical of herself when it came to time management, Bryson was able to use this reflection as an opportunity to change his instructional decisions in order to make the best use of his time with students.

Teacher beliefs about practice. Prompted reflection also gave teachers the opportunity to explore and analyze their own beliefs about their practice. Joyce explored an interesting question during a guided reflection conversation on October 14, 2013. She had asked me to film two class periods on the same day. She taught the same lesson, so she was not looking to explore instructional strategies. Instead, she was interested examining why students in two different classes behaved and responded to instruction differently. Joyce was a first-year teacher who taught four sections of sixth grade ELA. I asked her why she requested I come in twice in one day:

Abbey: You did ask me to come back and film second and fifth [period] on the same day. Why did you want that to happen?
Joyce: Second [period], I feel, is my best class. It’s a smaller group and we’re more like family. And my fifth period… I wouldn’t say they’re bad. They’re not bad, they just very hyperactive and they can’t take things seriously. They’re goofy and it’s hard for me to get them to turn to the serious side. Like you would notice with my
second period, they get to the details and the stories, but my fifth period would start laughing. It’s just not a good atmosphere for people to start sharing. I wanted to see what I was doing differently, if it’s me or if it’s the type of students, the combination of students. I’m just trying to figure it out by seeing both sides.

Access to the filmed observations allowed Joyce to analyze her teaching from “both sides.” Joyce was driven to examine herself, instead of simply blaming the students, to determine why the vibes of these two classes were so different. While we only watched a short clip together, Joyce had access to the full videos of her teaching and watched them on her own. She made the instructional decision to use the video of her second period class as a model for her fifth period students, to show them “other sixth graders, who they know, doing it [Socratic seminar] really well.”

Prompted reflection gave teachers the opportunity to explore the ways their practice influenced student learning. In a guided reflection conversation (November 11, 2013) with Annabell, I asked about the peer feedback her students gave each other. I had captured the peer feedback on video four days prior to our conversation, and the quality of the feedback stayed with me. I wondered how Annabell had gotten her students to that point in their ability to provide clear and specific feedback on each other’s writing:

Abbey: OK. The other thing that really stood out to me when I was walking around, looking at your students giving feedback, was the high-quality, specific feedback they were giving. And I was wondering how they got to that point.
Annabell: They’re just bright [laughs]. I honestly think it’s just the feedback I give them. I have not taught them that. We talked briefly one day before the first time we ever did anything, how do you give great feedback? And that was it. So the preface, I think you probably heard in class that day. I think I said, “Give them feedback like what I give you. If you tell them if something is not strong enough, explain to them why. Half the time they don’t understand it when they get it from me so they need to make it explicit. So I think they just took what I give to them and gave it to each other. And that’s 97% them. And I believe that.

In addition to being a self-critic, there was evidence of Annabell also being very modest. She clearly believed in the intelligence and ability of her students when she made comments like “they’re just bright” and “that’s 97% them.” However, she acknowledged that the feedback she gave students served as a model as they gave feedback to their peers when she stated, “I think they just took what I give to them and gave it to each other.” By watching this clip, Annabell was able to see her students live into the model of giving and responding to quality feedback she had worked so hard to demonstrate for them.

Viewing clips and responding to guided reflection questions also led to new understandings/ideas about teaching and learning. Unlike Annabell, who naturally modeled quality feedback for her students, Bryson did not provide support through modeling. During a guided reflection conversation (November 19, 2013), Bryson expressed frustration about the written responses students provided after reading a chapter of the class novel. I asked Bryson about modeling:
Abbey: When you read together, did you, as the teacher, stop and ask questions and model questions like the ones similar to their sheet?

Bryson: Probably not nearly enough. That’s a good idea though. We held discussions at the end of every chapter. And I guess I did ask some questions, but not during the reading. I think they are already so confused with the book—it’s a much more difficult book than what they’re used to—so we save all the questions till the end of each chapter. But at the end of every chapter we stop and discuss and make sure they’re all on the same page. I think the group discussions are probably what helped their responses [on the sheet] be as good as they are. Because I had a wide range, from 50% correct all the way up to 100% correct. So, if I had to guess, the kids that are participating heavily in the discussions are doing better versus those that are just sitting back.

In this example, Bryson examined the range of possible reasons his students struggled with responding to questions. These reasons included the complexity of the text, students not participating in discussion, and the reason I prompted him to consider: lack of exposure to similarly difficult questions. Reflecting on the visual of his students’ struggle, in concert with analyzing their poor grades on the written responses, resulted in a shift in Bryson’s practice; he planned to add a modeling component into future lessons.

**Unprompted and open-ended reflection.** When I use the term “unprompted” what I mean is reflection that happened during guided reflection conversations that was not the result of researcher prompting. The more I analyzed my data, and the deeper I took my
coding, the more uncomfortable I became with the term “unprompted.” After spending a significant amount of time with the data, I acknowledged that teacher reflection was prompted by *something*: most often, the video, so as I coded I reminded myself that there would likely be few instances of true unprompted reflection. One goal of this study, after all, was to create space for teachers to reflect on their practice through watching clips of themselves teaching. Here is an example of data I had originally coded as “unprompted” because it was not the result of a guided reflection question I posed:

Alissa: There [points at the video screen]. I felt like I could have had them doing something while we were setting norms because I hated that they were just sitting there while we discussed. But I knew we needed to set norms. I think there could have been a better way to get them engaged. They’re thinking, but obviously not everyone is thinking (October 10, 2013).

Alissa’s reflection was prompted by what she saw in the video. In fact, this was her first comment after I asked which part of her lesson she would like to view and started playing the recording device. She did not need to wait for a question from me to reflect on what she saw. Similarly, in a guided reflection conversation with Clarence on November 21, 2013, a piece of data originally coded as unprompted reflection was clearly prompted by the video. Clarence had gained access to the full videos of his two lessons and watched them both in near entirety before his second guided reflection conversation with me. He opened our conversation by commenting on watching the videos:

Clarence: I just saw many areas that I need to improve. And when I look at it, that first video was in September I think, but I think I’ve really
grown since then. And I can’t remember exactly what it was, but there were points throughout where I asked myself, Really? It that how you handled that? Re-watching it two months after the video, I didn’t realize ’til then how my methods have changed. So I’m feeling good about it.

In both of these cases, the teachers were able to explore their practice by reflecting on what they saw in the videos. Alissa reflected in the moment, while her video was playing, and Clarence after viewing more of his videos on his own. He likely reflected as Alissa did as he viewed alone, and then provided a summary of sorts when he met with me. After looking closely at this two instances, I became very interested in what inspired teacher reflection.

I began to seek out what prompted each piece of teacher reflection, and when I looked very carefully at the transcript excerpts I had coded as “unprompted” I saw a trend. Of the seventeen instances of “unprompted” reflection, twelve were the result of the open-ended question with which I ended each guided reflection conversation: is there anything else you’d like to talk about? I took another pass at the data and reassigned the “anything else” code, realizing that this open-ended prompt was still a prompt, but also learning that it was a powerful way to conclude the conversations.

After looking closely at the anything else moments that closed each guided reflection conversation, it became clear, based on the responses I got to that question, that teachers needed space to talk about what was on their minds at that moment. The talk they filled this space with was sometimes connected to the filmed lesson, but oftentimes about an unrelated issue. The anything else moments also extended the guided reflection
conversations, sometimes by five or more minutes. Prior to beginning data collection, I had assured teachers that these post-observation conversations would not exceed fifteen minutes, and I worked to keep that promise. However, when I posed the “anything else?” question after ten-twelve minutes of talking, teacher responses often took us past the fifteen-minute mark.

When teacher responses to the “anything else” question were tied to the filmed lesson, they often commented on the filmed lesson and asked for researcher advice or feedback. Alissa, at the end of our guided reflection conversation on October 10, 2013, came back to the issue of student engagement she focused much of her attention on over the course of the semester:

Abbey: OK, so those were all of my questions. Do you have anything you’d like to share with me?

Alissa: Well…with this class you saw. I worry about keeping them, well, keeping their endurance. They get bogged down with stuff. I need to find ways to encourage them to participate.

Abbey: I think your ideas about different ways to engage them come into play here. So getting them to write down their ideas before they share. I think of Teach like a Champion (Lemov, 2010) [the text we are reading in Induction] when the author suggests the technique “Everybody Writes.” And that’s that idea on a smaller scale: you pose a question, give them a second to jot some ideas down. And then if students have it down on paper, they’ve thought about it, recorded it, and might be more likely to share it out.
Alissa: And it would be easier to some students to then read it after processing it instead of just answering quickly.

Even after discussing student engagement earlier in our conversation, Alissa was still searching for ways to encourage participation from her students. The fact that she brought this topic up again signaled to me that it was troubling Alissa and was an area she wanted to develop in her practice. In response, I repeated back to her one of her own ideas that she developed while reflecting, and then referred her to a book I knew she had read that she would be able to use for further inspiration. In her last line, she is rephrasing the engagement technique and acknowledging that some students would be more likely to participate if they are able to think through their ideas, write them down, and then refer to them during class discussion.

When I posed the “anything else” question to Bryson at the end of one of his guided reflection conversations (November 19, 2013), this gave him the opportunity to state an overall self-assessment, and then ask for general advice from me:

Abbey: Well, those are the questions I had while sitting in class and while watching that clip of the film. Do you have anything else you wanted to reflect on?

Bryson: Overall, I’m pleased. The kids worked hard that day and that was my goal. Even my third period, that’s a large class and it can be challenging, but I think some of them saw the value in it. So I was very pleased in that. Other than that, is there anything you would offer, advice-wise? Anything you would have done differently or strategies you would implement?
This particular guided reflection conversation had fallen flat. I posed the “anything else” question—my closer—at just 7:21 into the conversation. Bryson’s answers to that point had been relatively succinct. However, after opening the conversation up and giving Bryson the freedom to direct the conversation, we ended up talking for nine more minutes. He spoke in longer stretches and reflected more in those nine minutes than he had all semester. The conversation moved from reading strategies, to writing instruction, to his concern for students “that have a really hard time focusing.” Bryson seemed to respond well to the open-endedness of “anything else.”

There were other guided reflection conversations where I gently pushed to create space for reflection. This happened at the end of both guided reflection conversations with both Annabell and Anne, the experienced teachers who often took on the role of a mentor to the novice teachers in the community. Over the course of the semester, they both expressed the sense of obligation they felt to support the novice teachers. Once I created space for them to talk about anything, they did. In this first example, with Annabell (November 11, 2013), she declined to add anything to our conversation. I gently nudged her by commenting positively on the way she meshed her new understandings from graduate school into her classroom practice, an area I knew she was both proud of and worked hard in:

Abbey: Right. OK. Anything else you want to add?

Annabell: I can’t think of anything.

Abbey: Well, I really love the way you’ve incorporated your grad school life and what you know about your students into your planning—
kind of bringing it all together to create this project. That’s really impressive.

Annabell: Thank you. I’ve made a lot of changes this year. I have a lot that I still want to make, too. It’s just so rewarding.

Abbey: What makes it so rewarding?

Annabell: Well, when I went to graduate school this summer, our professors taught us that we are not just brains on sticks, and they taught us differently. And I realized that I was teaching my kids like they are brains on sticks instead of whole children. Like I see their emotional needs and their social needs and things like that, but really, when it comes to looking at the things I teach, I feel like literature has become something to just dissect and we don’t appreciate it for its aesthetic qualities. So that class especially we got to look at learning from the social, emotional, aesthetic, communicative—all these different angles. And I’ve been able to take a lot of that and get some ideas. And one of the things I wanted to do and I wasn’t able to, but I shared with Grace [a high school teacher in the district] who just loved it—was looking at a text through different lenses, almost like a theme, if you were to look at this text at the communicative level, or social level, how would you see the psychological impacts this has. So I want to pull this in and I thought it might work as a performance task, like the one I’m supposed to be doing with To Kill a Mockingbird that
Jason [the high school teacher who also taught English I] did, or is doing soon. So, I don’t know. It’s given me different ideas about how to value our subject and our kids at the same time. So I don’t know. Too many thoughts bounce around! [laughs] And I feel like I have more freedom in English I, like I can make it mine. Anne and I are still trying new things and we just don’t have time. So I see some of the things I’ve been learning and Anne took some a couple classes too so that’s exciting.

Annabell revealed some of her beliefs about students and how they learn in this conversation. She also touched on some of her collaborative experiences within and outside of the learning community when she talked about sharing ideas with Grace and Jason and trying new ideas out with Anne. Her tone and demeanor also shifted in this open-ended space: in most of the transcribed conversations with Annabell, it seemed as if her words were selected very carefully and she really thought through what she was going to say before she said it. However, in this segment of the conversation, she laughed and interjected casual phrases like “Too many thoughts bounce around!” and “trying new things.” The guided reflection conversations with me became a time where Annabell could shed the burden of mentor and model teacher for the novice teachers and show a little vulnerability by admitting she was still learning about her students, how they learn, and her own practice.

Anne also hesitated to respond to the “anything else” question, but just for a moment. I posed the “anything else” question at what felt like the conclusion of both of our guided reflection conversations after approximately fifteen minutes of talk (14:40 on
October 8 and 15:23 on November 13, 2013). The November 13 conversation ended after an additional seven minutes, but the October 8 conversation continued on for an additional nineteen minutes. The following excerpt demonstrates how Anne responded to the open-ended question:

Abbey: Anything else you’d like to tell me about the lesson I observed?
Anne: [long pause] No, nothing I can think of. They had to do a STEAL chart again today on one of the boys. Because we’re in Day Six, that long part, and that’s where they get confused [the novel the students were reading was The Acorn People. This particular novel is divided into days as opposed to chapters]. So they had to do a chart on one of the boys. That was due today. So that will let me know today if they are getting it any better. So I’m waiting to see what happens with that tomorrow. And they are going to use that for assessment tomorrow. Because I think they think, “We’re just doing this for something to do.” But their assessment will be to use the STEAL chart on Ron or on one of the boys to write a character analysis. If they don’t do the chart right, their analysis won’t be very good.

Anne went on to pull out student examples of STEAL charts and talked specifically about student performance, the upcoming assessment, and her predictions about how the students would perform on the assessment. Note that her initial response to my question was “No, nothing I can think of” followed, without missing a beat, with a recount of the instructional strategy she had used to teach character analysis in that day’s lesson. Her
immediate reaction may have been the result of her adopted role of mentor in most professional development sessions and certainly in learning community meetings. Or perhaps teachers are so rarely given the space to reflect that the act does not come naturally. With a little encouragement, though, Anne filled up that space with reflections like questioning student motivation (“We’re just doing this for something to do”), exploring student learning (“That’s where they get confused”) and her instructional decisions in response to student learning (the repeated use of the character analysis chart).

While I worked to honor my participants’ time by limiting post-observation guided reflection conversations to just 15 minutes, the majority of the conferences exceeded that time limit. This was the result of the “anything else” question I ended each conversation with, which created space for each participant to either end the conversation or take it any direction he or she chose. Participants opted to extend our time together, which indicated the need for an additional space to talk about practice. I explore this concept more deeply in the next section.

**Learning communities alone do not satisfy teachers’ professional needs.** As I demonstrated in the first finding for my first research question, learning community time was dominated by seeking advice, sharing resources, and discussing the business of the learning community. Because the time was so driven by the business of the learning community and the sharing of resources, teachers still needed places and spaces to discuss and explore their beliefs. This finding became even clearer as I explored data connected to my third research question: *What did guided reflection reveal about teacher beliefs and practices?* I discovered that learning communities alone do not satisfy teachers’ professional needs; other professional experiences and spaces are needed.
Participants in this study often referred to other professional learning they experienced over the course of the semester. I will define and describe these professional learning experiences using data from guided reflection conversations in the following section.

I categorized the types of professional development as 1) school-based, 2) graduate school, and 3) one-on-one. School-based PD included any professional development that took place within the school district. Examples of school-based PD that participants talked about were whole-faculty PD sessions or content-specific (e.g. teachers of gifted and talented students, English teachers) sessions. Professional development also took place when teachers chose to enroll in graduate school or graduate classes. And finally, professional development occurred in one-on-one sessions. Examples of one-on-one professional development that participants drew on were planning sessions with their grade-level partner, post-observation conferences with the principal or instructional coach, and the guided reflection conversations with me. The more experienced teachers, Anne and Annabell, experienced the most professional growth in larger PD settings, like school-based PD and graduate school. The novice teachers spoke about the one-on-one settings as having the greatest impact on their professional growth.

Larger professional development sessions. The experienced participants thrived in larger professional development settings, such as the school-based PD sessions. Annabell, for example, referenced two separate professional development experiences that had an impact on her practice: school-based gifted and talented (GT) professional development (PD) that occurred quarterly and school-based vertical teaming sessions that occurred for four days over the summer. The GT PD included approximately twenty
teachers district-wide who taught GT classes to students in grades 3-12. The vertical 
teaming sessions included all eleven English teachers in the district who taught grades 6-
12.

During a guided reflection conversation on November 11, 2013, Annabell 
described how she transferred a skill (the use of Google docs) from PD into her 
classroom in order to best organize the writing unit she was planning.

Annabell: When we were at the last GT PD and we were playing with the 
Google docs and folders, that’s where I got the idea of how to set 
the class up. That really helped me and kept me from having to go 
to a technology PD and sit through everything I already knew in 
order to get that one bit of information about Google docs and 
folders. So that was really really helpful.

Annabell used the skill she practiced in GT PD as a professional with her students and 
created a system through which her students were able to submit their writing 
electronically in order to get feedback from her. She also used this online shared folder 
system to set up a peer feedback system in which students gave their peers access to their 
digital writing folders in order to give and receive peer feedback.

In additional to classroom organizational practices, Annabell picked up writing 
strategies in PD sessions that she took back to her students. In a guided reflection 
conversation with Annabell on September 25, 2013, she talked about a writing strategy 
that she learned from a high school teacher during a vertical teaming session:
Annabell: We talked this summer while working on the book about how students need different strategies to organize. So the tree map that came directly from that. I had never done tree mapping before.

The purpose of the vertical teaming sessions that summer was to create a collection of exemplar pieces of writing for each grade level so students would know what writing looked like at their grade level, as well as the grade levels before and after theirs. The conversations teachers had around this book went beyond selection of pieces of writing: they also discussed writing strategies that could be used to guide students to develop the kind of pieces they considered to be exemplar. Annabell picked up one of those strategies, the tree map, from a colleague and took it back to her students.

After I concluded all observations and post-observation guided reflection conversations, I still had some questions. I sent out a follow-up survey (see Appendix C) via Google forms to the six participants. One of the questions I posed was: Many of you referred to professional development opportunities other than your learning community. What impact did those PD experiences have on your instructional practice? Annabell responded with the following:

PD drives my professional practice. Honestly, without further PD, the resources that we do and would share in an engaged PLC would probably be less likely to come to light. In previous years, when we did book studies, the PLC was a PD session. Later, when we shared skills and ideas, the information often came from resources we were given at a different PD or that someone had read for their own continued growth and development. Grad school, for me, is also huge. Because I have to apply what I'm learning there, I'm forced to implement some of the ideas
into my own practice, but at the same time, just reflecting on the information I've learned has made me WANT to implement ideas into my practice. In fact, there are so many changes I still want to make after further reflection of the material that I have not been able to make, and even some things I would love to see schoolwide, such as the creation of curriculum maps. Grad school is more reflection-based, which makes me think deeper about what I'm doing. Our schoolwide PD is more application based where we can implement ideas. I like both, and I think it's important to do both.

As she stated, Annabell did implement ideas and strategies she picked up from her school-based PD. She also wrote about graduate school and the impact taking courses had on her, specifically on the ways she thought about her practice. Annabell also wrote that there was “forced” application of what she learned in graduate school, but when this was coupled with reflection, she wanted to implement those ideas. Annabell saw worth in all of the professional development settings in which she participated. In contrast, Anne, who was also taking graduate courses at the time of the study, did not find worth in school-based professional development. In her response to that question in the Google survey, Anne wrote:

   School-wide PD isn't always that much of a help to be honest. It seems to be more of a "here's what we need to discuss at the moment" kind of time. I got tons of great ideas from the course I took and have already begun implementing them.

Anne’s impression of school-based PD was not favorable. She thought it was not planned out ahead of time and more of a triage model: the pressing issues that popped up drove the focus of professional development as opposed to an intentionally planned
professional development model. She was not driven to implement ideas from school-based PD because it was not relevant to her practice. Anne was hungry for instructional strategies to incorporate into her practice, though, as evidenced by the way she talked about the ways she implemented ideas from the course readings required by her graduate class. In a guided reflection conversations with Anne on November 13, 2013, she talked at length about the course readings and the specific strategies she took from those readings and used with her students:

Abbey: One question that came up in that opening clip of your class, the way you did the question and answer was really unique, the kids kind of passed the question? Where did that structure come from?

Anne: Kelly Gallagher *Deeper Reading*. I took a class over the summer for recertification and the text for the class was *Deeper Reading*. So since we’re doing a novel right now I’m pulling out a lot of his strategies and trying them out and seeing how they go. And that was one of his: ask a question, make a comment. One thing that stood out to me was that they didn’t respond to each other’s’ questions. It just became round robin. So, in the future, it may have to be structured differently, where I want you to answer their question before you share something else. Because I want them to respond to the questions. Some of them had really good questions, and then the next person would just barrel on. And I’m like, Can we talk about that question because that was really good! So that
might have to just change. But that was the first time we’d ever done it.

Abbey: And you have used other strategies from that book?

Anne: All of his graphics: some explore plot, character, setting, all that good stuff. But then he talks about turning it into an essay of some description. You’ve got to do something with it. He talks about the empty head graphic. And that teachers, or maybe this was the Cris Tovani book [*I Read It, But I Don’t Get It*], that it became filling the head with stuff. OK, that was good, now throw it away. So you have to take it and do something with it. And what we’re going to do with our research project is we are going to find a real-world connection to the themes of our book. So translating the theme of compassion from the book to what’s going on in the Philippines, this is how compassion functions in society. And I’m excited, but I’m terrified at the same time at where they might go with it.

Anne was excited to implement the ideas from the graduate course in her classroom. The motivation and passion to transfer new learning into her classroom practice was evident in that excerpt as she described the restructuring of her research project. For Anne, graduate school was the place where her professional growth occurred.

Annabell relied on both school-based PD and graduate school. We discussed this at our second guided reflection conversation (November 11, 2013):

Abbey: That’s really interesting. It’s also interesting because two questions that came to mind while I was filming were: how did the
collaborative peer feedback develop? And why did you choose to use Google docs? So it’s interesting that you mention that this is a study you are doing for your graduate work. So maybe talk a little bit about that. So did your program call for the use of technology in the literacy classroom or could you choose any topic under the sun that appeals to you?

Annabell: We could choose anything we wanted to, and initially, I thought I was going to study reading. I was going to use one the texts we got in GT [gifted and talented] PD and I was going to use those strategies, but the more I started thinking about it, the more I realized that it wasn’t going to work for different extenuating circumstances. So I started looking at stuff that week—during my summer courses for my graduate program—that week I had to have my topic. I started looking at stuff online and it just came up. We met for three weeks over the summer and each week was for a different class. The week before, for class, my groupmates and I had to write a ten-page, single-spaced paper in two days and so, they had suggested in my group, “Let’s use Google docs.” And so that was really my first experience with it. And so when I had to start thinking about a topic for my research class, I thought, “Well, that was kinda cool. I wonder how that would work with kids.”

Anne and Annabell were both experienced teachers at the time of the study. Anne’s comment that school-based PD “isn't always that much of a help” may have stemmed
from the feeling that much of the PD was devised to ensure the new teachers were “caught up.” When I analyzed data around the roles teachers assumed during learning community meetings, there was evidence of Anne feeling like her professional growth was sacrificed in order to best support the four novice teachers. So, for Anne, graduate school was the place where she was able to grow. Annabell, on the other hand, was able to draw on both settings, graduate school and school-based PD, and incorporate ideas from both into her practice.

**More intimate professional development experiences.** The novice teachers in the study drew more upon the new understandings developed in one-on-one settings. These one-on-one settings included planning sessions with their grade-level partner, post-observation conferences with the principal or instructional coach, and the guided reflection conversations with me.

While every participant mentioned working with their grade-level partner, the novice teachers in the study spoke about these experiences more often and more specifically. Anne and Annabell each mentioned planning with the other, sharing resources, and “trying new things.” In contrast, the novice teachers, who were paired with each other, talked more about the emotional relationships they formed while working and planning together.

In response to my “anything else” question at the conclusion of a guided reflection conversation with Clarence on November 21, 2013, he launched into the following:

Abbey: Anything else you’d like to comment on?
Clarence: It’s fantastic [the partnership]. That’s the only way I can put it, really. To break it down, when it comes to the strategy implementation side, he really pulls his weight there. But when it comes to the content, for example the various literary elements we’ve covered, that’s where I pull the weight. It’s really just a perfect match, I couldn’t ask for a better partner.

Clarence, in addition to being a first-year teacher was pursuing alternative certification. He had a bachelor’s degree in English and was obtaining his mid-level teaching certification through South Carolina’s Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE). PACE is a pathway that allows people with degrees in specific content areas to earn educator licensure through coursework and other requirements. Clarence stated that his partner, Bryson, “really pull[ed] his weight” when it came to implementing strategies. Clarence’s self-identified strength was content. Bryson, a certified art teacher, did not have a comprehensive background in the ELA standards. By combining their strengths and working together, they were the “perfect match.”

In both guided reflection conversations with Alissa, she talked about always planning with Joyce. On November 7, 2013, she talked about her next steps with a particular class that was struggling with note-taking. She wanted to spend some time during her planning period brainstorming ways to teach her students effective note-taking skills. I asked her if Joyce had planned to join her in this planning session, and she responded enthusiastically, “Oh, yes, we always plan together!” Like Bryson and Clarence, Allisa and Joyce valued time spent planning together. At times, these grade-level partnerships seemed to offer more direct support than the whole of the learning
community. Bryson revealed this in the following excerpt (September 26, 2013) when I asked a follow-up question to a positive comment he made about his grade-level partner, Clarence:

Abbey: So it sounds like you guys have a strong working relationship. Do you also rely on your PLC?

Bryson: Um…not the 6th grade teachers. 8th grade, yes. We go to them for clarifying questions. But mostly the two of us team up and figure it out. Anne and Annabell help us with basic questions. And Libby [the school instructional coach] has been a big help already. We question the mess outta her! [laughs]

The building principal and instructional coach conducted observations of teachers during the school year and provided written feedback. Often times, especially with novice teachers, they also held post-observation conferences. Bryson, and other teachers, were able to “question the mess” of the instructional coach during these one-on-one conferences. While Bryson does not mention specific questions he posed to the instructional coach, he clearly indicated that he saw her as a support person as he developed his ELA content knowledge. Bryson referred to another one-on-one learning opportunity during another guided reflection conversation (November 19, 2013), this one involving the building principal:

Abbey: Yea, but I think you’re being smart in teaching it through the text. The best way, in my opinion, to teach grammar is through their writing or the text you are reading.
That was advice that Ms. Mitchell actually gave us after an observation. The connection between what we’re reading and what we’re writing.

Bryson connected the advice I offered him regarding the teaching of grammar to similar advice his principal gave after observing him teach a grammar lesson, one that, according to Bryson, did not go well. He appreciated the opportunity to talk to his principal after that observation and seek out her opinions and advice in order to improve his practice.

Joyce was another novice teacher who really flourished in the intimate professional learning space, as indicated by the amount of talk she engaged in during guided reflection conversations with me. Joyce, who rarely talked in learning community meetings, really opened up in this space. Over the course of the semester, Joyce spoke 60 times in learning community meetings, and 50% of those instances were asking or answering questions (see Figure 4.3). Only two of those instances were extended turns. In contrast, this excerpt from our guided reflection conversation on November 13, 2013 is an example of the quantity and quality of conversation Joyce engaged in one-on-one professional settings. We discussed the second observation of her teaching, during which Joyce had modeled for her students how to analyze a text for theme. She reminded the students that a single text could have multiple themes, and themes that stood out to one student may not stand out as much to another. The students were reading *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995) as a shared reading text, and during the lesson I observed, Joyce modeled her analysis of one theme:

Joyce: I chose friendship because I noticed in this class, with each individual, they’ll be friends one minute, and the next it’s just
drama. There’s this one girl who I try to work with. And I talked to
her about whether or not she could forgive her [points to an empty
desk to indicate where the other girl sat] and she said, no, I’m not
going to forgive her. So I really took their personal experiences
and said, *Well, we’re going to do friendship.* So it was kind of a
last minute, well, not last minute because I planned it for like a
week, but it was still kind of a last minute: *what do they need?* I try
to sneak in a little mentoring into my teaching. So that was that.
And hopefully they’ll be able to use that as an example when they
talk about growing up, family, racism, because those are themes
covered in the book.

Abbey: Yea, I’m sure it’s nice to have it as an anchor to refer back to.

There was a moment where the kids were going to board and
writing on the graphic organizer, on the Smart Board. And you
said, *Do you want to speak it out before you go up there?* What do
you think that says about you and your teaching beliefs?

Joyce: That I know kids get up there and freeze. And sometimes it’s
easier for a kid to talk about it before they actually write. And I’ve
noticed that even when they take tests. They always have to come
up to me, or raise their hand, and just have to say out loud, *Well, if
this is this, and this means this, then*…I mean, they just talk it out.
They’re not really even asking me a question. They just raise their
hands and I just pretty much have to tell them it’s OK. And so I
give them that option if I see them hesitate. *Do you want to tell us first and then go up?* And then they’re not standing up there, center of attention, shaking. It really builds their confidence when they go up there prepared and then they feel better about themselves.

Abbey: Yea, it really was just a nice way to support that student. Do you think that kind of support is just part of who you are as a person, or does that kind of support come from what you have experienced these past couple months as a first year teacher?

Joyce: I don’t know how that started…like I don’t remember coming to a point where I thought I need to do this. I think it’s just part of my character. Yea, I think it’s just personal, honestly, because I hated it in college when my Spanish professor—that class was a nightmare. [laughs] The professor would say, *OK, come write your sentence on the board.* And I’d write on the board and go sit down, and it was like all wrong! So, I know how they feel. I guess it’s just empathy.

As Joyce talked through her lesson, she revealed much about the motivations behind her instructional planning as well as her beliefs about teaching and learning. Joyce drew upon her students’ experiences in order to personalize learning and help students make connections. She knew her students well enough to notice when there was conflict between two friends. She took that opportunity to move beyond teaching ELA standards and pull in life lessons, or as Joyce put it, “sneak a little mentoring into” her teaching. Joyce also made instructional decisions based on both academic and emotional needs of
her students, as evidenced by her creation of space for students to talk through their ideas before approaching the board. She talked about building their confidence, a critical part of a middle schooler’s academic success. Finally, Joyce reflected on who she is as a person in general and a teacher specifically when she discussed her experiences as a learner and the empathy that instilled in her. Joyce thrived in the one-on-one space created by the guided reflection conversations of this study.

Teachers in this study engaged in professional development in three settings: 1) school-based, 2) graduate school, and 3) one-on-one. Individual teachers thrived in different settings; different settings were the most ideal learning situations for different teachers because different needs were met, different learning styles acknowledged. There was potential for all of these experiences to work together to create professional development plans individual to each teacher. This notion of individualizing professional development will be discussed in more depth in the implications section.
Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Implications

In this chapter, I provide a brief summary of the study, followed by a discussion of the major findings. The implications of these findings for teachers, instructional leaders, and future research are woven into the discussion.

Summary of the Study

In the fall of 2013, I spent five months with a learning community comprised of six middle school literacy teachers. I attended their learning community meetings, visited their classrooms, and videotaped them teaching. After each classroom visit, I conducted a guided reflection semi-structured interview with the individual teachers. The purpose of this study was to investigate the professional conversations that teachers in a learning community had and the impact of those conversations on the beliefs and practices of the individual teachers in the community. Specifically, I was interested in discovering how and why facets of professional learning transferred (or did not transfer) into classroom practice. To focus my research, I explored the following questions:

1. What went on in the teachers’ learning community when teachers discussed their teaching?
2. What impact, if any, did on-going collaboration within a learning community have on teacher practice?
3. What did guided reflection reveal about teacher beliefs and practices?
I hoped to capture the voice of teachers and the stories they told about their teaching and learning experiences in order to reveal a deeper understanding of effective professional development. As such, I drew from case study methodologies to design my study and borrowed from methodological components of narrative analysis to analyze my data, which included:

- Transcriptions of videotaped conversations from learning community meetings
- Learning community documents and artifacts, e.g. meeting agendas, exit slips, group norms
- Field notes of classroom observations
- Transcriptions of videotaped post-observation guided reflection conversations
- Analytic memos kept in my researcher’s journal

My original intent in designing this study was to explore a learning community in action. I entered into the data collection as an observer seeking to understand the learning community, not influence or guide the formation or function of the learning community. My experiences, reviews of related studies, and extensive reading on the topic had led me to believe that learning communities would be a place in which teachers would flourish as professional learners. Based on my personal professional experience and research, I believed, as I acknowledged at the onset of this study, that learning communities were an effective method of professional development, professional development that would transfer into classroom practice and have an impact on student learning. Through this study, however, I learned about so much more than just learning communities as a professional development structure. I learned about teachers’ professional needs, the dynamic relationships teachers form with each other, the importance of creating multiple
spaces for professional learning, and the potentially powerful role an instructional leader could play in nurturing professional growth. In the following section, I discuss the conclusions that characterize the major findings of this study and the implications that build from those conclusions.

**Discussion of the Findings and Implications for Practice**

As I collected and analyzed data for this study, I began to see the participants as living their professional lives in several spaces. The first space in which teachers operated was *inside* the learning community as the teachers engaged in conversation about teaching. I also observed what went on *outside* the learning communities (i.e. in individual teacher’s classrooms). Finally, teachers identified and described to me the spaces *around* the learning community (i.e. other professional learning spaces). The implications for teachers and instructional leaders described in this section are suggestions based upon the findings of the dissertation study. Instructional leaders (e.g. principals, administrators, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and mentors) who design and execute professional learning experiences with and for teachers can implement the findings of this study as they set about creating professional development plans in their schools or districts. Teachers can use the findings of this study to identify and then advocate for the kinds of professional learning from which they would most benefit.

While reviewing the body of literature that examined the process of creating learning communities or described the structural elements of learning communities (see, for example, DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007; Venables, 2011) trends emerged. These trends were often named as ideal elements
or expectations for “effective” learning communities. In my professional life prior to this study, I accepted that there were such ideals and participated in a learning community that strove to meet those ideals. I began to think of learning communities as a singularly defined entity: a group of teachers functioning exactly as described in the literature. In fact, I even attempted to capture, summarize, and parse down overarching definitions of learning communities in my review of the literature before conducting my study. However, as a result of engaging in this study, I have come to the conclusion that the ideals of learning communities as set forth in the literature guiding educators to create learning communities do not necessarily hold true or serve as best practice for all. In other words, learning communities do not have to be “textbook perfect” in order to be worthy endeavors. In fact, striving for perfection (as defined by those who write about the structural elements of learning communities) can make the learning community lose sight of its true purpose and instead cause them to become primarily focused on “doing” learning communities—paying attention to the routines and norms thus undermining the goal of these gatherings. In fact, analysis of the data collected during this study revealed that conducting the business of the learning community took up a large portion of the teachers’ time together (refer to Figure 3.3 Types of talk in the learning community). In the nine meetings I attended, there were 30 instances of taking care of business. While a greater amount of time was spent asking questions (104 instances) over a quarter of those questions were about the business of the learning community (e.g. meeting times, agenda items, discussion about how the meetings should be structured).

Close examination of the practices of the learning community revealed that the three practices highlighted in the Findings chapter of this dissertation (the setting of
group norms, the implementation of discussion techniques, and the creation and adherence to agendas) may have actually limited the progress of the learning community and potential for professional growth for its members. The norms set by the learning community, with their focus on organization, respect, staying on topic, and responsibility, may have unintentionally caused the limited participation of four of the six learning community members. The purpose for setting norms—one step toward building a collegial culture—became lost in this professional setting. When considering the data regarding the amount of time spent setting the agenda and determining how to talk about student and teacher work within the learning community, it appears the same holds true for the other learning community practices. The learning community never grew beyond the structure of some of the discussion techniques that were used to facilitate talk within the learning community. Had they explored the space beyond the protocols, they may have ventured into conversation that examined questions like: What do we really care about as teachers? or What do we really want to tell each other? While implemented with good intent, these practices limited the growth of the learning community as opposed to creating space for professional growth.

The teachers did have the opportunity to share resources and teaching strategies they had implemented, but there was not a lot of time left for the learning community to reflect or share their teaching stories and concerns. And because the time was so driven by the business of the learning community, the teachers still needed places and spaces to discuss and explore their beliefs. Schools that choose to implement learning communities as a method of delivering professional development or as a professional learning space will need to strive to take the pressure of emulating a formulaic model off the community
and help participants see these spaces as generative rather than prescriptive. This growth beyond the structures could create more space for professional growth.

**Dynamic roles and complex relationships.** Related studies of learning communities stressed the importance of building collegial relationships (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009; Silva & Contreras, 2011; Wells, 2008), which Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2009) defined as relationships “characterized by purposeful adult interactions about improving school-wide teaching and learning” (p. 6). Glickman et al. observed that teachers in collegial schools are able to discuss issues free from judgment and accept disagreements and use these disagreements as an opportunity for change. Further, the collegial faculty as a whole respects the wisdom of colleagues.

Collegial relationships, in the literature, are often set up as dichotomous with congenial relationships, defined by Glickman et al. as “friendly social interactions and professional isolation (p. 5). Of course, building toward collegial relationships can be a goal, but sometimes some teachers, like the first-year teachers in this study, need those congenial interactions.

Through data analysis, I concluded that relationships within the learning community cannot be summed up in static definitions; the roles that teachers took on shifted and were dynamic, which added to the level of complexity in relationships. The overall tone of relationships among teachers in the learning community operated more on a continuum between collegial and congenial, depending on the community’s purpose or topic of discussion at any given moment. I found this notion of relationships to be closely related to the oft-made suggestion of a shared leadership model (Kennedy, Deuel, Nelson, and Slavit, 2011; Phillips, 2003). I, too, had positive experiences prior to this
study as a member of a learning community that operated under shared leadership. However, based on the findings of this study, I concluded that successful shared leadership is dependent upon the group of teachers in the learning community. In this case, three of the six members of the learning community were first-year teachers. The suggestion of shared leadership was abandoned as quickly as it was proposed based on the reactions and feedback from the other members of the community. I recommend that teachers take the time to build relationships and engage in a variety of professional development opportunities that allows teachers to build experience as both expert and learner before moving into the shared leadership model.

Learning communities can build these relationships in a variety of ways. The learning community in this study began to build a collaborative culture through some intentional actions like setting group norms and asking for all members to contribute ideas to the agenda. However, since the norms were never revisited or reflected upon, the community did not grow into or beyond them. Since so much individual growth resulted from one-on-one reflective conversations around videos of the participants teaching, I recommend this practice be enacted within the learning community. This practice could also work to build trusting relationships. Teachers could be filmed, either by themselves or a peer, and then self-select clips to reflect upon as a community. The teacher self-reflecting would gain insight into his or her own practice, and the other community members have much to gain from watching their peers in action. As the relationships among community members grow, teachers may begin offer suggestions and constructive feedback so all involved can grow professionally.
Space for reflection. This study also revealed insights about the nature of teacher reflection. York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie (2001) stated simply, “Learning requires reflection” (p. 1), but analysis of data indicated that teachers have neither the space nor the time to reflect. Shulman’s (1987) recommendations for specific reflection strategies are aligned to the findings of this study. The professional learning space that was created when individual teachers met with me to view themselves teaching and engaged in conversation around that video footage is a reflection strategy that met the professional learning needs of some participants. However, that space was intentionally created for the purpose of this study. It is difficult to imagine the guided reflection conversations carrying on without a driving force, such as a researcher collecting data.

Although some participants found the guided reflection conversations to be very rewarding, the time involved in recruiting someone to film and then engage in conversation around the filmed observation is intense. Findings from this study support the worthiness of such a time investment, but the logistics would be difficult to manage without a support person, such as an instructional coach or instructional leader, given the other obligations teachers juggle. Instructional leaders would have to commit to this level of sustained professional learning in order to ensure the teachers have the necessary support to make it happen. In lieu of direct instructional leader support, the learning community could commit to filming each other and then participate in guided reflection conversations as a group at their weekly or bi-weekly meetings. With the entire learning community viewing the video and participating in the conversation around the observation, the teacher featured in the video will have the opportunity to get feedback from a variety of perspectives. The teacher could then reflect on the feedback offered by
his or her peers, and select which suggestions he or she may want to put into practice in the classroom.

**Learning communities alone do not satisfy all teachers’ professional learning needs.** This finding is contrary to what I believed at the onset of this study. I began this study with the notion that I would uncover the power of the learning community. The theoretical frame for this study drew heavily on the social learning theories of Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978) and my belief that professional development for teachers should be designed to reflect the social nature of learning. Vygotsky taught us that we learn from and with others; therefore teachers must be given the opportunity to talk with one another, work with and process new information, and reflect upon new understandings during and after professional development opportunities. The learning community can be a place where this can happen, but it may not be the optimal place for all professionals. What I discovered was that for this particular learning community, this structure was not enough. There were very worthy aspects of the learning community, and those transferred to teacher practice and those practices were enacted in classrooms. However, for some participants, the greatest professional growth occurred in settings outside of the learning community: in guided reflection conversations around their filmed teaching, in graduate courses, in other professional development engagements.

Little (2003) identified several features that she determined to be illustrative of learning communities. These features included setting aside “time to identify and examine problems of practice,” questioning “those problems in ways that open up new considerations and possibilities,” and inviting “comments and advice from others” (p. 938). In essence, the learning community could be restructured to provide a space for
teachers to grow through professional conversation. I drew upon Barth (2003) and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) while constructing the theoretical frame for this study. Their work helped me see the importance of encouraging professional growth through spaces that honor storytelling. The learning community structure could be just that space. Members of the learning community would need to work to create what Barth termed “a culture of listening,” and if they did, they would create the space that acknowledges teachers as professionals who have ideas and stories others can learn from. Likewise, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) noted “missing from the knowledge base for teaching are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretative frames teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices” (p. 2). Imagine how powerful a learning community could be if teachers were able to engage in the ways Barth and Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe. Perhaps as the learning community in this study grows together over the coming years, and as the first-year teachers gain more experience, this kind of culture will flourish organically, as the space that was filled up with learning how to function as a learning community will open up, leaving room for questions and conversations about teaching beliefs and practice.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The very nature of case study creates limitations. I explored one learning community for a relatively short amount of time. While this study added to the growing body of studies that examine learning communities, due to the dynamic nature of human beings and the relationships they form in group settings, the findings that my study
revealed may have looked very different had I spent time with any other learning community.

Learning communities are complex because of the variety of teachers who make up the groups. Researchers should continue to explore what goes on within learning communities as they will not all function in the same ways. For example, the idea of space (or the lack of space, in many instances) was a theme that came up again and again in the data: space for professional learning, space for teacher reflection, space to support others’ learning. A study that examines the role of an instructional leader, such as a literacy coach or a lead teacher, in creating multiple spaces for professional may lead to deeper understanding of effective methods of professional learning. This study would have looked very different if the learning community had been led by the researcher or another person in a support role such as an instructional or literacy coach.

I would also suggest a future study that examines the role of classroom teachers in planning, developing, and sustaining their own professional development. The learning community in this study did have freedom in the direction their professional learning could go, but there was little evidence of a sustained focus in any one professional learning area. This was likely due to the number of novice teachers in the study, as first-year teachers often describe their first year of teaching as doing anything to stay afloat. However, if the learning community took time to reflect as a group or self-assess their progress toward self-selected professional goals, there may have been more professional and personal satisfaction evident in the members of this learning community. Perhaps the norms set by the learning community at the beginning of the study could be used as a self-assessment tool as participants determine whether or not they are living into those
norms, or if the norms even serve the purpose they were set to serve. The self-assessment of norms should lead to action, though, and the practice of revisiting and revising norms periodically should be an integral part of the learning community.

**Conclusion**

As I wrote the theoretical frame for this study, I drew upon Dewey and Vygotsky’s work and stated my belief in learning as a social process (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). I went on to say that professional development for teachers should be designed to reflect that. What I did not acknowledge prior to this study was that teachers are in very different places socially and professionally, and that teachers, like the students in their classrooms, may prefer to learn in different ways. While planning professional development, instructional leaders must consider individual needs and learning preferences in an attempt to individualize professional development. Needs assessments could be conducted so teachers have the opportunity to identify and name the areas in which they would like to grow professionally. Teachers should have access to professional development settings that work for them and that are not imposed on them. Examples of various structures that could be implemented include: intimate settings like one-on-one post-observation conferences or pre-observation goal-setting conversations, small group settings like learning communities, book study clubs, or department planning sessions, or larger settings like graduate courses sponsored within school districts or universities, whole-school seminars, districtwide learning sessions, or regional or national conferences.

The findings in this study expanded and complicated understandings about professional learning. This exploration of professional conversation in learning
communities, as well as the transfer of these ideas into teacher practice and the emphasis on guided reflection, contributed to the growing body of qualitative studies that explored the work of learning communities. As a result of this study, I am able to advocate for the continued creation of learning communities. However, learning communities cannot stand alone as a “one size fits all” approach to professional learning. In other words, learning communities, while necessary, are not sufficient. In fact, the findings from this study indicate that a solution is a comprehensive professional learning plan that creates multiple supports and many spaces for professional learning that situates teachers as lifelong learners. Because every educator needs a supportive space in which to grow professionally: novice teachers need a safe place to explore ideas, ask questions, and learn; teacher leaders, experienced teachers, and veteran teachers must be honored for what they know while also being nourished to outgrow their current knowledge base. While these findings do not provide a simple solution, they do honor the complexity inherent in all human endeavors and I now believe a comprehensive professional learning plan that honors educators can be designed to include multiple spaces to meet the diverse needs of teachers.
References


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*Education Week*, 28 (14), 22-23.


Appendix A: Post-Observation Semi-Structured Interview Guided Reflection Form

1. Do you have a particular clip/portion of your class you’d like to view?

   [view clip]

2. Talk about that clip. [Possible follow-up questions: What do you notice? What surprised you? What message does that send?]

3. In your last learning community meeting, [a particular topic] was discussed. Why did/didn’t you decide to implement that idea? [insert questions specific to the observation—found in Appendix B]
Appendix B: Guided Reflection Questions Specific to Observations

Anne Observation: October 8, 2013 (3rd period)
GR Conversation: October 8 11:30 AM

- At the last PLC I attended, the group discussed assessments. Are any of those ideas reflected in the assessment you gave today?

Alissa Observation: October 10, 2013 (3rd period)
GR Conversation: October 10 11:30 AM

- Yesterday [October 9], this video was presented and discussed. Why did you decide to use it today?
- I noticed you used the CCSS Discussion Rubric created within this district. Why did you decide to use that particular rubric?
- You and your students set group norms today. Why did you decide to put those into place?

Joyce Observation: October 11, 2013 (2nd & 5th periods)
GR Conversation: October 15 7:30 AM

- On Wednesday [October 9] in the PLC meeting, this Socratic seminar video was presented. Why did you decide to use it this week?
- I noticed group norms posted and reviewed. Why did you decide to put these into place?
  Were you satisfied with the Socratic seminar?
- You asked me to film two classes on the same day? Why? What insight did you hope to gain?

Annabell Observation: November 7, 2013 (1st period)
GR Conversation: November 11 7:30 AM

- How did the idea of this collaborative peer feedback develop?
- Why the use of Google docs?
- I noticed students giving each other high-quality, specific feedback. How did students get to this level?
Anne Observation: November 7, 2013 (2\textsuperscript{nd} period)
GR Conversation: November 13 7:30 AM

- Why did you develop this particular Q&A structure?
- Origins of the STEAL chart? Why the revisions to it?
- How did you know students needed clarification on STEAL?
- Has the PLC discussed different annotation techniques?
- What drove your choice of standards for today?

Alissa Observation: November 7, 2013 (3\textsuperscript{rd} period)
GR Conversation: November 7 11:30 AM

- In a previous PLC, someone recommended the Kylene Beers' text [When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do]. There's a chapter on vocab. Have you consulted this?
- Have you asked your other PLC members how they teach roots?
- After the last observation, we talked about engagement techniques. Was this activity a result of that?

Joyce Observation: November 11, 2013 (1\textsuperscript{st} period)
GR Conversation: November 13 12:30 PM

- You modeled the analysis of one theme: friendship. Why did you think this was an important practice?
- Where did you get the graphic organizer you used?
- You said to a student, "Do you want to speak it out before you go up there?" What does this say about your teaching beliefs?

Bryson Observation: November 18, 2013 (1\textsuperscript{st} period)
GR Conversation: November 19, 2013

- You stated in the first clip that you would not help students while they read and answered questions. What does this say about your teaching beliefs?
- Follow-up Q: Last week in Anne's class, she made a similar comment. Have y'all ever discussed letting students struggle?
- What else will students do to engage with the text? Follow-up Q: Where did those strategies/ideas/engagements come from?

Clarence Observation: November 18, 2013 (2\textsuperscript{nd} period)
GR Conversation: November 21, 2013

- In the second clip, you mention FANBOYS. Where did you hear that acronym?
- The students read The Hobbit on their own. Why did you decide to structure the reading of the text this way?
Appendix C: Follow-Up Questions

These follow-up questions were sent to participants via Google Form on December 4, 2013.

1. In your opinion/experience, would the sharing of ideas and/or resources still occur if your learning community didn't meet regularly?

2. Many of you referred to professional development opportunities other than your learning community. What impact did those PD experiences have on your instructional practice?

3. Some of you invited me in during your inclusion classes; some of you stated that the inclusion class was your favorite group of students. What are your thoughts on this?

4. I recommended titles and resources to some of you. Did you access these or use them in subsequent planning or individual professional development? If yes, what were your thoughts?

5. Some of you viewed the entire lesson, either with me or on your own later. Do you have any thoughts to share about your instructional practices?
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Tentative Study Title: A Study of the Effects of a Professional Development Experience on a Literacy Learning Community

August 12, 2013

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Abbey Duggins. I am a doctoral student in the Language and Literacy Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying learning communities and school-level professional development. If you decide to participate in my study, I would begin attending the literacy learning community meetings each month and am asking permission to videotape these meetings. Further, I would like to conduct two classroom observations of you teaching and videotape those as well. After videotaping these observations, I would like to engage in a guided reflection conversation around the observations. These conversations will be videotaped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by me as I transcribe and analyze them. You will not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to. Further, I will engage you in member-checking, which is a way to ensure my interpretations of conversations and observations accurately reflect your intentions. If, at any time, you wish for me to exclude or revise a piece of data, I will honor your requests.

The information collected will be kept confidential. Materials collected may have participants’ names on them; however, if I make presentations about the project or write articles for educational journals, participants’ names will not appear. You and I can discuss suitable pseudonyms. I will keep all materials (i.e. discussion transcripts, observation notes, videotapes) in a locked file cabinet and/or in a password protected computer file. There is a slight risk that a breach of confidentiality could occur, despite the steps that will be taken to protect your identity.

Although you probably won’t benefit directly from participating in this study, we hope that others in school communities in general will benefit.
Taking part in the study is your decision. You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

For more information concerning this research project, please contact me at (803) 413-3059 or abbeyduggins@hotmail.com. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Tasha Laman, at (803) 777-2595 or laman@mailbox.sc.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please return the bottom portion of this form.

With kind regards,

Abbey S. Duggins
(803) 413-3059
abbeyduggins@hotmail.com

I have read the information contained in the letter about the above titled study, and I would like to participate.

____ I give permission for the researcher to attend and videotape learning community meetings and I also give permission for the researcher to videotape two classroom observations and subsequent guided reflection conversations with me. I give permission for the activities listed above and for elements of this work to be used in presentations and publications.

__________________________________________ ___________________
Participant Signature Date