Stages of collaboration and the realities of professional learning communities

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Abstract

Although professional learning communities are often promoted as unique learning opportunities, little is known about how they get started and how they are sustained. For this reason, group members are often unprepared, and then frustrated, by inevitable group tensions. With this in mind, Karl Weick’s [(1979). The social psychology of organizing. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley] model of means convergence was used to analyze the social dynamics of a small group of Middle Years teachers over a 2-year period as they implemented Egan’s [(1992). Imagination in teaching and learning: The middle school years. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press; (1997). The educated mind: How cognitive tools shape our understanding. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press] theory of Imagination and Learning to their practice. Along with the analysis of journal entries, focus-group discussions, and individual interviews, Weick’s (1979) four developmental stages of collaboration provide a broader understanding of why conflict occurs in learning communities and its effect on collaborative learning.

Keywords: Collaborative process; Interpersonal tension; Egan’s theory of Imagination and Learning; Inquiry process; Middle Years education; Professional learning community; Weick’s stages of collaboration

1. Introduction

Many educators argue that professional learning communities offer an important and distinct form of professional development because they are situated between the educational policies of school districts and the realities of schools and practicing teachers. From this perspective, professional learning communities can translate knowledge from the district into an understanding of a particular school’s day-to-day practice (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Central to this concept, though, is the ongoing interplay between the notion of community and its demand for a shared perspective, and the community’s focus on professional growth and the inherent need to consider individual needs (Little, 2002). Teachers, armed with only a vague understanding of a community’s features of “shared beliefs”, “interdependence”, and “meaningful relationships” (Westheimer, 1999), soon find the critical nature of the communal learning experience to be extremely challenging and surprisingly ambiguous work. Uncomfortable with the existence of competing tension, the community’s learning experience can often be reduced to “having everyone just try to
get along” (Westheimer, 1999). For this reason, we know little about how effective professional learning communities develop, how they are sustained, and how teachers learn to work collaboratively throughout the inquiry process (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Wilson & Berne, 1999).

What is clear, however, is that the notion of inquiry, which is at the heart of a learning community, is a substantial source of interpersonal tension. A group’s “inquiry stance” complicates members’ relationships because as they initiate group learning, negotiated agendas, shared authority, and compromised actions become paramount (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Although Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) argue that tension is inherent in group work, little educational research explores the difficulties that teachers experience in establishing and sustaining productive learning communities. In this respect, McLaughlin and Talbert (2006, p. 11) note: “Lack of trust, time, and talent are the usual reasons”; however, Hargreaves (2001) and de Lima (2001) suggest that teachers often do not understand the nature of the interdependence required in effective learning communities. Moreover, there is little research that examines teacher interactions in professional learning communities as they strive to contribute to educational reform (Little, 2002). This, then, raises the question: What collaborative dynamics are involved in developing and sustaining a professional learning community?

2. The nature of collaboration

To begin, teachers need to appreciate the demands inherent in the collaborative process. Although individuals come with their own expectations of group work, they need to define each others’ actions so that they “fit together” to create a shared practice. Out of necessity or convenience, individuals coordinate their activities to achieve common goals that, in time, guide future shared actions (Weick, 1995). The group’s “shared history and culture” (Selznick, 1992) eventually provide the stability and predictability that are crucial for meaningful collaborative work to occur (Weick, 1995). There is, however, much more required to transform a group of individuals into a learning community.

Aligning acts to develop a group’s practice requires the “mutual engagement” of members (Wenger, 1998). In fact, members’ engagement in the learning process provides them with a sense of belonging, an essential element of any professional learning community (Weick, 1995). Research suggests, then, that a learning community is a group of people that act on an ongoing basis to develop their knowledge of a common interest or passion by sharing individual resources and by engaging in critical dialogue (Wenger et al., 2002). Thus, if members’ relationships are built on trust, the forthright nature of the group’s practice can generate honest interactions, challenging questions, and constructive feedback (Wenger et al., 2002), all of which are essential for intellectual growth to occur (de Lima, 2001; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). The problem remains, however, that interpersonal tension often makes people uncomfortable and teachers are no exception to this general observation (Goulet, Krentz, & Christiansen, 2003; Little, 1990). As Hargreaves (2001, p. 19) explains: “Too often ... conflict in schools is seen as a problem, not an opportunity, where purposes are threatened, competence is questioned and undertones of status and power strain the fragile bonds that hold teachers together.”

What types of opportunities and challenges can conflict present? Intragroup conflict, sometimes described as “opposing and divergent interests” (Tjosvold, 1997), is often identified as either “cognitive” or “affective” (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; de Lima, 2001; Jehn, 1997). Cognitive conflict is related to problem-solving; the thoughtful consideration of critical feedback and alternative viewpoints enhances the group’s collective ideas (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Westheimer, 1999). When these professional tensions are interpreted as personal attacks, however, the more destructive “affective conflict” (Jehn, 1997), marked by feelings of “friction, frustration, and personality clashes” often surfaces (Rentsch & Zelno, 2003). From this, suspicion and distrust can permeate the collaborative process, leaving members unwilling to tolerate differences and unable to trust each other’s motives (Amason & Schweiger, 1997); in fact, teachers often describe themselves as feeling “devastated”, “personally attacked”, and “angry” during group work (Hargreaves, 2001). Not only is any move towards public discussions of deeply held teaching beliefs going to arouse affective tension in teachers (Hargreaves, 2001; Kelchtermans, 1996), but the collaborative process also presents still other significant challenges.

Teachers collaborate by drawing on each other’s strengths to achieve a shared goal. The increase in
frequency and intensity of their interactions, however, increases the potential for conflict (de Lima, 2001; Grossman et al., 2001) because as members work more closely with each other to develop their shared practice, fewer assumptions are left unchallenged (Wenger et al., 2002). Ironically, the features that are essential to a strong community, such as a shared identity and perspective, and meaningful relationships, eventually become sources of tension for its members (Westheimer, 1999). In an effort to overcome these challenges, the educational literature offers teachers a myriad of strategies, such as exploring members’ assumptions, sharing pertinent information (Russo & Giblin, 2000), and educating members to reach a consensus on effective group norms (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). These strategies are helpful, but do teachers have the necessary understanding of the inherent tensions embedded in collaborative processes to effectively implement these strategies? Do they know what challenges to anticipate as they collaborate to combine their strengths in a professional learning community?

Although educational research has explored the actions and emotions of individual teachers as they collaborate with colleagues (Goulet et al., 2003; Hargreaves, 2001; Mandzuk, 1999), we believe that some helpful regularities can also be identified in the collaborative dynamics of people who, through the constraints of a social setting’s norms and sanctions, chose similar courses of action (Kerckhoff, 1993; Weick, 1995; West, Tjosvold, & Smith, 2005). These regularities, whether described as “stages”, “phases”, or “ages” (Hargreaves, 2000; Weick, 1979; Wenger et al., 2002), help to further understand a group’s new state within the context of the “significant residues and traces” of earlier experiences (Hargreaves, 2000), a continuity that is presently lacking in educational research (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Wilson & Berne, 1999). For this reason, we believe that Karl Weick’s (1979) model of means convergence is a useful theoretical framework from which to analyze the interactions of seven teachers over a 2-year period as they collaborated to understand and to implement Egan’s (1992, 1997) theory of Imagination and Learning to their Middle Years teaching practices. By concisely describing members’ actions as a group form and then as norms are established and maintained, Weick’s (1979) stages of collaboration provide teachers with a greater understanding of the changing requirements in the development of a learning community; ultimately, it may help them to navigate more effectively through the complexities of collaborative work (Kerckhoff, 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

3. Weick’s model of means convergence

Little (2002, p. 14) describes the development of a community’s practice as members’ ongoing negotiation between “collective obligation” and “individual preference”. Weick (1979, 1995) reminds us, though, that group members’ interdependence is centered on their need to adopt shared actions to “get the job done”, rather than on others’ individually desired ends or preferences. Furthermore, the fundamental tension that exists between the two perspectives in the collaborative process can be analyzed using the four stages of Weick’s (1979) model: (1) diverse ends, (2) common means, (3) common ends, and (4) diverse means. These developmental stages (Weick, 1979) provide teachers with a broader understanding of why challenging shifts occur in a learning community’s dynamics and how they may effectively implement strategies to further support collaborative learning.

To begin, individuals, motivated by their personal expectations, unite on a common interest or a shared passion; in fact, meaningful collaboration stems from this initial overlapping of values (Weick, 1979). At this time, people converge to find out whether they share enough common ground to potentially work together, although their individual expectations or diverse ends, such as developing leadership skills or expanding social networks, remain private. If, then, a shared group interest can be identified (Wenger et al., 2002), members’ interdependence becomes centered on the development of their common means or their practice, such as assigned readings and meeting agendas, to achieve the group’s goals (Weick, 1979). It is important to remember, though, that while members collaborate to develop their practice, their personal intentions and expectations regarding the group experience remain disconnected, and these differences eventually create conflict (Jehn, 1997; Weick, 1995; Wenger et al., 2002). As members’ unmet expectations eventually surface and interpersonal tension ensues, a subtle change occurs where the group begins to reflect an overriding concern for its own survival; the group’s practice now includes common ends, such as sanctions and the clearer articulation of members’ roles, to address its tenuous stability in light of the group’s goals.
In the end, the adopted changes may ultimately re-energize the group or simply drain it of its energy (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 96), but individual members’ efforts to stabilize the group by becoming more focused on individual tasks generally means that they have become less attentive to the group as a whole (Weick, 1979). Furthermore, some individuals eventually react to the group’s incessant demands for conformity by adopting idiosyncratic behavior in the hope of reasserting their uniqueness (Weick, 1995). With this in mind, the group’s practice tends to eventually “break down” and individuals are left pursuing diverse means or acts. At this point, communities often split into sub-groups, or simply “fade away” (Wenger et al., 2002).

4. The analysis

As such, Karl Weick’s (1979) model was used to analyze the social dynamics of a group of seven Middle Years teachers from one suburban Middle Years school over a 2-year period as they attempted to implement Egan’s (1992, 1997) theory of Imagination and Learning to their teaching practice. Briefly, this theory argues that there are innovative ways in which the imaginative capacities of both teachers and students can be further engaged in order to enhance student learning. The study’s non-probability sample included the first author as researcher, and also included one Grade Six teacher, three Grade Seven teachers, and one Grade Eight teacher from the English program, one Grade Seven teacher from the French Immersion program, and the principal of the school. The group, consisting of five females and two males, ranged in teaching experience from less than 1 year to over 20 years.

Throughout the 2-year experience (October 2003–June 2005), members met once or twice monthly, either in the evenings or during “educational leave days” granted by the school district to develop implementation strategies and to assess the effectiveness of those strategies in teaching the Middle Years curriculum. Examples of members’ implementations included the integration of villains and heroes, and natural extremes (Egan, 1997) in the teaching of Particle Theory and integers in Grade Seven and Eight Science and Mathematics. During this period, members also explored the benefits and challenges of working collaboratively. Three methods of data collection were used in this 2-year study. Through regularly submitted journal entries, three focus-group discussions, and individual interviews, the teachers had an ongoing opportunity to reflect on their learning of the theory, as well as demonstrate the group’s collaborative efforts. Overall, the process required approximately 300 h of each group member’s time and resulted in approximately 500 pages of data.

The analysis began with a general reading of the data to re-familiarize the first author with the issues raised by group members, beginning with individual interviews, focus-group discussions, and then members’ journal entries. Using a copy of the collected data that had already been coded for the subjects’ identities and the method of data collection, this author then noted how members’ impressions and issues related to Weick’s (1979) four stages of collaborative work. Afterwards, relevant data were analyzed and subsequently organized into the corresponding stages (Weick, 1979) using the following guiding questions: (1) What were members’ individual expectations regarding the group’s experience? (2) How did members gauge whether there was enough “common ground” to initially participate in the process? (3) What actions did the group adopt in learning and implementing Egan’s theory? (4) What significant social dynamics shaped their practice? (5) Which actions indicated that the group began to prioritize its own survival? (6) What triggered this shift in the group’s focus? (7) How did the group’s structure eventually change? and (8) What were members’ sentiments at the end of the group experience? Once the relevant data had been organized, common themes and divergent viewpoints were noted and sequenced to represent the group’s 2-year collaborative experience.

5. Findings

Weick (1979, p. 91) states that “partners in a collective structure share space, time, and energy, but they need not share visions, aspirations, or intentions.” Moreover, because Weick’s (1979) model of means convergence provides a broader understanding of the ongoing tension between these two perspectives in the collaborative process, the data have been analyzed using the four developmental stages, namely diverse ends, common means, common ends, and diverse means.

5.1. Diverse ends

Members begin group work by establishing whether there is enough shared interest to work
collaboratively, but what motivates them to join the group in the first place? For the teachers in this study, the motivation began in 2003 when Kieran Egan planned to conduct research on the implementation of his theory of Imagination and Learning and chose a large suburban Middle Years school in a Western Canadian city as one of his sites. Unfortunately, Egan was unable to include the school in his study; nevertheless, seven teachers decided to apply Egan’s theory to their teaching practice. Although all the teachers expressed a desire to become more creative in their teaching practice, they were also attracted to the project for other reasons: as a preparation for graduate studies, as an opportunity to “work through” prior frustrating group experiences, or as an opportunity to achieve future goals as educational leaders. One member noted his professional responsibility to others by saying: “If you’re asking people to ... take a risk, you also have to take that risk. If you’re asking people to look at their practice, you should be critically looking at your [own] practice.” A number of members hoped that the group experience would help them develop a professional and social “support system” within the school. But, as one member explained: “I... also expect that there would be some payoff in terms of workload for me—that I’m not reinventing every wheel.”

How did members initially gauge whether they shared enough common ground to participate in the group work? Most stated that they needed to establish who the other participants were and whether they liked them, and trusted them, before they committed themselves to the project. As one teacher explained: “We genuinely like each other. If I were in a group with [some people], the personalities would drive me crazy. I just couldn’t do it.” Another member noted: “We are fortunate that we are a personally compatible group for the most part. I’m noticing that even though we are becoming more comfortable with each other, we maintain a highly respectful and deferential tone with each other.” Regardless, a few members were concerned with the principal’s role in the group. On this note, one teacher said:

I am entering this group with mixed emotions. Part of my objective is to become more comfortable with sharing information.... While I hear that we are not being officially evaluated, I can’t help but feel otherwise. I want my opinions to count, but [I] fear that I will seem ignorant of the subject.

Another member noted: “I [feel] funny... even though we’re friends.... There could always be a backlash.” Another teacher added: “You have to remember to be mindful...the things you say can be heard differently, interpreted differently....”

All the teachers believed that sharing group activities could only occur if they developed their unique implementation of the theory to practice. Otherwise, the potential conflicts arising from the members’ different work ethic, personal abilities, and quality of work would have frustrated the group’s collaborative efforts. As one colleague elaborated: “[Not being responsible for a group project] takes a lot of tension out of the process. There would be an undertone of animosity involved with equal credit, shared workload, etc.... It is then that people get intolerant of others’ weaknesses and limitations.” Another teacher added:

I like the idea that we’ve been given an umbrella experience where we... want to focus our experience because we are all focusing our practice in different areas. I’ve focused [the theory] in on an area that’s fascinating to me— it may not be fascinating to someone else... but it’s my own individual area that I find strength in.

5.2. Common means

And so, the collaborative work began. Based on the understanding that all members had an equal voice in their learning and that everyone would be supported through the challenges, the group’s first year was mostly spent exploring difficult theoretical concepts, such as the nature of imagination and creativity, and identifying strategies that would foster group learning. All the participants agreed that the group’s shared readings helped establish common “points of contact” during discussions among members with diverse teaching beliefs. Yet, when group members discussed any one concept in detail, significantly fewer “points of contact” in understanding existed. As one member noted: “Do we need a common denominator? Yes and no. When you are working together ... you need [one]. I think that we need less of a shared understanding in this group because we are freer to go our own ways and to do our own thing.” Another teacher added that “I think that... we agree on the main ideas
where we ‘come together’ and also the issues where we don’t…. We agree to respect that.’” Still another noted: “We become like a family and so to get along, [we] need to let some things go.” But, occasionally the group became uncomfortable for some members. Towards the end of the first year, a colleague described the group’s “coming together” as a “strange cohesiveness” that risked going “too far” and becoming “too utopian” and “too insular”. Another teacher noted that the members’ ideas aligned very quickly, describing them as “entrenched” and “difficult to change”.

Which strategies were most helpful to the group’s learning? Even though teachers’ opinions varied on the effectiveness of the “rotating chair” where different people chaired meetings on a rotating schedule, the strategy was essential because it allowed all members to take ownership of meetings. In the first year, meeting agendas depicted a consistent structure: discussions of readings and then exploration of ideas for implementation. Because some readings were intellectually challenging, one member volunteered to provide the group with brief outlines prior to discussions. A number of teachers noted that the recorded “meeting minutes” were helpful because “the information moves so fast … and so much is said that this [later] reviewing of ideas was very helpful.” Still, another added: “It seems to make people more accountable when they know that what they say is going to be recorded.”

In preparation for the group’s summer presentation at an international conference on Imagination and Education, members began using the “hot seat” process, which was considered by all members to be one of the most effective learning strategies adopted. This strategy required individual teachers to volunteer to present their most recent plans for implementing the ideas and others to provide honest and constructive feedback. One teacher explained: “We all want to do [the hotseat]. When I was at home doing the readings, I was thinking that I’m going to come back with these questions…. I need this group to figure it out.” Still, another member said that: “We’re not always saying that everything is heavenly and perfect. If something isn’t right, we’re honest.”

In the first year, what appeared evident was that members found the social events, such as informal dinner parties, important in developing trusting relationships, although many noted that it took about 6 months before they could risk being forthright about their struggles in the learning process. A teacher explained: “At first I was a bit reluctant, to be honest. But in time, I felt that I could really share my thoughts and what I believe and that it would be respected.” Yet, after presenting her plan for implementing the ideas, one teacher confided that “My stint seemed so small compared to everyone else’s. I felt much better after a colleague credited me. Why am I still so insecure with this group? Nothing they say or do instigates this uneasiness. It’s me.”

Although members relied on the sharing of each other’s resources, most agreed that an “overriding vision” of the group’s learning was essential. As one teacher explained: “As a group, we decide on the concepts … to be explored, but it’s necessary to have a few people, or even one person, to always be a few steps ahead in the process and thinking about where to go next…” For example, in preparation for the conference, one teacher stated that she “found it discouraging to hear [some members] not really understanding [the theory] … [and] was relieved when [a member] just took control of the whole thing and laid out… key points for the [members].” Furthermore, members found the developing practices reassuring. As one teacher noted: “Having an assigned chair, a set agenda… they are ‘safe’ and convenient ways to remind people that the group has certain expectations…” Nevertheless, when some members continued to challenge the group’s structure in the second year, other members became anxious and agitated.

5.3. Common ends

In fact, anxiety within the learning community surfaced in the fall of the second year of the project. The first meeting after the conference on Imagination and Education was considered by many members to be “too social” and “generally off-task”. One teacher said: “We weren’t talking about what we were supposed to be talking about… I know [that]… the mood might have been more social…. This is wrong, however, because … some of us still had a whole year to integrate [Egan’s] theory.” Still, another person added: “I thought [the meeting] was enjoyable, to be honest…. and I was expecting a social time because we hadn’t seen each other since the beginning of summer. But it threw some members off.” However, other factors were at play. A member noted that “the conference was a high that could not be duplicated …. [There] was a general feeling going into the fall—some frustration,
some sense of a ‘letdown’. Yet, another teacher noted: “That conference gave us a bounce…. I’m not sure we would have gotten to the end of our second year as reasonably and as successfully as we did otherwise.” Another added: “In the first year, there was all that preparation—merging the theory and practice in preparation for the conference…. In the second year, we’ve generated a greater quantity of work, but not as high quality.”

To make this even more interesting, a Vygotskian scholar from Simon Fraser University had been invited by the school district, following the conference on Imagination and Learning, to further discuss Egan’s (1992, 1997) theory with our learning community. Although all members described this as a “high point” in the group experience, one member noted that “people in the group were ‘thrown off’ by her visit—they were nervous, anxious, and a bit scared…. I think that it forced us to ‘tighten our act’ a bit…. ” Another teacher said: “The readings [in preparation for the scholar’s visit] were very beneficial … but stressful. I needed to meet with the group [because] the discussions helped me to understand the readings. I found that, at times, certain group members spoke too much and we didn’t always have the opportunity to hear everyone’s voice.” And although most members agreed that the scholar’s visit and the conference presentation helped all the participants “to take stock” of the group’s generated work, several teachers wondered if the expectations were spreading the group “too thin”.

Moreover, the group’s expectations changed in preparation for the scholar’s visit; some participants who had assumed greater responsibility in preparation for the visit ultimately altered the group’s authority relations. As a result, separate discussions were taking place between specific members, such as the principal, and key external people, such as the scholar and the district superintendents, leaving a few group members to participate “after the fact”. At this time, one member, frustrated by the group’s “subtle pressures”, noted:

that we’ve become kind of this group monster … and I can think of a couple of different examples where we’ve made decisions individually based on what the group-what is perceived as the need by the group—and I think that that is dangerous… to be quite honest.

Many teachers noted that one or two members appeared to be struggling with the group’s expectations by “starting meetings a bit later” and “wandering in and out of discussions”. For example, one teacher noted: “The dynamics of the group changed after the [scholar’s] visit. I don’t know why, but it was as though some members were struggling for control of the group after that…. Sometimes, [people] would try not to follow the chair.” Another teacher added: “The conflicts arise from the leadership roles and what people take on in a group… where they think the process is going, what they expect from the process and themselves.” Yet, another explained: “Middle Years teachers find it extremely difficult taking direction from each other even when it’s obvious that they need it. It might be obvious, but no one calls one person ‘leader’. They feel most comfortable working within this context, even if it’s not entirely accurate. They need to believe it.” The evolving sense of frustration was exacerbated by the fact that some members’ implementations had been largely completed in the first year while others were still struggling with understanding the theory in the second year. A colleague noted that “when [your] application is over and you’re getting tired of hearing about the theory, you don’t have the same motivation to participate.” Another echoed this point: “At the beginning, it’s exciting. The deeper my understanding goes, the more difficult the applications get…. Everything gets more complicated. I’m seeing more dilemmas than answers…. ”

Why, then, were teachers so committed to “working through” the group’s complex social dynamics when they might have abandoned the group altogether? Members explained that they felt “quite invested” in the lengthy group process, and that they felt a personal commitment “to the group” that had become “like a family”, to “ongoing professional development”, and to their “reputation” within the school district. And as one member noted: “[the Egan group] is going to be an experience acknowledged by the superintendents.” Another teacher added: “I will be honest, as time went on, and it got demanding, I did feel like giving up! But, I thought I can’t let down the group, we are a unit, and we need to keep as one.” In coping with the group’s interpersonal tensions, members repeatedly discussed the need to carefully “calculate” whether reacting to some distracting, and at times, hostile behavior would enhance or hinder group work. As one teacher explained: “Each time situations … present themselves … you have to decide whether it’s going to interfere with the stability of
the group or if it’s worth it. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn’t.” Another member agreed, adding: “Maybe we should or could have addressed some of [the challenges] in a way that was gentle, you know, not by attacking....” However, “You’re always wondering if it’s going to shake up or wreck the group. And then you have to wonder if dealing with the issue [is] worth it.”

As a consequence, several members began to rely on some of the more “outspoken” members to keep the group on-task. All group members agreed, however, that the focus-group discussions helped the community move away from what a few members described as the more formalized procedures of collegial interaction so that members could effectively “hash out” their differences and challenge each other to be “more accountable”. As one teacher suggested: “The first focus-group was more collegial, but once we started the second year, it became ‘Here are the issues, let’s put them on the table....”’ A close colleague noted: “I think that until the tension in the focus-group surfaced, direct thought as to the group’s stability was never raised.”

5.4. Diverse means

Did members ever feel that too much was sacrificed to maintain the group’s stability? One colleague believed that it came close but, in her words, “we’ve always made sure that we were getting the work done.” Another teacher noted: “I don’t see the time [dealing with issues] as a sacrifice.... It’s a way to move forward .... When [concerns] got ‘close to the line,’ we talked about them .... I think that’s all you can do....” Having said that, another teacher confided: “We’re all trying to ... maintain friendships. It’s all part of the puzzle, [but] it can be very tough.” Although members perceived the “less comfortable” times as important for the group’s development, they were also “weary” of the demands of the group, along with the competing demands of teaching. Mirroring the sentiments of many others, one member said: “It’s very difficult to get a group to a place where they can be openly [be] critical... about practice, theory, [and] group dynamics.... Often, it doesn’t get to that point. We got to that point. Still, people’s feelings get hurt [and] things become personal.” Another teacher added: “The whole group is affected by the behaviour of individual members. You know, one bad seed can ruin it for the others.... It can also impede learning and ... raise uncertainty about their commitment to the group.”

Therefore, in February of the second year, the teachers “broke off” into smaller groups to further develop their specific implementation projects with their teaching partners or with one or two trusted colleagues. Although all of the members still met at the end of educational leave days to briefly discuss group plans, they were relieved that they were working in smaller groups, away from the larger group’s complex social dynamics. A teacher explains: “The last meeting was good.... But, I do believe we’ve said what we can say to each other.... We’ve read what we can read within this group. It seems ... appropriate to ‘pair off’ and [to] focus on... more individual interests.” Another colleague noted: “We are more separate now .... It’s the same feeling as when you sell your house. The neighbours start treating you like you’re already gone. In a real sense, we’ve already started to say goodbye ....”

In the end, what was created from the 2-year learning community’s experience? One teacher who helped students to create a “dream island” while integrating features of human and physical geography, explained: “I have worked harder to familiarize myself with curricular objectives... and I am much more concerned with quality over quantity. I have moved away from daily worksheets... and [I’m] into longer term inquiry-based projects.” Focusing on “extremes”, two teachers planned a teaching unit on “Bears: feared and revered” within the context of literature and one teacher later helped students design a new personal transportation vehicle when studying “structures” in Science. As one member noted: “I didn’t find that I was making wholesale changes in my practice. In fact, the outer effect for kids is mostly the same. The changes are more in how ... I’m framing it for myself as I go along.” Another colleague who taught students how to create their own legends and myths while studying different story types, noted:

Well, in the past I said to my students [to] simply write. They did, but they didn’t understand the elements of a story. They just wrote. Now, I noticed [that] the stories were more detailed and I told them stories, too, throughout the unit. Doing this, they were able to be more imaginative.

One teacher who was integrating the binary opposites of “life and death” to the study of water systems noted that “I got typical responses [for the
most part], but one kid made a whole story out of it! On his own! It was beautiful.” And, finally, one member who introduced the use of metaphors in the analysis of individual staff teaching practices, concluded: “One of the hardest things that I’ve [learned]… is the whole issue of when does a professional relationship become a social relationship [in group work]… and the line between the two…. It sounds easy, but it can be tough… It’s something to keep in mind.”

6. Discussion

Teachers can feel vulnerable for any number of reasons. They might struggle with conflicting views of effective teaching practice, with vague interpretations of educational goals, or with the uncertainty associated with their own professional knowledge base (Kelchtermans, 1996). Although these issues, among others, seem to offer valuable opportunities for in-depth educational discussions, teachers often deal with professional conflict by “avoiding interactions” and engaging in “superficial politeness” (Hargreaves, 2001). Evidence suggests, of course, that teachers need to take professional dialogue “out of the privacy of the classroom” and into a forum that allows for open and critical discussion (de Lima, 2001; Grossman et al., 2001; Little, 1990). However, this may very well be easier in theory than in practice. Although members often enter into the experience primarily expecting collegial support and friendship, the collaborative process often proves to be unexpectedly demanding and personally challenging (Mandzuk, 1999). In support of the collaborative process, teachers are often encouraged to integrate a number of strategies, such as addressing conflict “respectfully and constructively”, putting tensions “aside” (Goulet et al., 2003), and deciding by consensus (Russo & Giblin, 2000). However, when cognitive and affective tensions (de Lima, 2001; Jehn, 1997) surface, teachers often react by feeling “confused” and “personally attacked”, and they often respond by distancing themselves from their colleagues (Hargreaves, 2001). Clearly, these reactions significantly limit the ability of teachers to benefit professionally from collaborative work because, as Weick’s (1979) means-convergence model suggests, conflict is inherently embedded in the collaborative process (de Lima, 2001; Jehn, 1997; Westheimer, 1999).

Interestingly, the participating teachers in this study found the open and forthright nature of the focus-group discussions essential in realizing individual behavior to the group’s goals; the candid conversations appeared to reassure members, especially in the second year, that regardless of the tension the group remained committed to “getting the job done”. In fact, the evidence suggests that adopting “open conflict norms” (Jehn, 1995) that deal candidly with cognitive, task-related tensions relating to differences in viewpoints tends to enhance group work because it generates a vigorous exchange of diverse ideas (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Jehn, 1997). This should be done carefully, though, because when professional disagreements trigger interpersonal, affective conflict, the “open sharing” of tension can actually complicate group dynamics by increasing the frequency and intensity of feelings experienced by members (Jehn, 1995). In short, group “sharing” does not always foster feelings of “acceptance” and “forgiveness” among members (Jehn, 1997). This highlights a central challenge in collaborative work: the need to balance forthright and “open” discussions that reap the benefits of cognitive conflict without simultaneously eliciting destructive, affective interpersonal tension (Amason & Schweiger, 1997). It is suggested, then, that strategies such as group problem-solving can help to prevent disagreements from being construed as “personal attacks” or “political manoeuvring”, while strategies such as “avoiding” and “contending” tend to elicit affective discord (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Jehn, 1997).

In the first year of this learning community’s experience, members focused on adopting strategies such as the “hot seat” process to further encourage cognitive conflict. In fact, it is suggested that the gradual adoption of “common means” (Weick, 1979) into group practice slowly enables members to adapt to “open norms of conflict” (Jehn, 1997); it likely desensitizes members to some of the negative feelings related to group tension (Amason & Schweiger, 1997). When affective conflict surfaced in the second year, members were more or less able to sustain the group’s already established practice while scrambling to identify new ways to cope with the added tension. This suggests, then, that taking the time to gradually stimulate cognitive conflict in the earlier and “friendlier” stages of collaborative work (Weick, 1979) might help members to persevere to “get the job done” when they are later required to cope with intensified affective tension.

As proposed in Weick’s (1979) means-convergence model, people tend to be either “getting to
know” each other in the early stages of collaboration or trying to “get along” in the later periods of the process (Weick, 1995). In this study, teachers consistently emphasized the importance of developing and implementing their own theoretical application of Egan’s theory to their practice, believing that one “group product” would have increased feelings of animosity among members. On the other hand, though, would the creation of one final product have helped to “level” the disparities among individual teachers and to challenge their willingness to stay focused, thereby reducing the group’s tension? This is a complex question that relates to the issue of “task interdependence” and the degree to which members need each other’s help to achieve the group’s goals (Jehn, 1997). Interestingly, when members realize that they need each other to “get the job done”, they tend to be more accepting of task-related disagreements because they know they need to come to an agreement on content (Jehn, 1997). However, because the challenging task also demands an increase in the frequency and intensity of members’ interactions, there is a greater potential for interpersonal conflict to develop (de Lima, 2001; Little, 1990). Furthermore, members’ intensified interactions demand a level of conformity that, in the latter stages of collaboration, induces idiosyncratic behavior in members needing to reassert their individuality (Weick, 1995). As such, when people work closely together and learn to depend on each other, they are more likely to be affected by interpersonal tension (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Jehn, 1997). For this reason, the theoretically challenging nature of Egan’s work that demanded a high degree of task-related interdependence likely made this learning community’s members quite vulnerable to the effects of interpersonal conflict (Jehn, 1997). To further increase the frequency and intensity of the teachers’ interdependence with a single “group project” would likely have worsened the group’s tension, perhaps even to the breaking point.

McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) highlight the unique learning opportunities available through professional learning communities because they are strategically positioned between the “macro” policies of school districts and the “micro” realities of teachers’ school practices. Although the learning generated from collaborative work depends largely on the ability of group members to establish a practice to achieve their common goals, they can be surprisingly difficult to identify. In the first stage (Weick, 1979) of the learning community’s work, teachers deliberated on their potential involvement by considering each other’s strengths and weaknesses, as well as workload expectations. Yet, because the group’s topic of interest relating to Egan’s theory was already established, the early stage of this study appears quite purposeful and directed; however, this is not always the case. Identifying a learning community’s focus of study that fosters collaboration among educators can be a convoluted and frustrating process that is further complicated by members’ expectations of critical and “hard-nosed” group deliberations (Little, 1990) or of a “collegial limbo-land” of support and like-mindedness (Hargreaves, 2001). For this reason, much more needs to be learned about the unique challenges associated with starting a professional learning community.

Although significant theoretical work exists on the “design principles” of learning communities, little is known about the changes that they experience as they develop (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Wilson & Berne, 1999). As such, educational leaders are often unable to help teachers navigate effectively through the inevitable tensions that surface in group work. This rather substantial gap in our understanding of collaborative work should be examined by educators who are promoting inquiry-based learning communities in their schools. Weick’s (1979) model of means convergence is helpful in this regard because it provides a theoretical framework from which to understand the regularities, as well as the challenges, that emerge in people’s dynamics as they collaborate over time (Kerckhoff, 1993; West et al., 2005). By recognizing the inherent tension between members (Jehn, 1997), the means-convergence model (Weick, 1979) challenges our understanding of professional group work to be more than feigned politeness and “mutually affirming friendships” (Hargreaves, 2001). In this respect, Wenger et al. (2002, p. 139) suggest that: “It is important not to romanticize [communities] or expect them to solve all problems without creating any. They are not a silver bullet.” As such, a deeper understanding of what life is like in professional learning communities will challenge professional dialogue beyond the simple rhetoric to encompass more of the harsher realities of group work. This understanding will help educators who wish to become members of professional learning communities to respond more effectively to the challenges associated with collaborative work and
to ultimately become more skilled at combining collegial support with the critical dialogue that is necessary for meaningful professional growth (de Lima, 2001; Hargreaves, 2001).

References


