



# World Language Teachers Exploring Cultural Teaching Through Professional Learning Community

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## Abstract

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a form of collaborative professional development through which educators gather to explore selected issues related to their teaching and learning philosophies, and classroom practices. This study focuses on one professional learning community formed with five world language faculty members at an American university. All five faculty members teach undergraduate level world language courses at the university, namely, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, and French. This study describes how the participants worked together to build a sense of community and overcome challenges, both within and beyond the field of education. Data were gathered through field notes and transcripts. Upon analysis, the following positive findings were determined: PLCs help participants create collegial relationships. PLCs can change classroom practices. PLCs promote reflective dialogue among participants. PLCs provide professional learning opportunities. Among the challenges that confronted the group were time constraints, difficulty in maintaining focus, and the importance of the facilitator maintaining a proper balance of authority.

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## 1 Introduction

Teachers need a supportive environment that allows for time to network, share, reflect, and learn ... To have this happen, time is provided for teachers to work together in planning instruction, observing each other's classroom, and sharing feedback.

Darling-Hammond (1996)

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2002) and Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC, 2013) believe that shared learning and professional development are crucial to ensuring teaching quality and the improvement of student learning. NBPTS (2002) states that accomplished teachers and administrators of all levels contribute to the effectiveness of the school by working collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum, and staff development.

However, traditionally, shared learning has not been a part of school culture, especially in the US, where most learning is isolated within the classroom between a single instructor and students. As a culture of individualism has been the norm of school culture (Dunlap, Neale, & Carroll, 2000; Thibodeau, 2008), it can be a formidable challenge for educators to create a "sense of community"

which is supportive and collegial. Increasing accountability adds to the complexities of teaching and learning, and professional development has become more about helping the teacher reconstruct what, when, and how students learn and develop over the mere distribution and acquisition of new knowledge (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Different models have been developed which tried to connect educators with their colleagues and break the isolation that educators often face. Recently, an increasing number of organizations and schools have had success with one model of professional development in particular – the *professional learning community* (PLC; Schmoker, 2004).

This research project is a qualitative, ethnographic case study of a PLC that focused on the teaching of culture for world language classrooms. Because it is often reported that world language teachers struggle to provide adequate cultural instruction due to lack of time, support and resources (i.e. Byrd, Hlas, Watske, & Montes Valencia, 2011; Garret-Rucks, 2013), this research project focused on the development of one PLC focusing their efforts on the teaching of culture in world language classrooms. Through community group meetings, participants explored issues regarding cultural teaching and sought to improve their teaching practices as well as student learning outcomes.

The focus of this research addresses the following questions: How does the PLC influence the participants' construction of professional relationships and beliefs and practices about the teaching of culture? What factors will promote or hinder the participants' transformation process? (Bachmann, 2012).

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Teacher change through professional learning community

A PLC is a group of educators who come together, share their knowledge and experiences, learn new theories and methodologies to improve their practices, exchange opinions, and collaboratively attempt to accomplish selected goals to grow professionally and improve student learning outcomes (Kristmanson, Lafargue, & Culligan, 2011). Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace (2005) defines a PLC “as a community with the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing student learning” (p. 145). While there has been some criticism about the naming of any combination of individuals with any interest in school PLCs, DuFour (2004) and Kristmanson et al. (2011) argue that big ideas driven by core principles such as ensuring student learning, promoting a culture of collaboration, and maintaining a focus on results can differentiate a PLC from a group without specific goals or purposes.

Various research reports that PLCs enable teachers to join supportive professional communities and connect to each other to share different perspectives and promote reflection (Thibodeau, 2008). Short (2013), who conducted research on the *Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol* (SIOP) model with teachers who worked with English language learners, recommended that school-based PLCs, combined with other workshops and coaching, should be standard protocol for training and sustaining effective teachers of ELLs. In particular, an approach incorporating the co-development of lessons in which a teacher teaches the lesson while others watch, regroup, discuss, and revise the lesson, proved to be beneficial, helping teachers improve their practices and learning. Kristmanson et al. (2011) conducted a study of high school world language teachers and college professors working together to incorporate the European Language Portfolio (ELP) into their classrooms. Although there were conflicts about teaching methods among participants, they shared a common vision and specific goals that helped them establish philosophical guidelines and actions plans. PLCs often engage a wide swath of participants, including not only teachers, but also family, administrative staff, social workers etc. A study conducted by the Urban Education Institute (2012), a birth-to-college approach to public education, created various PLCs consisting of teachers, family and support staff to close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students. The

UEI report showed that 82 percent of study members felt their PLC involvement had impacted their thinking about their practices, and 45 percent said they had changed their practices as a result of participating in the learning community. One participant from this project extolled the benefits of PLCs saying that “[PLCs] really put professionals together in a real setting and provide that opportunity to communicate and dialogue with one another about how they do what they do and why they do what they do as well as offer ideas, advice, and strategies ... and to do that on a consistent, regular basis” (p. 7–8).

While PLCs are more common in K–12 school settings and most research demonstrates the effectiveness of PLCs in such environments, there is also research that shows how PLCs play a role in continuing professional development among faculty and improving student learning in higher education contexts. Daly (2011) argues that, with the rapid changes in the contexts of teaching and learning in recent years, such as diverse backgrounds and wide range of skill-sets and background knowledge the students bring to higher education, colleges and universities need to provide additional support for faculty. According to Daly, the *faculty learning community* (FLC) is one of the most successful faculty development initiatives to address such challenges (p. 4). Daly’s study, which involved seven higher education institutions, examined how FLCs helped the participants be more aware of student diversity issues on their own campuses and how to incorporate that improved understanding into their teaching (and administrative?) practices. Daly (2011) concluded that the FLC provided a venue for relationship building among faculty across departments and academic units, and through autonomous self-directed activities, faculty could have the opportunity to identify and build areas of competence and share them with other faculty.

Cox (2001, 2004), who explored the concept of FLCs as well, argues that FLCs provide a supportive space for faculty to question, revisit, and adopt new instructional practices and ultimately strengthen their interest in teaching and learning, and promote students’ learning. A study by Nugent et al. (2008) examined a FLC focusing on the use of digital technologies for instructional uses. Nugent et al. argue that engagement with technology in a supportive and collegial environment over an extended period of time helped the participants to be equipped for the meaningful use of technology to enhance teaching. These research findings were corroborated by Beach & Cox (2009) who conducted the first national survey of the impact of FLC on faculty and student learning outcomes. Beach & Cox (2009) reported that many faculty members noted that newly learned pedagogical approaches learned through the FLC helped their students improve critical thinking skills and the capacity to synthesize and integrate ideas and information.

In summary, the research on the effects of PLCs on the teacher beliefs and practices show that a majority of participants reflected on their teaching, learned and implemented new practices, discovered possible solutions for their problems and eventually transformed their classroom teaching (e.g. Bachmann, 2012). While this research suggests the great value of PLCs and FLCs in broader contexts, few studies have conducted up-close qualitative studies on the processes through which participants organize a PLC, engage in discussion and change their perspectives on teaching and learning. The authors hope that this study can add insight to the existing body of research on PLCs and continue the on-going discussion on how collaborative groups contribute to a teacher’s professional development.

## **2.2 Cultural teaching in world language classrooms**

The teaching of culture is a crucial aspect of language classrooms, and most agree that language and culture instruction are inseparable (e.g. Byram, 1997; Gandana, 2015; Kramsch, 1993; National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006; MLA ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). Traditionally, in language classrooms, cultural instruction focused on the transmission of concrete information (food, festivals, folklores, and statistical facts) and/or geographical information (mountains, rivers, cities etc.; Galloway, 1985b, cited in Omaggio-Hadley, 2001; Shrum & Glisan, 2005). Such a focus on culture as static, superficial concepts has been challenged and culture has come to be understood as a more dynamic and fluid phenomenon. Street (1993), for instance, explains that culture is not just about defined concepts, but also a pro-

cess of negotiating and re-defining shared meanings. Under this notion of culture, language mediates interactions and communication that contribute to a continual re-definition of culture that takes place in a specific socio-cultural context (Chan, Bhatt, Nagami, & Walker 2015; Street, 1993).

Research on child development similarly maintains that language is a tool for communication and emphasizes the close relationship between language and socio-cultural environments. Halliday (1975, 1978) argues that language is a semiotic system and resource that allows adults to transmit knowledge, practices, and values shared in the society to children. Vygotsky (1978) also emphasizes the socio-cultural aspects of one's learning and explains that language is the most critical tool for children and enables them to obtain knowledge and skills from more capable peers to become a member of the speech community. Second language acquisition novice learners, as children learning a first language do, use language as a key vehicle to communicate with speakers of the target language, and to understand and re-define new cultural norms and surrounding environments (Chan et al, 2015; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

As globalization and global communication has expanded and improved, and the view of culture has become more fluid, the emphasis of cultural instruction has shifted from superficial, factual teaching to the cultivation of ability, including the knowledge, skills, and proper attitudes to communicate successfully in cross-cultural contexts. (Deadorff, 2004; Peng, 2006). Teachers teach not only cultural products (tangible and intangible things) and practices (behaviors, or what people do), but also the perspectives (attitudes, beliefs and values) underlying said products and practices, and also the analytical and reflective skills necessary to understand world views (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006; MLA ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007).

While language educators agree about the importance of meaningful cultural teaching, many of them struggle to provide adequate cultural instruction in language classrooms (Byrd, et. al., 2011; Garret-Rucks, 2013). Language curricula are often filled with required linguistic information and it can be difficult to allocate sufficient time for cultural teaching (Byrd, et. al., 2011; Moore, 2006; Schulz, LaLande, LaLande, Zimmer-Loew, & James, 2005). An emphasis on target language usage within the classroom also makes it difficult to teach culture in depth, especially at beginning levels (Garret-Rucks, 2013). The case study of three university teachers of intercultural communication and cultural studies in Indonesia by Gandana (2015) shows that when teachers view culture with a "singular national paradigm," students are presented with essentialist and over-simplistic notion of culture despite teachers' good intentions to enhance students' intercultural awareness, which demonstrates the significance of teachers' perceptions of culture in teaching language and culture. A lack of teacher knowledge, skills, and confidence can be another obstacle. Byrd et al's (2011) survey of over five hundred world language educators finds that teachers do not feel that they have received proper training. With limited time, resources and experience, many teachers struggle to acquire and maintain the knowledge and skills to conduct in-depth cultural teaching, and often avoid it despite a desire to include it (e.g., Byrd et al.; Schulz et al., 2005).

As is often noted, there is a great demand for more sample lessons, materials, guidance, and support for teachers to decrease the gap between theory and real classroom practice (e.g. Altstaedter & Jones, 2009). The PLC described in this article is an attempt to tackle those difficulties in cultural teaching that world language educators often face. The authors maintain that PLCs can be the avenue to provide necessary assistance for language instructors to improve their cultural instruction.

### **3 Research setting and methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research questions***

This research project is a qualitative, ethnographic case study of a PLC that explores cultural teaching at world language classrooms. Authors collected and analyzed data to examine the fol-

lowing two questions: How does the PLC influence the participants' construction of professional relationships, and beliefs and practices about the teaching of culture? What factors will promote or hinder the participants' transformation process? (Bachmann, 2012).

### **3.2 *Research setting and participants***

The research in this report was conducted during the summer break at a small Midwestern private university. At this university, the World Languages and Cultures Program offers seven languages (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish) and faculty, included an associate professor, three assistant professors, one full time instructor, and four adjunct instructors. The first author is a full time assistant professor with 10 years' experience at this university. She organized and participated in all of the PLC meetings as she collected data. After data collection, the second author, who teaches language and literacy education, and ethnographic research courses at a different university, assisted in the data analysis.

To form the PLC, the first author, invited all nine of her colleagues via email and face-to-face communication to participate in the study. Four female faculty members (Chinese, French, German, and Russian) agreed to participate in the group activities. The Chinese instructor was a Chinese native with over 20 years of teaching experience at various institutions. The German instructor was a recently retired high school teacher with 40 years' experience. The French instructor was a formerly tenured professor with 20 years of teaching experience. The Russian instructor, a native of Russia, was a newer instructor with four years of teaching experience. The Chinese instructor was on a full-time contract and the other three instructors taught as adjunct. All four participants joined the research site university when its world language program went through a major reconstruction in the previous Fall semester.

### **3.3 *Professional learning community meetings***

Group meetings were held in a college classroom of the program building. In the first introductory meeting, the group reviewed their summer schedule and agreed to have one to two hour weekly meetings for five weeks. They also negotiated the basic structure of the meetings and prospective foci for their study group and agreed upon cultural teaching. Then, the group discussed a research article they read prior to the meeting. The article detailed the activities and accomplishment of a world language teacher study group. The first author selected the article as a background resource for the group to discuss the purpose of PLC practices. Lastly, the group determined a task for the coming week and each member agreed to bring the results of their in-class efforts to the following meeting.

Subsequent meetings were conducted in a similar manner. The group opened their discussions with a five- to ten-minute chat about daily matters and work updates. Then, the group members shared experiences regarding the chosen assignment and discussed issues, questions, and concerns that arose. The members often reported or presented about their classroom practices and received feedback. At the end of each meeting, members decided on a new assignment for the next meeting.

### **3.4 *Data collection and analysis***

The first author joined all group meetings as a participant observer and kept field notes. She interviewed the participants in the following five weeks of meetings. The open-ended interviews (see Appendix 1) allowed the participants to share their learning and growth from their own point of view in accordance with their level of interest. The interviews were also designed to learn about participants' teaching philosophies, reflections on their practices, teaching and learning experiences, and PLC activities. All group meetings and instructor interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher and a professional transcriber.

After the first author collected the data, both authors separately read the data line by line, writing comments and questions. They repeated this process several times, and searched for regulari-

ties, patterns and research themes while making diagrams and maps to seek linkage within the body of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Then, the two authors shared their findings and created categories. For example, when participants shared how the PLC had improved their practices and encouraged them to continue their professional development, there was consensus to create a category of “professional development.” Research supports this category, as collaborative learning groups such as PLCs have contributed to professional development among faculty (Cox, 2001). Other major categories include teacher change, connection, reflection, cultural differences, and classroom teaching. These categories and supporting data were arranged into clusters or “higher order patterns” reflecting theories that describe activities and phenomena related to the research questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). They continued this analysis until a stable pattern and theme became clear (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). After analyzing data through this method, four themes in particular emerged, which will be discussed below.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 PLC helps the participants build supportive/collegial relationships and feel connected

The most prominent feeling PLC participants experienced was one of connectedness with other colleagues through the sharing of common goals and the exchange of difficulties, feedback, and ideas, in an encouraging and collegial atmosphere. A supportive working environment in a professional community group can create change in teacher culture, which has traditionally been described as ‘isolationist,’ (Leonard & Leonard, 2003; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). As expressed in the book, “A Place Called School” by Goodlad (1984), in school cultures, teachers tend to feel isolated and separated from each other even when they work in the same department. The participants of the PLC all agreed that, as colleagues, they might have seen each other at various meetings, but they barely knew each other. “Kind of isolated” or “Everyone is pleasant but very distant” are the words some participants used to describe the atmosphere of their relations with others. Despite their willingness and motivation, members, especially adjunct instructors, did not have many opportunities to get acquainted with their colleagues, and this isolation was a strong motivation for their participation in the PLC, as evidenced by comments such as “Getting to know each other better beyond just ‘hi’ ” and “I wanted to get better acquainted with people I work with and the workplace and the college level.”

A learning community can create a venue for people to build closer relationships. In the featured PLC, members felt able to speak freely as the meeting and all the information from the meeting were confidential and free from faculty performance evaluation. In this safe environment, they learned about one another’s professional and personal perspectives, as well as previous experiences that they had in common. These exchanges enabled members to feel closer and connected. The PLC participants share:

I was surprised by how much common experience we had and how it would resonate in everybody, how someone would come up with something and all of sudden everyone can relate to that, from all these different perspectives and having the cultural diversity.

You face the situation you are not the only one who is struggling with certain issues. We are all on the same boat, on the same boat.

We are teaching words languages and cultures and somehow we are isolated in our own language of silence. [This learning community] is really an opportunity to engage, I mean [an opportunity] to break those silence.

The successful leaning community can also foster a mentoring culture (Attwood, 2011) where novice members obtain new skills and information through participation, mutual support and reflection. One participant agreed that such support becomes as important to a feeling of belonging as improving her teaching: “I needed more guidance and I wanted to reach out to some people because I had so many questions ... I was little bit intimidated because everyone had been here for

so long and you want to hear about this vast experience of teaching.” When the group discussed the weblog, one instructor with limited technology experience initially indicated reluctance to the use of a blog. More technologically experienced members answered a number of questions and also provided step-by-step instructions on the creation and practice of blog assignments. Such collegial exchanges in a non-threatening environment encouraged the novice blog user to get familiar with and gain confidence in the use of new technology.

#### ***4.2 PLC changes how participants design classroom activities***

One of the benefits of a PLC is to help participants expand their repertoire of teaching ideas and activities. Throughout the PLC sessions, participants shared practical applications and new ideas about cultural teaching in their classrooms. The sessions, more than just a presentation of their teaching methods and class examples, were hands-on and pragmatic. Participants asked questions and explored the potential of focused teaching ideas in their own classrooms.

One question that often came up was how to provide more authentic cultural experiences for students. A Russian instructor shared her experiences with video clips of actual Russian weddings. She explained that the comparison of the similarity and differences between Russian and American weddings and cultural implications motivated students to learn more about Russian beliefs and attitudes. Her report brought up issues of authenticity, language proficiency, and importance of the target language in cultural studies. The group discussion on these issues made some members reflect upon their own cultural teaching activities further and prompted the generation of new ideas for cultural teaching incorporating the target language, such as the use of TV commercials, holiday cards, and political slogans.

Another frequently discussed teaching activity topic was cultural learning blogs. At one meeting, two instructors shared their experiences with the cultural learning weblogs they had used in their classes. Another instructor reported her frustration with students who did not express strong interest in foreign cultures and voiced the idea of networking several blogs. She explained that having students connect to multiple blogs would enable the students to see “world views” and to “broaden horizons.” Inspired by her suggestions, the PLC participants discussed the idea of a shared blog in which a number of individual instructors prepare a blog about their target culture focusing on the same issue, and have students review the blog postings. The instructors reflected on their own experiences with cultural differences and brainstormed appropriate topics for the shared blogs, such as attitudes towards the elderly, the Olympic games, National Women’s Day, and so forth. This conversation helped instructors deepen their understanding of intercultural competence and re-define the learning objectives of the blog assignments.

Participant 1: ... and no matter what we write about ...[in the blog], we’ll tell the students to read everything and try to see different perspectives ... We need to be multilingual and multicultural ... this [shared blog] is a way to demonstrate multiple perspectives and expand their minds multi-dimensionally [students will know] not only that Germans have a different view point on X topic, but that it’s radically different from Chinese, Japanese, Russian ...

Participant 2: Or sign languages. Yeah, deaf has deaf culture and we should be introduced to that.

Participant 1: And I think ... long time for their [students’] lives, it [knowing more than one cultural perspectives] could potentially be the most important part of their language study.

Participant 3: Yeah!

Participant 4: That’s intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is not just about understanding the target culture ... but being able to see and understand cultural differences in general ...

Intercultural competence is a current buzz word and the PLC participants explored its definition and application within their classrooms. Discussion on the cultural learning blogs enhanced

the participants' understanding of its meaning, and clarified the new and expanded focus of the blog activity.

### ***4.3 PLC helps participants engage in reflective dialogue***

The benefits of this PLC reached far beyond the exploration of new ways to teach cultural components in a foreign language class. As Daly's (2011) study illustrates, the FLC can help the participants be aware of expertise that they already possess, and the featured PLC served to improve participants' confidence as instructors, and provided motivation and opportunity to reflect upon their own practices. In turn, reflection reinforced some perspectives, or prompted the participants to revisit their own beliefs and practices concerning culture and the teaching of culture.

PLCs focus on improving student learning outcomes by encouraging instructors to reflect on their own teaching practices. When PLC members engage in reflective dialogues within a non-critical and non-judgmental environment, participants are more willing to share the weaknesses and struggles they deal with as educators.

At the beginning I might have been a little reluctant to share the challenges that I had been dealing with for fear that they should be viewed as my weakness or lack of experience ... however, I realized that a lot of us actually share the same struggles and concerns. We are there to help and not judge each other. We were there to try to come up with solutions to our universal problems, no pressure nor negativity among the group ...

We are not the know-it-all people and I didn't feel any pressure or any negative attitude from anyone. This is a very, very welcoming atmosphere for learning and for asking questions.

While an honest and supportive environment can benefit any instructor, it has a more significant impact on the novice instructor. The novice instructor of the PLC group had doubted her own ideas of teaching and practices, but after sharing her ideas with other world language instructors, she realized that many other instructors experience similar dilemmas. The sense of community and the 'professional validation' she received gave the novice participant more confidence as a language instructor.

That's why their feedback and approval means so much to me because I am very new and I need it. Because it feels like we are all individuals and we teach at different times [our schedules are very disparate], I needed some guidance from someone more experienced but at the same time not feel that I was being criticized, worrying "what if I do something wrong?"

As the instructors were looking for the ways to improve the engagement of the students of the current digital generation, they tried several strategies. This focus gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and perceptions regarding cultural teaching. For example, one participant questioned whether students would learn the target language better if they used English in the blog to discuss cultural themes. This question led to lengthy discussions about how learning culture should be more than learning language, how to help students build cultural knowledge, and what other tools could be used to help students develop intercultural knowledge. Each member shared their personal cultural experiences – areas of limited knowledge, bias and cultural shock which they have forgotten, and it created connections to their world view and the way it be communicated to the students.

I sometimes let students select their own topics, and they select something I would never choose. For example, one student wrote about Japanese tattoos, and another student wrote about anti-Japanese Korean groups in Japan – I would not have selected those topics at all. I realized that I kind of tried to show a "good" side of Japan, maybe I was prejudiced in that way. So it was good experience to have students write.

It's really intercultural competence, it's the purpose of our assignments to the students, to obtain a world view ... I gain more confidence to move on and believe in myself as a teacher, that this is my place and I am doing a good job.



York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Monti (2006) argue for the significance of reflective practice for three reasons: (1) it has the potential to improve teaching practices and educational outcomes; (2) it can enhance teachers' sense of professionalism and lead them to explore a variety of alternative viewpoints about teaching and learning; and (3) it provides a forum in which teachers' individual and collective voices can be heard and their sense of efficacy can be enhanced. The quotes above from the participating teachers illustrate the interconnected relationship of deepening collegiality, teacher efficacy, and professional development that arise from an effective PLC.

#### ***4.4 PLC provides professional development opportunity and has transformative impact on participants***

Regardless of experience level, all educators need professional development to strengthen their practice and ensure the quality of the teaching they provide for students. The PLC can provide a place where participants discuss teaching theory and practices with other educators to expand their knowledge and skills in the field. PLCs provide a safe and collegial environment for professional development that can lead to transformative learning experiences.

Bolam et al.'s study on a PLC (2005) indicated that participants saw clear connections between their participation in the PLC and changes in their practice and student learning. The interviews in this study also revealed how the PLC contributes to the participants' continuous learning. A veteran instructor with 30 years' experience described that, as a lifelong learner, she was curious about what she could do to improve her teaching, and what other instructors were doing. She felt that getting acquainted with her colleagues in her department and strengthening everyone's knowledge about culture enabled her to work collaboratively and efficiently, which supported her professional development.

What I had not anticipated is how enlightening it has been to hear all of you, who are from very different cultural groups, talk about aspects of culture that I had no idea about.

In response to the questions regarding change of beliefs, participants also reported that their views towards intercultural competencies had widened and transformed through the new ideas and strategies shared and discussed within the PLC.

I had not expected that, to be honest, cultural sensitivity, not just about the culture we are teaching, but an awareness that "oh and by the way that's different from what you are used to as an American," "oh, by the way, there's the Arabic culture and that's totally different ... well there's another planet, be aware of that."

This group reinforced and confirmed my thought ... it is beyond the awareness. Feel comfortable and become open minded ... we all have a different culture, and it's just a door and you need a key to open a lock on the door.

Feedback from the participants show that, when driven by participants' needs and desire for further learning, a collaborative community can contribute to a fundamental shift in the habits of mind that instructors bring to their daily work in the classroom (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

## **5 Conclusions**

This study investigated the practice and influence of a PLC on participants' relationships and cultural teaching. Collected data indicate that the PLC promoted closeness and connectedness among the members. Through the PLC, members shared experiences, difficulties, feedback, and guidance that provided them with new perspectives, new teaching ideas, and assurance and confidence in their teaching practices. This experience helped them acknowledge the effectiveness of learning communities to construct supportive professional relationships.

Participants reported that exchanging personal matters and updates at the beginning of each PLC meeting helped them to feel closer. Sharing private information enabled them to get to know each other better and positively impacted their relationships. The members also analyzed that hav-

ing differing areas of expertise was a noticeable advantage in their relationship-building. Hold (1997) explains that shared responsibility is a core factor for the creation of a successful PLC, but it can be a challenge to establish. Differences in experience and occupational status commonly create a hierarchy and PLC members can hesitate to take a leading role, or struggle to give up a position of authority. The five participants in the featured PLC taught different languages and each member was an “expert” of their own culture. The unique knowledge that each instructor contributed discouraged competitiveness that sometimes comes with groups of instructors with similar skill sets, which made it easier to create a shared sense of leadership.

Another promising result of this PLC was the shared teaching ideas and perspectives among the PLC members. Through their discussions of cultural teaching, the group decided to create a collaborative cross-cultural, shared blog in future classes. The lengthy discussion of blog use allowed the members to alter their teaching methods and understanding of cultural competence.

The collected data revealed several factors that assisted the teacher transformation in this PLC: willingness to collaborate, reflect and change. Reviewed literature maintains that a willingness to reflect with a mind toward continual improvement, and engagement in reflection upon one’s teaching are key factors for teacher change (e.g. Schon, 1983; Serafini, 2002). Three PLC members accepted the first author’s invitation to the PLC immediately and expressed strong interest in improving classroom teaching from the beginning. At the PLC meetings, participants engaged in reflective activities by examining their cultural teaching ideas and practices. As “professional learners” they questioned their own and their colleagues’ materials, and learned from each other (Short & Burk 1996). Uncertainty or discomfort about their teaching also played an important role in the participants’ transformation. Members of the PLC occasionally mentioned the difficulty and frustration they experienced. Teacher education research often reports that it is the teachers’ awareness of discomfort and dissatisfaction that prompts improvement (Serafini, 2002; Schon, 1983; Short & Burk, 1996). Recognition of problems and the need to improve promoted reflection helped the members change their classroom teaching practices. Collaboration among the members is one of the most significant factors that assisted the teachers’ transformation. PLC members worked together towards the shared goal – to improve their cultural teaching. They exchanged their cultural knowledge and provided feedback and guidance to each other. Collaborative culture as well as professional and emotional support from the facilitator and/or from colleagues are critical aspects in the teacher change process (Richardson, 1996; Ribisch, 1999). This PLC succeeded in building collegial and supportive relationships and functioning as a facilitator to help members to utilize each individual’s expertise.

## 6 Implications and limitations

While the scope of the research was limited with five university faculty members during the summer break, the PLC succeeded in assisting the participants to create a collaborative culture and to transform their teaching, despite some difficulties. The strong sense of belonging that the participants experienced strengthened the commitment to the people they work with and the program in which they work. Despite the positive results, there have been challenges and limitations which we need to further consider for future study.

1. The difficulty of face-to-face meetings: Instructors are busy with their daily routines and it has been difficult for them to take the time necessary to participate in substantive professional development activities. All participants were present at only one of six meetings. Interviews showed that one of major challenges to PLC participation was finding time for the group. While a traditional PLC model requires participants to have in-person meetings, an alternative PLC model, utilizing various communication technologies such as Facetime and Skype can allow participants to participate in learning communities through on-line discussion groups and blogs. These alternative formats can help participants to guide their own learning and collaboration in a more flexible and effective manner.

2. Duration of the study: A longer-term study could allow researchers to observe and analyze the issues of teacher change and the impact of a PLC on practices to a greater extent. While this study impacted the participants and assisted them in multiple ways, such changes do not happen overnight and require more frequent and on-going interaction among committed participants. A longer time period will provide more opportunities to share and demonstrate teaching strategies for the participants – beyond discussing the ideas only.
3. The role of the facilitator: While the PLC places emphasis on the independence of participant teachers in terms of the ownership and direction of their inquiry, too much freedom can result in their activity becoming a “chat room.” (Wildman, Hable, Preston, & Magliaro, 2000). The facilitator for this PLC worked to help the group stay on the topic of cultural teaching and yet she was not always successful. It is important to have clear goals and direction in place to ensure that the meeting goes as planned and to maximize benefits the PLC can provide for the participants. One participant shared that facilitator needs to have a degree of control and, at the same time, it should not take away the casual feeling they are experiencing: “We are all adults and everyone has their own duties and other events to go to, but the facilitator has to organize, send reminders of what to discuss, which takes a lot of work.”

Given both the challenges and advantages inherent in PLC groups, it should be emphasized that this type of learning community can tremendously benefit the university and students as a whole, and that more collegial support should be encouraged ultimately not only within departments but also across fields and among institutions. A study by Leonard & Leonard (2003) argues that administrative support for collaborative practices was “very little” or nonexistent, preventing “authentic teacher collaboration.” The support and guidance that members of this study received from their colleagues motivated them to incorporate new cultural teaching activities in their future classes. Participants’ positive feedback was a testament to the potential benefits of an effective PLC: “You feel like you are a part of it, feel like a member of this program so much more than before”; “I should think this would have very nice consequences for the department as a whole”; and “It’s commitment. It makes me a better teacher and that’s my priority.” It is hoped that such benefits will be more widely acknowledged and more assistance will be provided for successful PLCs in the future.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

#### Initial interview questions

Where and what do you teach? How long have you been teaching?

What do you like the best about your job?

What are challenges you have in your teaching?

What is the most important thing for you when you teach? (What do you spend the most time and effort to accomplish?)

How would you describe your relationship with colleagues at your current school?

How do you and your colleagues support each other professionally and personally?

Please describe the diversity in your classroom.

Do you differentiate instruction for students from different cultures? If so, how?

What do you know about intercultural competence? (What do you think about when you hear the term?) Do you do any class activities to enhance students' intercultural competence?

Have you participated in any other PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) in the past?

(If yes) How did you like/dislike it and why?

Why have you decided to participate this teacher study group?

What do you expect from the PLC experiences?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

**Last interview questions.**

What did you like the best about the PLC?

Did you experience any difficulties regarding the PLC experiences?

What would you change if you were to conduct a PLC in the future?

What does “intercultural competence” mean to you (now)? Has your view/understanding about intercultural competence changed? If so, how?

How the PLC reading and discussions influenced (or not influenced) your teaching?

What disturbed you the most regarding the PLC experiences?

What intrigued you the most regarding the PLC experiences?