Sustainable Transformation of Educators in a Graduate Learning Community Model

Dennis Lamb, Sharon Kabes, John Engstrom
Southwest Minnesota State University

Abstract

The graduates of the SMSU Master of Science in Education program are involved in a transformative program delivered through a learning community model. The examination of the program's impact and influence in sustaining change in the personal and professional development of its participants shows the success of this program. In addition, the qualitative and quantitative data collected reflects the sustainability of the program and supports what exemplary teachers reported, in terms of factors influencing their development: professional development, collegial support, and engagement. The essential elements of the program have also been validated through the reported levels of impact, empowerment, and transformational practices they have provided for the participants. These elements include, but are not limited to: research-based decision making, peer collaboration, professional growth and empowerment, creating teacher leaders, and transformational learning, and transformational sustainability. Over the course of the last eight years, all of these elements have played a key role in providing an opportunity to promote sustainable and life-changing knowledge and skills to its participants, leading to personal and professional growth and transformation as an educator.

1. Introduction

This paper will examine the impact of the learning community model of a Masters of Education program on seven elements: Research-based Decision Making, Peer Collaboration, Professional Growth and Empowerment, Creating Teacher Leaders, Transformational Learning, and Transformational Sustainability. Qualitative and quantitative data have been collected from program participants focusing on the evidence, which identifies the success of the seven elements related to teacher professional growth and leadership. Post graduate data in the form of reflective comments have also been collected.

Since 1996, a Masters Learning Community Program delivered at a Midwestern university has been purposefully designed to foster professional growth of educators through the use of inquiry, self analysis, critical reflection, collaborative problem solving, peer review, and feedback. Meaningful collaborative experiences engage students in critical examination and dialogue about educational theory and practice. As students build their understanding about teaching and learning, incorporate ideas and processes into their classrooms, and reflect on those experiences with colleagues, transformation of their practice occurs. There is also a corresponding development of teacher leadership. Cochran – Smith & Lyttle as reported in Lieberman and Friedrich [15] "…. a core part of the knowledge and expertise necessary to transforming practice and enhancing students' learning reside in the questions, theories, and strategies generated collectively by practitioners themselves in their joint interrogations of the knowledge, practices, and theories of others" [15].

Kabes and Engstrom [9] describe the learning community model as a non-traditional cohort model. In traditional models classes are taught as a single entity by different professors. As a result, students often experience lack of continuity. In this non-traditional model the entire program is facilitated by a team of two university professors. Themes and "objectives from different classes are interwoven and spiraled over a two year period" (and theory and practice are examined at increasing depth) [8]. Students are also expected to implement strategies learned into their teaching and to share results and receive feedback from permanent cohort teams called advisory and job-alike teams.

Survey feedback from one student described the non-traditional learning community experience. "What I expected far was surpassed as I engaged in the learning community environment. Every concept/theory the instructor was trying to introduce to the class was modeled through the learning community classroom. The in-depth conversations, the real-world applications, and the power of the discussions based on what we were actually doing in our classrooms was invaluable. A learning

community builds partnerships through the job-alike-groups, the special interest groups, and the peer mentoring that occurs every session. The concept of a Learning Community transcends the way a teacher sees their own classroom and offers a framework for new ways to engage learning with students as well as colleagues. I grew personally and professionally through this experience" [19].

Collaboration and peer review are essential elements of the program. Collaborative cultures build the confidence teachers need to lead. In collaborative cultures, teachers support instructional improvement by others. They share ideas and build on those ideas, thus creating a new synergy. They evaluate new ideas that focus on student learning [14]. Students participate with the same cohort and faculty facilitators over the course of the two year program.

Facilitators work to create a safe and positive learning environment using a constructivist approach. The facilitators incorporate a transformational leadership model, and thus, "provide the mechanism by which solutions are transferred into subsequent practice by building the capacity of the individuals and the group" [2]. Students are actively engaged in key constructivist components, which include independent learning, inquiry, self reflection, metacognition, collaborative problem solving, community building and peer review. As one student stated, "Every part of my teaching is better as a result of this program. My lessons incorporate a solid understanding of the brain & the body, constructivism & differentiation, outcomes & objectives, data collection & usage, and reflection. As a teacher leader, I am more confident and more involved" [20].

2. Data Collection Process

To support the theoretical model of transformation, a quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted to further examine the impact the learning communities were having on the participants. Data were collected over a period of seven years (2004-2010). In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative surveys were administered to recent graduates of the program, including graduates from the last seven years, in which they were asked to provide, in narrative form, their opinions as they related to their personal and professional growth as a result of participation in the program. This data was used to examine the sustainability of changes in student learning and teaching practices as delivered in the master's degree program.

For the purpose of this paper, seven specific elements, which serve as the premise for programmatic decision-making, as well as quantitative evidence of the program's success, are indentified. This article will examine the impact of the learning community model on Research-based Decision Making, Peer Collaboration, Professional Growth and Empowerment, Creating Teacher Leaders, Transformational Learning, and Transformational Sustainability.

3. Research-Based Decision Making

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, a continuous stream of reform efforts have challenged schools and teachers to improve. Professional development in education has been described as an organized effort to change teachers with the expected result of improving their teaching practice and student learning [1]. Yet, in spite of this prolonged effort, teaching and student performance have remained largely unchanged [16].

According to one perspective, "A framework for professional practice offers the profession a means of communicating about excellence…It is through serious, professional conversations about the components comprising the framework [for professional practice] that the components are validated for any particular setting" [3]. It is within such a framework that the program fosters a values-based decision making process that advances and facilitates an enriching progression of self-discovery and growth that examines individual attitudes, beliefs, values, and dispositions of effective teaching practices.

Most teachers are convinced that teaching skill is developed through classroom experience. Yet, there are limitations on the effectiveness of learning new and improved teaching skills from one's own experiences [18]. Organizational factors likely play a role in the resistance to significant operational change. One group contends the lack of meaningful staff development and training ultimately produces teachers who revert to familiar past practices, perpetuating the status quo in teaching [16].

It was reported that survey data collected from students over a seven-year cycle showed consistent scores of 92.5 per cent or above when rating twelve elements central to the learning community model and demonstrated the effectiveness and impact of the learning community model. The quantitative results include elements of best practices: learning environment, effective teaching strategies, research-based decision making, scaffolding, peer

collaboration, learning community philosophy and professional growth, empowerment, reflective practitioner, inquiry, and transformational leader (change agent) [10].

The educators who enroll in the master's Learning Community program evolve into transformational educators, showcasing the foundational elements of effective teaching embedded into the learning community model. It is through this self-reflection process that beliefs, values, and attitudes centered on their teaching begin to become validated for them. As a professional, the integration of 'best practices', which encompasses lessons and activities designed to promote brain-based learning, differentiation, constructivism, and learning styles, sustains their ability to construct a support system designed to facilitate and cultivate partnerships in the learning arena. From one student's perspective, it was shared that "The biggest change for me was learning that a significant part of being a practicing professional in the field of education means staying abreast of both validated and leading edge practices. It is just not enough to be great at what has always worked. A teacher should always be learning and growing to give the best to his or her students. The most significant change in my thinking was to base pedagogy on data. Data-driven decision making is the smartest way to make professional modifications" [19].

4. Peer Collaboration

Collaboration with colleagues, within and outside grade specific levels, for example, helps promote and showcases their integration of effective teaching strategies. As stated by one recent graduate, "Teaching is completed in isolation, but I found that after my experience within this learning community that I have gained irreplaceable colleagues and friends who share the same passion and vision for their students. I no longer feel alone in my teaching because I know that I can contact any of the members from my learning community and gain insights, resources, and support. I think that is key to any professional's growth. As many of my classmates were also colleagues, we have worked together to implement new programs, encourage our administration to listen to our ideas, and we have been asked for our input by administrators often. That connectedness and similar vision has totally allowed me to overcome negative comments from colleagues who may not understand new ideas or strategies I am implementing for my students, but I know that I can find support by those who understand the same

research and theories we learned in this program" [19].

This intentional structuring mechanism provides time for them to validate and, if needed, modify or completely change their teaching styles. This assumes a metamorphic process, rather than demanding a drastic transformation, which could be more detrimental than assistive. It is not the intent to insist on wholesale change, but rather, and most importantly, this collaborative forum allows for a very direct and guided feedback system, which in turn will create an atmosphere that is not threatening or intimidating to those involved.

Current research on professional development supports the importance of collaborative and collegial learning environments where colleagues reflect on learning strategies which have been implemented in the classroom [5]. Other researchers report that teachers who are involved in collaborative review of implemented practices demonstrate deeper understanding, which insures transferability of new learning to professional practice [6].

Experienced teachers are often revitalized as a result of their experiences. "This program has stretched me professionally and personally to heights I never thought I could attain. Furthermore, this experience has once again ignited the spark for the love of teaching I thought I had lost. The impact of what we've done in our community has reached and will continue to reach out to our classrooms, to colleagues, our families, the lives of our students, and beyond" [19].

Regardless of the grade level or subject areas taught, educators have an opportunity to connect to 'best practices' and support each others' development in their own teaching. Whether a beginning or veteran teacher, the engagement levels focus on supporting current teaching practices, taking them from where they are and stretching them further, which brings a new level of practicality and realism to their classrooms and learning situations.

5. Professional Growth and Empowerment

Jacobson [8] explored the research on professional learning communities. He described, how an inquiry oriented collaborative approach by teams of teachers, leads to a deeper understanding of teaching strategies. This is a concept that is fostered throughout the masters program and leads to improvement of curriculum, instruction and assessment [9].

The collaborative curriculum that has been designed is more than just a one-time exposure to content and information. The intentional structure of the program provides ongoing opportunities to practice, reflect, and improve instruction through a spiraling approach of delivery. Professional development in education should be viewed as a process of transformation through critical reflection, with the goal of achieving a greater capacity to think and act differently [11].

The transformational interactions that result from their participation in the learning community help inspire and empower teachers and invigorate learning and teaching. It is through this collaboration and building of community that educators are engaged and begin to explore an approach to empowerment and transformational practices that support best teaching practices, encourages them to try new approaches, and gives them continuous opportunities to reflect, process, and examine their own growth and development as an educator. Transformational learning acknowledges that one's beliefs, values, and assumptions provide the perspective through which meaning of experience is formed. When this system of understanding is found to be inadequate for new and changing experiences, transformational learning can provide a new perspective. The newly adapted perspective is more refined and reflective, and leads to increasing capacity for learning and growth [15].

Three elements of teaching practices were surveyed throughout the two year program. The summative results, which included best practices, effective teaching strategies, and reflective practitioner, demonstrates the impact of the program had on the students' growth and development [10] (See Table 1).

Table 1. Elements of collaboration fostered in LCs

Elements	Total Percent
Opportunities for others to explain ideas	99.0
Opportunities to dialogue with others	99.0
Focuses on collaborative problem solving	99.0
Emphasizes professional scholarship	98.0

6. Creating Teacher Leaders

Through the framework established within the delivery model, educators who enroll in the program experience several foundational elements that facilitate their personal and professional growth. This increased capacity for learning, growth, and development enhances students' abilities to reconstruct and transform themselves as educational leaders. The goal of the program is to create conditions that lead to significant change in the teachers' values, beliefs, and actions as a professional educator. This is in contrast to the in-service training and workshops attended by educators, which seldom result in more than a shallow or temporary change in knowledge. One student perspective supports this in reflecting the impact of the program on her leadership when she stated, "I have worked on English 9-12 writing/literature curriculums and implemented many ideas based from the research and classwork that I learned at SMSU. I currently serve on the professional development committee, NCA accreditation committee, the Student Responsibility Committee, the MEA Teacher Evaluation Committee, and have been asked to be the trainer for the state writing program for the middle school, high school, and alternative school. I have been asked by my administration to train for the Curriculum Connector and to present at pre-service sessions for district professional development days. My administration has sought me out for input on ideas and is currently working with me and colleague on a book talk for the ICU program that our building is considering for implementation. My leadership roles have grown and my validity as a teacher has emerged because I am using research to support the enhancements I am choosing to make within my classroom that consists of at-risk students and middle to average learners. Our school has college prep courses and regular English, so my mission is to teach the standards to reluctant learners with engaging strategies and assignments" [20].

Student surveys reported the impact of the elements of leadership fostered in the learning communities [10] (See Table 2).

Table 2. Elements of leadership fostered

Elements	Total Percent
Dialogue with other students	99.0
Collaborative problem-solving	98.0
Facilitators make LC emotionally safe	98.0

7. Transformational Learning

Transformational learning involves the process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising one's assumptions to better fit with one's new perceptions [8]; [13]. This ability to reflect on our own, as well as others' assumptions, is inherent in the

process of transformational learning [16]; [10]. It was stated that "central to this transformative process of learning is critical reflection and testing new meanings through rational discourse" [16].

Kennedy, Deule, Nelson, and Slavit [12] reported that in professional learning communities where adults continually engage in dialogue and inquiry to support student learning, "reculturing" takes place. Kabes & Engstrom described the transformative process, "Initially, exposure to an inquiry-based environment leads to a period of 'deconstruction' in which teachers experience dissonance in current beliefs and practice in light of newly acquired knowledge and experiences. Through consistent exposure to opportunities (individual and collective) critical reflection on practice becomes a habit of the mind [8]. When the learner's system of understanding is found to be inadequate for new and changing experiences, transformational learning can provide a new perspective by experiencing the initial deconstruction. "I am also reflecting on my beliefs as a teacher as well as [myself] as a student. I am thinking a lot about the methods I teach in my classroom and my beliefs. I am beginning to question what I am doing and why. Through my reflections, I am beginning to develop a sense of who I am and what I really believe" [9].

What is needed is a new approach to teacher development that focuses on the needs of teachers, and is delivered in a meaningful way. Gabriel, Day, and Allingont [7] indicated that exemplary teachers reported that three factors influenced their development. The factors included: specific kinds of professional development, collegial support, and a sense of "engaged" autonomy. Engaged autonomy is where they are allowed to do teach in the way that know is best and to make decisions based on observations of students, but to also share with colleagues. These efforts are supported by their administration. Furthermore, exemplary teachers described how peer support networks allowed them to reflect out loud, to share ideas about teaching and learning, and to pool experiences and expertise that increases understanding and helps them improve their practice. Exemplary teachers they were supported by professional development programs which helped them to be better "child watchers" and because they collaborated with colleagues. The professional development provided a lens for "seeing children and understanding their work" [7]. The Exemplary teachers become leaders in their organizations as they are asked to try new things and to share their expertise with a larger group of colleagues. What seems to be more important is the

effectiveness in which professional development time is organized, structured, and directed. Professional development in education should be viewed as a process of transformation through critical reflection, with the goal of achieving a greater capacity to think and act differently [11].

The transformation which takes place in the teachers also promotes growth and understanding in the teacher as a leader. "This program has challenged, stretched, and inspired me to become a leader. I can hardly put in words the direct impact this program has had on me professionally. I am stepping out and taking leadership in not only my classroom, but among my staff and district. This has given me affirmation about important decisions I make in my school. I have grown more than I would have ever imagined" [19].

8. Transformation Sustainability

Qualitative data in the form of summative reflections from students are regularly collected. Recently, all of the summative reflections of 55 students in two learning communities reported growth in thinking about learning, in reflection, and in teaching. All 55 respondents described themselves as different and better teachers and learners since the start of their program [8]. Students consistently reported that they had become more reflective about their teaching. All of them described how they had learned about themselves as learners, as thinkers, and as collaborators who had grown professionally. The responses mirror those collected from students since 1998. Incremental changes have occurred and transformation of their teaching and learning was developing. This gradual transformation was observed in student formative reflections. The feedback reflected the transformation of students in their thinking and in their practice and also supported the effectiveness and impact of the learning community program. Examples of reflective responses have been selected to demonstrate how that transformation is reported by students.

Further examination of the impact of the learning community program demonstrates that graduates have benefitted and grown, both personally and professionally. Thus, an element of transformational learning is fostered within the learning community program, and is recognized by our constituents as it relates to their own growth and impact on the field of education. The personal and professional development seen in students reflects a sustained, evolving process. As the researchers examined student responses, multiple responses support this

change. For example, one student replied, "The realization that as an individual, I have the ability to impact change on a larger scale" [20]. This was a common theme shared by many others.

Another student reflected on this by stating, "In our learning community, we had open-ended opportunities to share and learn from others. We were able to learn and grow from each other and attempt new challenges together. We learned to have a strong voice in how education is run and understand why it is run and designed the way it is" [20].

Getting educators to think more holistically about education is not as easy as it seems, as the tendency is to focus more on their present teaching environment, classes, and strategies, and losing site of the 'bigger picture.' Here's how one student summed it up, "I am a more conscientious teacher. I think more in light of the bigger picture especially in trying to meet the needs of each of my students. I am also more aware of educational policies and the American educational system" [20].

Multiple responses supported the importance of developing relationships through the learning community process. As summarized by the following statement, "The relationships had the greatest impact on me personally and professionally. The people, their ideas and the dialogues that resulted changed me and my teaching", [20] this supports the importance of establishing an environment where open and honest dialogue can exist, without the fear of repercussions or fallout for sharing one's opinions relating to change.

In terms of impacting the role of becoming a change agent, this student sums it up by saying, "I found that some of the ways I was teaching now has research to back up the benefits of engaging learners in a new way. Constructivism was something I had already been utilizing in my classroom, but was not labeling it as such. I found that the research I did throughout my two years offered me stronger justifications to continue group work/collaboration, choices, writing instruction in new ways, and ways to engage students by continuing to offer them choices---all of these concepts were ones I personally believed in, but found validity and support for within my masters program. The other significant change is the leadership role that I have taken or been asked to take for my district. Our district encourages involvement in our professional development committees and encourages input on new ideas or topics we can address K-12. I have taken an active role in this committee and [have] been asked to present and do training because of my background and research from this masters" [20].

Another key element that advocates professional connections to professional growth is related to the implementation and structure provided through the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, which guide the student's portfolio. Artifacts are generated to showcase how educators enrolled in our program are making the connection to what effective teachers do well and how they see themselves growing, both personally and professionally. Another common theme generated by multiple students is represented in the following statement, "The professional portfolio that was created, using the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, had the greatest impact on my own personal learning and growth. The goals I created were aligned with the Standards...and pushed me much further than I thought I could go. To be challenged is great, to be CHANGED is greater! That process really developed my professional practice as a teacher" [20].

These descriptors shared through student reflections are indicative of the type of effect the program is having on the growth and transformation of learning community members, which has also proven to be sustainable over time.

9. Change Agent

One of the key elements directly linked to the Learning Community model is supporting the development and sustainability of our teachers to become change agents in their respective classrooms, schools, and communities. One of the post-graduate survey questions asks specifically how each individual has been a change agent in their schools since graduating from the SMSU program. The following responses reflect answers shared by participating graduates.

Several students described how their roles have evolved within their school settings. One student describes her new role as this: "I have shared lesson plans with colleagues continuously since my time at SMSU. I have been asked to speak at and organize staff development meetings. I have served on a variety of committees and panels. I have sought out individuals from the community for various uses in my classes. Most importantly, I have stood up for what I wholeheartedly believe are vital aspects for the success of students and staff at my school" [19]. Another student describes the leadership role and how it has initiated change – "Through my program, I have grown as a teacher personally and have taken on many more leadership roles. During my program, I started a friendship program for high school students with disabilities to interact socially with

their non-disabled peers. The first year, 18 students participated. Although I am no longer with the program, it is still going strong and has grown to over 50 participants" [20].

Others have shown their contributions to their schools by being actively involved with implementing new PLCs, increasing parental involvement, serving on district-wide task forces, report card standardization, and other committees and planning groups.

Several individuals shared how they are having a direct impact on others within their school and/or district. One response shared focused on being a change agent by stating, "People look to myself and another colleague on Brain Gym. I have just given another in-service, teaching simple movements to paraprofessionals. I also attend a leadership cohort because of my newly built confidence. I feel that I am more confident in my abilities to explain to parents and colleagues about why I do certain things in my teachings. I also have a better understanding how a school operates" [20].

Another teacher describes the new role as this, "Out of the 5 core teachers in my junior high, tow more have gone on to earn masters degrees. I have an especially strong professional relationship with one of them and we are regularly trying to drive the discussion of academics in the direction of the 21st century. I have served on communications committees, negotiations for the association, and others" [20].

Parallel to the previous response, another teacher identifies the role played in school as this, "I have joined several groups, in order to help create and maintain a positive atmosphere in our district: Superintendent's Committee, Building Advisory Team, etc. I have also been trying to incorporate technology into my lesson plans and am helping other teachers do so as well. I have volunteered to train teachers at an upcoming in-service on how to use a program called Photo Story so they can implement it into their curriculum" [20].

10. Conclusion

The success of the SMSU Master of Science in Education Learning Communities has been validated. The most telling set of data collected over the last seven years is that the sustainability of the transformations in teaching and leadership has been maintained. The carefully designed transformational collaborative learning environment of the masters learning communities fostered a process of growth and change. Graduates of the program have described how, as a result of the program, they have become leaders in their schools or their profession and how the transformation in their teaching has been sustained.

The professional learning and growth of educators can be maximized through programs of study that include peer collaboration, empowerment, and transformational learning. A constructivist learning environment, intentionally designed to foster inquiry, will further contribute to a meaningful transformation that is sustainable.

11. References

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