

Encouraging Collaboration and Reforming Professional Development through an Online
Community

By

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Bachelor of Arts, University College of the Fraser Valley, 2001

Bachelor of Education, Simon Fraser University, 2003

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

As technology use continues to increase exponentially, which will affect the future workplace of students, there is a need for teachers to become well-versed in digital education. However, professional development has remained stagnant for many years, and while the content may be beneficial at times, educators are often limited to time and place specific learning. There is insufficient time to learn from others in the same field of teaching. Teachers often feel isolated in their own classrooms because of the demands of the job, and the limited time to correspond with colleagues. Communities of practice, particularly online communities of practice, would allow for educators to connect and collaborate at any time, and anyplace. Through the “Langley Virtual Staffroom” homepage, educators can access a series of grade and subject specific hubs where they can share resources, make connections, and learn from others who have similar grade levels or subject compositions.

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my loving and supportive husband, Michael, and to our two boys, Carter and Keaton. This has been a huge undertaking for me, and I appreciate your ability to not only cope with my non-existence at times, but that you have encouraged me along the way. To my parents, thank you for being such an incredible source of inspiration, and the reason behind my determination and strength. To my #TIEgrad cohort... you have been a phenomenal source of support from sharing ideas, expanding my thoughts, or just even sharing some laughs or concerns. This has been an incredible ride with an amazing group of individuals. To Valerie Irvine and Tim Pelton... thank you for putting up with my academia melt-downs and constant questions. You have allowed us to explore, experience, collaborate and learn. Your 'anytime, anyplace' support has been so invaluable. To Lorrie Burnham and Jake Main... you two are my family. You have always been a shoulder to lean on. We have succeeded together: the Three Amigos, Hewey, Dewey and Louie, AKA Rick Astley's back up dancers. You will always be friends for life and I am so thankful to not only have you in my life as colleagues, but as the most supportive friends.

Chapter One: Introduction of the Project

Teaching, at times, can be very isolating (Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008). With so many diverse needs in the class, educators often spend most of their time in their own classrooms and have limited time to collaborate with colleagues (Seo, 2014). As a result, few opportunities for shared reflection/discussion of teaching practice occurs (El-Hani & Greca, 2013), and teaching practices may stagnate.

With the rapid evolution of digital technologies, and the students quick uptake of these new tools, educators, more than ever, need to take advantage of these tools in order to keep lessons authentic and up to date. Educators need to gain insight and find support for these changes in order to captivate, motivate and communicate with digitally savvy students. The British Columbia (B.C.) Ministry of Education suggests that “in 21st Century Learning, students use educational technologies to apply knowledge to new situations, analyze information, collaborate, solve problems, and make decisions. Utilizing emerging technologies to provide expanded learning opportunities is critical to the success of future generations. Improved options and choice for students will help improve student completion and achievement” (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2015). While many educators are aware that they need to expand out of their comfort zones, by experimenting and implementing new teaching practices that benefit their students, this can become overwhelming because of the quick pace of change, and the intense task of revamping curriculum.

As professionals, educators continually try to improve their skills inside and outside of the work environment. However, research suggests that the traditional, top-down professional development opportunities offered by school districts are often ineffective in improving or altering classroom practices. Sometimes the offerings do not attend to the teachers’ specific

needs in the evolving classroom (Seo, 2014), or they are unable to transfer the lessons back to their classroom practice (Holmes, 2013). This leap may not be possible because if the professional development is too generic, there is no tailored instruction for specific grades, levels, or needs (Twining, Raffaghelli, Albion, & Knezek, 2013). Because most professional development is face-to-face, access is restricted to prescribed dates and times, which may not work for all schedules. Finally, one-time workshops do not allow for continual learning, resource sharing, feedback and reflection.

Our Story

Lorrie Burnham and Tracey Thorne, (<http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/about-us.html>), the co-creators of the resource, have been educators in the School District #35 (Langley) for over 10 years. In 2013, we started on an adventure to obtain our Master's Degree. One of the most difficult decisions while completing this degree is deciding on a topic of interest for our projects, as there are so many areas in education to explore. As we discussed, collaborated and brainstormed for hours, days and weeks, we came to the conclusion that our project needed to be something that would help support teachers in our district to better their educational practice.

Within the district, many valuable resources have been created, incredible lessons have been taught, and knowledgeable teachers have mastered excellent strategies for working with their students. Unfortunately, most of these valuable resources remain hidden away, because there is currently no public "catch all" location for educators to share and curate their resources. Often when teachers transfer between schools or are assigned new teaching areas, they start from scratch - reviewing the curriculum, planning their delivery, and devising lessons and assessments. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there was a way for teachers to come together in a

grassroots community to share their knowledge, their successes, their plans, their strategies and their ideas? Wouldn't it be great for teachers to have a community where they could connect with other teachers who currently, or have previously, worked with the same level of student and are able to offer emotional and professional support and encouragement? Even teachers with experience who know the importance of maintaining strong professional relationships, may not have had sufficient time to connect with a broad collection of their colleagues. If teachers could make connections with their colleagues, the opportunities for sharing, joint planning, and informal professional development could expand. Having a site where access to shared resources with a larger, subject/grade specific support network could build on trust and support; teacher interconnection would be enhanced. They could reach out, ask for and share advice, suggestions, and tried-and-true resources from within a larger community of opinions and voices.

With our Master's cohort being an online community, we have realized the power of online professional relationships, and the trust that can be built virtually. Extending our professional learning network has changed the way we personally teach within our own classrooms. We have conversations that challenge the way we think, and compel us to try something new. Fostering and maintaining professional online relationships and learning from others, has been an exciting experience and has led us to reflect on our own teaching practices.

Theoretical Context and Literature

Two of the current theories surrounding online resource sharing are communities of practice and communities of inquiry. The community of inquiry, which originated from John Dewey's (1929) progressive perspective on education and learning, focuses on three major concepts: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence, and reflection (Makri, K., Papanikolaou, K., Tsakiri, A., & Karkanis, S., 2014). A community of practice, while similar in

nature, focuses on joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire (Seo, 2014). Coined by Wenger and Lave (1991), community of practice focuses on the social participation and members' engagement of shared experiences. Because our focus is on building strong ties, gaining knowledge, and sharing a repertoire of resources, we chose community of practice as the theoretical umbrella for this project.

In conjunction with community of practice, the theory of social capital is included as part of our theoretical framework for our resource sharing site (<http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/>). Social capital addresses how members within an organization gain access to knowledge, in which social ties are key for members to connect with one another. In turn, these connections help to promote collaboration and further professional development (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010). The social aspect of teaching, sharing ideas, and connecting with fellow colleagues not only increases discussion, it builds on professional relationships, and reduces isolation in the workplace. Community of practice and social capital theory go hand in hand, as social bonds and trust are integral when building a professional community. Building on relationships and the knowledge of others, and sharing with one another is the essence of a strong community.

Why a Community of Practice?

Educators are becoming more connected and more comfortable with technology. Twitter, Pinterest, Google Communities, etc., are becoming part of everyday rituals, new ideas are being explored, and online professional relationships are being formed. There seems to be a desire and an eagerness to learn, yet at times, the direction of what or where to learn can seem unclear. There is an overwhelming collection of online resources, and educators can experience cognitive overload. A collaborative curation system seems necessary. Setting up specific online

communities can help advance professional connections and, in turn, they can provide the platform for shared, collective, and ongoing knowledge.

Project Overview

Inspired by a Google community page out of Indiana (<http://www.doe.in.gov/elearning/online-communities-practice>), our goal is to create a virtual community space for teachers, “The Virtual Online Staff Room,” within our school district. The subject-specific Google+ website and hyperlinked communities will hopefully allow teachers to efficiently share materials and ideas amongst each other. It will be a hub where teachers can also connect with others with similar or different grade compositions, subject interests, or challenges. Our goal is to provide educators with access to a community... a broad bank of resources and connections to support professional development, collegiality, efficiency, and teamwork.

The central site will be clear, concise, and organized. With the understanding that some teachers may not know how to upload documents or videos, there will be a help menu containing tutorials and step-by-step guides. Facilitation will also be key to help foster relationships, encourage teacher participation, and respond to any of their specific requests or questions (Beach, 2012). Members must feel comfortable within a community in order to share (McConnell, Parker, Eberhardt, Koehler, & Lundeberg, 2013), so establishing a sense of communal trust is key for our website’s successful launch.

A proposal will be made to the Langley School Board, and to a group of digital literacy representatives from each school within the district in order to gain support, feedback and suggestions. Langley School District employees will be sent invitations to join their subject and grade specific communities. This project will become a continuing passion for Lorrie Burnham and myself. As the community continues to develop, we will gradually share responsibility with

other co-educators in the district, as they will take more of the lead as facilitators for specific communities.

Moving Forward

With the constant shift of educational needs in a digital age of learning, there is a need to update and revamp some teaching practices in order to better prepare our students for the workplace and society. There is a push to adapt traditional teaching philosophies and curriculum. The content of traditional professional development workshops can be very helpful, and the instruction is well-intended. The downfalls continue to be that it is time and date specific, and there is little support for implementation in the actual classroom. Teachers have begun to reach out for alternate learning experiences, and online communities are becoming a common avenue to access newer resources, social connections, and continued support. Under the umbrella of community of practice and social capital theory, our website and subject-specific Google communities are designed for educators to connect with others within the district. As the community continues to grow, we hope that teachers can build on specialized, grade-specific content and resources, and share experiences, struggles and successes. In turn, with collaborative efforts, the goal is also to reduce the feelings of isolation, and to build a more cohesive district.

There are a few concerns when creating and implementing a community of practice among educators, and perhaps the greatest of which is the level of engagement in the communities. Will some teachers be wary of submitting resources for others to see, and critique? Will there be ‘lurkers’ who take ideas, but never share their own? Will the ‘givers’ be frustrated by this and pull away? How do we promote positive interactions, and encourage constructive feedback and reflection? How do we promote shared ownership over the site and eliminate personal agendas? While we do not yet know the answers, the site and our facilitation efforts will

be designed to proactively support and encourage participation and sharing. It will be a constant work-in-progress, and we are prepared for the timeframe for initial participation to extend if necessary. We do believe that over time, with teacher support, this site can be extremely beneficial for all educators within the district. Our hope is that Langley educators view this site as a collaborative tool and although the authors may have had the opportunity to develop this CoP sharing framework, it is the teachers who will make this site a success and a strong resource for professional development.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

In the 21st century – as becoming a digital citizen is necessary in the workplace and, therefore in education – innovative professional development opportunities are crucial for educators. The curriculum and needs of the students are becoming more diverse. As the technological demands are becoming more intense, and as our culture continues to evolve based around that technology, schools must adapt. However, change can be difficult. While some professional development offerings provide useful information for classroom teachers, integration of that information often fails, due to the lack of support, and minimal follow-up into classroom application (Little, 1993; Seo, 2014). Although ‘one-time’ workshops have been the norm for many years, they do not always fit into teachers’ schedules.

Isolation in the workplace continues to be commonplace, as teachers are focused on their specific needs for their particular students in their own classrooms. For many years, it has also been ‘widely accepted’ that teachers work in isolation from their colleagues (Liu, 2012). Finding time to connect has been challenging as educators already spend so much time within their own walls trying to engage students and address classroom concerns (Rodesiler, Rami, Anderson, Minnich, Kelley, & Andersen, 2014). Yet, connecting, sharing experiences and collaborating with colleagues is key to improving professional practice; with collaboration teachers can have the necessary conversations. They can accept guidance to help them change or revamp stale practices.

Teachers are beginning to focus on continual learning through online, professional networks and communities in order to gain the support and knowledge needed to teach effectively in the 21st century. The actual technology can be a distraction at first, but once educators become more comfortable, the focus can shift to the actual learning within their peer

groups (Liu, 2012). Within these communities, the importance of social ties, and the building of trust comes to the forefront, as educators need to feel comfortable in investing their time into a productive atmosphere. Leaders emerge as the means of the facilitation and guidance of the community, as they will need to help guide and redirect concerns as they emerge.

Research Terms and Delimitations

As the search for applicable and resourceful articles commenced, the most useful databases for our topic included ERIC (Ebscohost), PsycINFO, Google Scholar, Science Direct, and JSTOR. Contact with UVic librarian Pia Russell helped to limit and expand necessary keywords, Some of these keywords and delimitations were ("community of practice" OR "communities of practice") NOT ("community of inquiry" NOT "communities of inquiry") AND ("teacher development" OR "teacher professional development" OR "online professional development") AND (online OR "educational technology" OR "web-based" OR "digital") AND ("virtual online community") AND ("educators") AND ("inservice teacher education") AND ("professional learning community") AND ("teacher" OR "educator" online collaboration") AND ("computer collaborative learning") Peer-review and scholarly journals were chosen from the past nine years, except for journals which were at the helm of the origins of the theoretical framework.

Principles of Communities of Practice and Social Capital Theory

As far back as 1929, John Dewey argued that social moulding and community were integral to education. He believed in experience through living. He stated that education "is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (Dewey, 1929, p. 19). Learning should take place in the 'real world' with actual organic experiences, relationships and communication. In education, teachers can embrace this way of learning, as they become more inclined to

communicate with colleagues in communities (Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008).

Community of practice. Situated learning theory (SLT) addresses the social shift we are seeing in professional development in education. From this theory, came the Community of Practice (CoP) model, coined by Wenger and Lave (1991, 1998). CoP is described as “an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for the community. Thus, they are united in both action and in the meaning that that action has, both for themselves and the larger collective” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Recently, this desire to look out for the “larger collective” has also expanded into the professional world. CoP’s “include groups of people who share a work setting, a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting with each other over time” (Coutts & McArdle, 2010, p. 207).

With regards to education, the CoP theory supports the emerging need of teachers to share in a collective atmosphere in order to build their professional learning network. This type of network can enable teachers to expand on resources, and gain ideas from peers on an ongoing basis. There is emphasis on “the importance of a shared repertoire of practices that is emergent from mutual engagement in reflective dialogues” (Daphnee & Shaari, 2012, p. 457). This suggests that reflecting and sharing learning will continue to build on the initial community of practice created within a professional atmosphere. Teachers are starting to shift their mentalities in order to create an ‘open door’ network to continually improve teaching practices.

CoP theory suggests that communities of practice “are the basic building blocks of a social learning system because they are social ‘containers’ of the competences that make up such a system” (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). These competences are based on three foundational elements. The first element is joint enterprise where participants maintain the community with an

understanding of its direction and holding each other accountable for its development. The second is based on ‘mutual engagement’ where participants build on trust and create relationships through engagement. The third is that the community has a “shared repertoire of communal resources,” and that participants can share resources and be responsible with accessed resources (Seo, 2014; Wenger, 2000). Humans have a need to belong, and in an educational sense, this includes a need to “make a contribution to a community, and to understand that experience and knowledge are part of community property” (Lieberman & Mace, 2010, p. 80). By joining and participating in a CoP, educators can gain expertise, share their own ideas, promote collaboration and give support, and learn from each other based on material that will specifically help their needs in their situation (Tsai, 2012; Wang, 2012). While the term ‘community’ can be an overused expression, communities of practice are very specific in that over a period of time, educators are sharing their learnings, discussing problems and solutions, and building on their knowledge base (Seo, 2014). In brief, communities of practice are groups who “learn together by focusing on problems that are directly related to their work” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 143).

Social capital theory. The concept of social capital has existed since the development of small communities and the reliance of reciprocation and trust amongst community members. Social capital theory was popularized by Bourdieu (1983), Coleman (1986), and Putnam (1993). The theory itself has had ties to economic capital and human capital, but “to possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage” (Portes, 1998). Pierre Bourdieu defined social capital theory as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or

recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). Bourdieu focused on not just the participation within a group, but the deliberate social connections created with the developed community.

There are two integral elements to this theory: the social relationship between those connecting to share resources, and the actual quality and volume of those resources (Portes, 1998). Tie strength is

a combination of reciprocal relationships, collective identification, trustworthiness, and expectations inherent in a closed social network. Such a sense of belonging and reciprocity increases the awareness of others’ expertise as well as the opportunity for peer appraisal of work quality, which serve to enhance work performance (Tseng & Kuo, 2014, p. 39).

However, the manifestation and development of social capital within a community is very much dependent on those who are part of the actual network (Hofman, 2010). Wenger (1998) echoes this statement in saying that the success of a CoP is determined by its own members. Each individual must be willing to contribute to the group, and in turn, their actions will be supported. Strong connections, support, acceptance and open sharing can help members in a community grow, trust, and reciprocate what they have received. However, unwillingness to share, participate, or positively contribute to a community can cause negativity within a community, and eventually cause non-productivity. Facilitators need to be aware of ‘shadow issues’, which can be developed when mutual trust has not been created. Starting with supportive social ties, however, can limit the ‘wayward’ behaviours and allow members to continue to be privy to shared resources and support (Portes, 1998).

Traditional Professional Development

There are many challenges associated with traditional professional development for

teachers. Sometimes the workshops may be perceived as ineffective - perhaps because they are too short, or there is no opportunity to collaborate, or the focus does not match the teacher's needs (Holmes, 2013; So, 2013; Seo, 2014). At other times teachers may be disappointed in the limited opportunity for collegial interaction, be distracted from their participation because they are stressed for time or simply be unable to find funding to cover the costs (Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Seo, 2014). By identifying and articulating these struggles, we hope to effectively justify our claim that some changes are needed in the way we think about and offer professional development support for teachers.

According to Darling-Hammond (1994), the professional development of teachers "is a process of enhancing teachers' status through increased awareness and an expanding knowledge base" (Helleve, 2010, p. 2). Yet, professional development has been stagnant for so many years. Current professional development workshops can provide new insights and information and, at times, can motivate teachers to bring these ideas to their classroom. However, the 'one-shot' workshops, usually lead by an external source, often do not apply to all classroom needs or scenarios, and there is seldom any coaching or follow-up (Beach, 2012; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Seo, 2014; So & Kim, 2013). Therefore, there is minimal impact on educators as the 'one-size fits all' does not account for different teaching styles, needs, or contexts (Beach, 2012; Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010; Holmes 2013; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Liu, 2012; Seo, 2014). Preparing quality teachers is considered to be one of the most important factors affecting the performance of our students (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Yet, at times, educators' voices are missing from the direction and choices made when it comes to professional development. (Twining et al., 2013) If teachers are unable to focus on specific learning for their specific needs, professional workshops can be seen as a 'waste of time' (Beach, 2012; Holmes 2013;

Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Liu, 2012; Seo, 2014), and the desired quality development is not attained.

Segregated and separate classrooms can also make it challenging for teachers to gain the information needed to improve classroom practice. There is minimal, scheduled time built into the schedule for collaboration (Seo, 2014) and teachers find it difficult to find time to meet when there are so many other specific needs in the classroom that need attention. Furthermore, when teachers are required to connect with others, collaborate, or even participate in what might be beneficial professional development, they often feel that it is obligatory, and that it is keeping them from their ‘real work,’ which is imminent and pressing (Seo & Han, 2013). Without collaboration or connection with fellow colleagues, this only reinforces “the familiar attitude of every teacher for himself or herself within the sanctuary of his or her classroom” (Allen, 2013, p. 206).

Large expenses and time for travel are also detractors from attaining desired professional development opportunities. Districts do not often have the money to afford travel or specified workshops with more intimate learning environments. When budgets are constrained, the efficiency of professional development delivery often focuses on large group instruction, which again does not fit the needs for specific teachers' situations (McConnel, 2012; 2013). Travel also takes time. With the balance between trying to fit in work and home schedules, preparing extra notes for a substitute and driving to the workshop location, attending face-to-face workshops can add pressure to already busy schedules. Thus the costs (both money and time) can also discourage teachers from wanting to engage and participate in professional development (McConnel, 2012; 2013).

Continuance of Teacher Isolation

Isolation within individual classrooms continues to be a concern when it comes to the improvement of teacher practice. The closed-door school environment has been the norm for decades. Yet, time, again, always seems to be a major factor, and by opening those doors and connecting with colleagues, teachers may fear that the time spent will detract from focusing on specific needs. However, research continues to prove the effectiveness of peer, professional collaboration, and the positive results in the classroom and with teachers as a whole (Lieberman & Mace, 2010).

With the current state of professional development, educators find themselves attending workshops on their own, and working in a closed-door, individual effort, classroom environment. It has been the expectation that teachers work in isolation from other educators (Liu, 2012). As a result, there is often limited access to advice, problem solving, and sharing strategies, and many teachers report feeling feel discouraged, defeated, and spent (Dodor, Sira, & Hausafus, 2010). For many years, researchers have discussed that teacher isolation can be harmful for the development of educators and to the continual learning of educational progress (Lieberman & Mace, 2010), yet it continues to be common practice.

Time, during school hours, is a precious commodity, and teachers do not often have hours built into their schedules to allow for collaboration with colleagues. There simply is not enough time to have meaningful conversations (Hadar & Brody, 2010; Hur & Brush, 2009). Educators' schedules are filled with trying to "engage students, use time with students effectively, and address the issues students bring to the classroom from their lives beyond the school walls" (Rodesiler et al., 2014, p. 52). Unfortunately, with a closed classroom, teachers often do not ask for the necessary help needed in order to address change in their teaching

practice (Trust, 2012).

From as early as the 1980's, there has been a push for collaboration from policy makers, but also from educators themselves (Helleve, 2010). Researchers have questioned the efficiency of professional isolation, and they started to look at collegiality and collaboration (Little, 1982; 1986). Educators who were able to build a professional relationship over time showed a stronger commitment to one another and to the further development of their learning (Little, 1982; 1986). By learning together, and building connections, teachers can “become less isolated and more inclined to discuss new ideas... solve problems that arise... and form a support system to foster new ideas” (Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008, p. 519).

Professional Learning Communities and the Integration of Technology

One way to address the problem of teacher isolation has been the development of professional learning communities. By providing a definition and explaining the eight major characteristics, this should provide an overview of a professional learning community. While professional communities solve the problem of connecting with colleagues in a smaller, more intimate setting, face-to-face communities still struggle with issues of time, and travel expenses. Online learning communities are becoming more commonplace, as access to technology continues to improve. Once educators can move beyond the actual technological demands, they can invest in the substance of what is being shared and learned.

A professional learning community (PLC) is “ a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented growth promoting way; operating as a collective enterprise” (Stoll et al. 2006, p. 223). Coutts and McArdle (2010) suggest that there are eight major characteristics to an effective PLC: shared vision and values, group responsibility for the learning of students, collaboration, collective and

individual contributions, a sense of openness, reflection, an inclusive atmosphere, and trust, support and mutual respect. For shared vision and values in the field of education, veteran teachers, and teachers wanting to share and learn new strategies are able to share experiences and strategies for classroom changes over many years with one another (So, 2013). Shared interests and classroom needs are often a driving force for a professional community. This is the driving force that encourages teachers to continually return to and share with the community (Holmes, 2013). As individuals begin to join the community and contribute their ideas, collaboration and collective creation starts to emerge. Collaboration, including sourcing-out specific problems or ideas, and then implementing those ideas, evaluating the progress, and then reflecting on the positives and negatives of teaching and learning is key to building a community (Seo, 2014; So, 2013; Trust, 2012). With collaborative advice or suggestions, teachers learn how to become more effective, and educators begin to critique and improve their own delivery of instruction, and all of these activities benefit the students (So, 2013).

A PLC seems to be one way to help limit feelings of isolation, and improve teaching practice. However, as previously discussed, time and money are often constant factors impeding professional development, and face-to-face professional learning communities still require time and money for travel in order to meet with one another.

The emergence and easy access to technology has been one way to create a solution to this problem. An online PLC can be customized for a particular group, accessed from anyplace at anytime - even from the comfort of their own homes (El-Hani & Greca, 2013). Technology allows for easy access to infinite sources of knowledge and information (Seo, 2012). It provides convenience. Collaboration is still the focus, but the convenience of the Internet/World Wide Web allows for that collaboration to spread quickly among educators (Seo & Han, 2013).

The top-down professional workshop approach is slowly shifting to a more bottom-up, grass-roots, teacher-created system, where teachers are able to address the real needs that they are facing in their real-life classroom experiences (Holmes, 2013). It is important to keep in mind though that technology, unless it is the focus of the discussion, is simply a vehicle that enables learning to happen. These “technological innovations are not the destination but the means by which the leap is made” (Lieberman & Mace, 2010, p. 78). In other words, the focus of online professional development should not be solely on the technology used, but the learning that can take place with the technology as the platform (Twining et al., 2013). While it may take some time for teachers to become comfortable accessing information through technology, once those barriers have been overcome, teachers can truly invest and collaborate with one another in either a synchronous or asynchronous, time-friendly environment (Cifuentes, Maxwell, & Bulu, 2011; Liu, 2012; Ryman, Burrell, Hardham, Richardson, & Ross, 2009). As a result, teachers are able to participate in actual meaningful conversations and the professional development learning becomes authentic (Ryman et al., 2009).

Social and Collaborative Aspects of Online Communities

What makes a successful online learning community? It is human nature to want to be part of a community. However, mutual trust and support is key in order for members to feel comfortable when investing in a professional community. Mutual trust promotes interdependence: reliance on one another. By building on these connections, it will hopefully reduce those members, 'lurkers', who may stay on the perimeter of engagement because of their fear of rejection or minimal acceptance. Mutual trust is allowing revisions and reflections to take place without feeling any inadequacy or affront. There are four major reasons for community investment and these reasons contribute to a sense of collective ownership; a collective resource

with a wealth of shared knowledge.

Educators want to avoid isolation, but as Ryman et al. (2009) discuss, there must be mutual trust in order to avoid the fear of rejection. A learning community builds on mutual understanding, hopes, and vision. In particular, teacher-learning communities build on respect, and creating a dependence of trust and reliability. The focus needs to be on “we-ness” (Roseler, 2013); however, this ‘we-ness’ takes time to develop. There must be an emphasis at the beginning of the online community creation to allow for interpersonal professional relationships to build. Teachers will not take risks if they do not trust, and therefore they will not engage in the contribution of the community. The commitment to the group will stay strong, as long as the participants feel valued (Borg, 2012; McConnell et al., 2013). Emotional support, whether it is given or received, creates online friendships, which in turn builds on the trust between members (Seo & Han, 2013), and furthermore adds to the desired welcoming and relaxed environment crucial to engagement (Vavasseur, 2008).

Interdependence, the reliance on one another, in an online community helps to create a constructive, yet supportive environment. Yet, this interdependence “can only be established once members have a sense of one another through social presence, and an established learning purpose created through authentic learning experiences” (Ryman et al., 2009, p. 33). The magnitude of social presence will predict how well participants connect with one another. Network ties provide a ‘sense of responsibility’ amongst members. The greater those ties are, the more positively the beliefs are about the community, and the more the members want to contribute (So, 2013).

As trust continues to build, and relationships continue to take shape over time, those who may have stayed in the shadows as ‘lurkers,’ “participants who read and observe, getting often

involved in legitimate peripheral participation, but do not contribute much in an explicit manner” (El-Hani & Greca, 2013, p. 1345), may start to feel comfortable enough to truly invest and share their own thoughts and resources. In this case, “social capital represents the affective attributes of relationships that endure beyond an individual interaction and accumulate to support greater levels of trust, respect, intimacy and ultimately group effectiveness” (Ryman et al., 2009, p. 41).

Without trust, the community will struggle as educators will not invest their time or energy where or when they do not feel connected. With time and trust, constructive criticism will hopefully begin to take place. This can lead “to the further development of social capital because the group becomes more confident [and] it can use all of its resources to meet challenges of constructive controversy within the interdependent context” (Ryman et al., 2009, p. 41).

Constructive criticism can lead to reflection, and the continual betterment of lessons. As teachers begin to see positive results in and out of their classrooms with positive relationships, connections, and support, they will continue to invest in the community.

With developing trust, educators become keen to support other members by contributing and sharing resources with peers of common interests. There are four major reasons and motivators for educators to share openly in their online communities (Hew & Hara, 2007):

1. Collectivism - educators contribute for the overall success of the group
2. Reciprocity - educators want to share and contribute because they have received help and support and they want to reciprocate
3. Personal gain - sharing with others helps them, in turn, gain new knowledge for themselves
4. Altruism - educators can empathize with one another as they have similar demands,

struggles and stories to share

By connecting with colleagues and contributing to a community, educators continue to build on their professional learning networks (PLN's) (Beach, 2012) and improve upon their skills, knowledge and practice in the classroom, as a result of implementing new ideas (Hofman, 2010; Seo & Han, 2013). Members will continue to share when they can be assured of the mutual benefits in terms of support and resources (Tseng & Kuo, 2014). Over time, the primary goal becomes more than merely sharing with the community. What began as simply sharing encouragement, knowledge and resources will turn into more of a 'collective creation,' where teachers can exchange ideas, and create, and collaborate on lessons (So, 2013). Having a fresh perspective, or co-creating a lesson can enhance the individual's original concept.

Continuous Learning and Reflection

Historically, professional development has been time and date specific. Educators need to become 'lifelong learners.' With the availability and growing comfort with technology, professional development is becoming part of everyday life. There are three major themes when considering continuous learning. Those are: building initial confidence in order to invest and contribute to a community, sharing collectively with others, and finally reflecting and making constructive changes to original posts, ideas, or resources, and then sharing those changes with others.

As the implementation of technology is quickly changing, and the curriculum is evolving, the standards of both teaching and learning are continually being redefined (Liu, 2012; Wang & Lu, 2012). Online professional CoPs allow for teachers to find answers and share knowledge for everyday situations (Tseng & Kuo, 2014). As educators share knowledge within each community, the hope is that participant confidence will continue to build, and with that

confidence, the community will thrive. With sustained support over time, continuous education through PLCs should allow educators to seek for and find specific resources. They should be able to connect to their social support systems, who could help them refine and improve their everyday lessons (Holmes, 2013; McConnel et al., 2013; 2012).

With the ongoing support of a community, educators may gain confidence to try out new, cutting edge ideas in their classrooms and then ask for feedback for further improvement (Cifuentes et al., 2011). Teachers will hopefully continue to invest in their communities and in continuous professional development if they see positive results from their actions. As teachers continue to build on their learning communities, they start to create a ‘learning habit’ of wanting to increase their knowledge from other members. This results in the investment of learning improvement and the desire to gain more insight on a regular, continual basis (So & Kim, 2013).

The investment of time and energy into professional development should continue if educators believe it will improve their own (or others) effectiveness, if they can get help with their specific classroom needs, and if the students show significant improvements in their learning (Holmes, 2013). Furthermore, with continuous learning, the opportunity presents itself for veteran teachers to help guide newcomers, for the collective brainstorming and solutions to what was once believed an insurmountable task, and “to consider teaching not as a magical calling but as a complex profession that can be refined over time” (Lieberman & Mace, 2010, p. 85). It is a combination of an art, a craft, and a profession.

Part of being a professional is allowing yourself to reflect upon successes and failures. Reflecting on practice is not a new concept. In 1910, Dewey talked about the importance of reflection: “Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of

knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought” (Dewey, 1910, p. 6). Sense making and personal reflection allows for educators to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Lindberg expands on this by suggesting that “a reflective attitude is necessary for ongoing professional self-development. Professional development cannot be forced. The teacher has to be open to engage in reflective dialogues, to take personal responsibility and not to leave it to others” (Helleve, 2010, p. 9). Self-reflection, however, is only the first step to continuous teacher improvement. Once teachers are comfortable with inward analysis, they need to extend beyond the walls of their own classroom and reach out for advice from others, particularly from others within their communities. Ng and Tan (2009) delve into the impact of communities of practice and reflection for teachers. Coutts and McArdle (2010) argue that COPs “...should move from sense-making that is too technical and narrow to enable and empower teachers to become creators of new knowledge and teacher practices, to critical reflective learning” (p. 202). CoPs can be the perfect setting for providing outside perspectives and suggestions. They allow for educators to look back on their progress, and develop a heightened sense of professional confidence by reflecting on their growth from their original teaching designs, to those done collaboratively with tweaks and changes (Coutts & McArdle, 2010).

Equally, however, reflection needs to be shared with others. By challenging others thinking, in a respectful manner, continuous learning and improvements will only grow further, which can help students succeed (Beach, 2012). Educators need to stay on the cutting edge of their practice, reflecting and experimenting with new ideas, and then sharing those insights with others. This will not only promote personal growth, but improvements to the teaching practices of others in the community (Frick, Polizzi, & Frick, 2009). Building social ties and connections

in a community helps to build trust, as previously discussed, “but without the opportunity for learning to occur through critique, there is no point in membership” (Prestridge, 2010, p. 257). This means that critical feedback and support are absolutely essential in order to grow professionally, socially, and personally (Lindberg & Olofsson, 2010). Reflection, however, must have a purpose. Priority, relevance and insight need to be present when it comes to professional development – reflection must have purposeful action to remain of importance, and to encourage continuous investment in these methods (Coutts & McArdle, 2010).

Role of the Facilitator

If online learning communities can decrease isolation, expand on learning networks, create social ties, and aid in continuous education and reflection, then why are there so many that fail, or seem to start strong and fizzle out quickly? Communities require a lot of work and maintenance. They are shared resources. Much of the responsibility will fall on the community members (Tseng & Kuo, 2014), and the expectations of members needs to be clear. Participating teachers need to feel that they are equal as far as shared leadership in the community. If they do not feel valued, they may opt out of investing their time and energy into helping others. That said however, any community needs to have one or more champions at the beginning to be strong leaders/coordinators/facilitators to help organize the community and promote discussions (So & Kim, 2013).

A strong facilitator is essential to the start-up of the community. Teachers need to feel welcomed, particularly new teachers, and social ties need to be encouraged and given time to develop (McCluskey, Sim, & Johnson, 2011). It is “essential for managers of CoPs to develop mechanisms to help members to strengthen their ties with peers without fear of criticism from their supervisors or other professionals” (Tseng & Kuo, 2014, p. 44). Mak and Pun (2015) also

refer to the need to address frustrations and to help encourage team spirit.

The responsibility of defining community expectations and norms initially falls on the facilitator. These expectations may include guiding the development of resource repositories and effective collaboration skills and roles (Beach, 2012); yet at the same time not taking full control over the direction of the group, but not leaving too much of the responsibility to the members (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010). It is a fine balance between shared and directive leadership. Facilitators need to also be aware of ‘lurkers’, or as Lave and Wenger refer to them as ‘silent participators’ or ‘legitimate peripheral participators’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). ‘Lurkers,’ while still participating in the community, will do so from the outside until they feel comfortable enough to engage and contribute (El Hani & Greca, 2013; Kreijns et al., 2013; Seo & Han, 2013). With the continual encouragement of social connections and trust, as mentioned before, these ‘lurkers’ will hopefully eventually become all-in, invested participants. ‘Shadow’ issues must also be at the forefront of the facilitator’s mind. Shadow issues are “psychological issues which inform negative behaviours that can inhibit interaction and individual expression” (Ryman et al., 2009, p. 40). If confidence and trust waivers, and participants are no longer willing to contribute to a community due to ‘shadow’ issues, the community may slowly demise. In order to overcome a PLC collapse, the facilitators may have to make a concerted effort to solicit resources, encourage discussion and model positive interaction.

Communities, over time, need to survive without the continuous direction from those who launched it... leadership can change - similarly facilitators can emerge over time - This change can cause some discomfort with the members, as it does take awhile to ‘change old habits’ and teachers have been so used to the ‘top-down’ professional development approaches, that learning to take on joint responsibility for a community can be uncomfortable at first (El-

Hani & Greca, 2013).

Ryman et al. (2009) talks about transformative learning where individuals are critically aware of their own assumptions and are able to assess their relevance to the community. Deep transformative learning can occur within a community when the right environmental factors are present to establish a strong sense of community (Ryman et al., 2009, p. 32).

In other words, once members are fully aware of their roles in the community, they will be able to offer to take over responsibilities and the community will then become more of a joint effort. Ryman et al. also talk about interdependency. There is still a focus on individuals, but it is what they gain as a group by coming together; the goals become centered around a ‘common purpose.’ Goal and task interdependence are both crucial when designing an online learning community. Goal interdependence is the “extent to which group members believe they are assigned group goals or given group feedback” and task interdependence is the “extent to which an individual team member needs information, materials and support from other team members to be able to carry out his or her job.” (Somech, 2008, p. 365). Community members need to understand their roles within the group as individuals, but also as collective members within that group.

Design Considerations and Issues with Online Community Integration

As with many platforms, there are always stumbling blocks that need to be overcome in order to create a successful online environment. The actual technology can be a challenge for some of the members, as the initial learning curve (or threshold) is quite high. The facilitator must be an organized and strong coordinator, with clear expectations, yet must still encourage collective ownership of the PLC, and discourage small cliques that might exclude others. The end goal is for educators to not only want to contribute to the community, but to want to engage

in constructive communication with one another to improve educational practice generally. In the end, the community needs to be useful. It needs to provide a reason for members to continue as participants.

First and foremost, in an online community, the actual technology can be a burden and is often a 'hoop to jump through' in order to invest in the community. For some teachers, they feel like the tech is such an overwhelming obstacle that they cannot bother investing the time and energy, often which will be on their own, after-school hours (Holmes, 2013; Khalid, Joyes, Ellison, & Daud, 2014). From personal experience, without the aid of a tech coach to troubleshoot or provide suggestions, many teachers will want to give up; there is just so much to learn, so many new resources, and integrating tech can at times feel like learning a whole new language. As previously mentioned, a strong coordinator/facilitator is integral to the start-up of the community. Clear goals must be determined. It is very important for members within a community to be aware of expectations so that there are no misunderstood ideas or conceptions (Liu, 2012). Without strong guidance, which eventually can transform into shared leadership, the community could struggle with direction and a sense of purpose. Extending from a strong coordinator, trust must be encouraged and established. The coordinator must help to organize the community and foster the development and creation of professional relationships in an inviting atmosphere (Khalid et al., 2014; McCluskey et al., 2011). While teachers may not always be in agreement with one another, members still need to be respectful and strive toward the success of the community by sharing a common understanding (Lindberg & Olofsson, 2010). Without mutual trust, participants will not feel comfortable sharing or engaging in the online community (Khalid et al., 2014). Without trust, acceptance and reliance on one another will be extremely challenging.

There is always the concern of the creation of ‘cliques’ within the community and not complete acceptance of all members. At times, there may be a reluctance to share with new members, as participants have made connections with others, and are unwilling to let new members into their ‘circle’ (Khalid et al., 2014). These ‘cliques’ are not a part of ‘professional practice’ and if formed, can make educators feel like they are not wanted or valued. Teachers tend to connect with like-minded individuals, or with those with similar grade content, and therefore there may be some members who feel like they are outsiders, like they do not fit into the community, and that they cannot find a common thread with anyone else (Cifuentes et al., 2011; McCluskey et al., 2011). It may be necessary, at times, to remind members to reach out and invite new participants - the broader the community within the district, the greater the potential.

Pride is a positive quality of many teachers. Educators often take pride in their classrooms, with their students, and in their communities. Many teachers take such pride in their ability to teach and in their students, that they will often become defensive when given suggestions for improvement. They do not want to seem inadequate at their job. There is often the fear of ‘nothing to add’ or ‘limited experience’ which leads to limited confidence (Khalid et al., 2014). Participants in an online learning community need to be open to these suggestions, and have the desire to improve (So & Kim, 2013). Often, teachers are reluctant to provide advice or possible tweaks to a lesson because they do not want to criticise the work of other teachers, and they do not want to be scrutinized themselves (Coutts & McArdle, 2010). Therefore, “reflection on practice often fails to get started, or lacks any depth or substance, or quickly falters and stalls altogether” (Coutts & McArdle, 2010, p. 205). It may be a solution to ask participants to moderate their criticisms - to have a policy of identifying more aspects that are praiseworthy

than issues that need adjustments. Sometimes, members will share materials online, but it is rarely viewed, revised, and reposted. To overcome this, a community norm might be encouraged whereby members are challenged to view one 'new' idea each week or month to support the continual growth of all participants in actual resource exchange. Educators need to realize that the benefits of sharing, reflection, and revising far outweigh the fear of doing so. Teachers, and as a result students, will both benefit from the 'put your pride aside' investment in an online community.

Continued investment in the community, however, depends on the usefulness of the community. If teachers feel like they are not gaining any useful information, or developing strong connections with other members, they will most likely choose to opt out. Traditional professional development has been critiqued because the material is often not targeted for specific needs to specific teachers in their specific classroom situations. Therefore, if the online community is not providing this, members will not invest their time and energy into the community's maintenance and continuation (Khalid et al., 2014; So & Kim, 2013; Twining et al., 2013). Sustainability can also be an issue within a community. Members come and go, and when certain members are integral to the flow and success of the group (or at least some neighbourhood in the PLC), their departure can create a large void.

Conclusion

In conclusion, top-down professional development approaches may actually de-professionalize teachers, and a model such as a CoP might address their concerns, and be an effective addition to professional development (Roseler & Dentzau, 2013). With technology at our fingertips, online PLCs have emerged as a way to provide the development of social ties, support communities and resource repositories. These could reduce isolation, and eliminate the

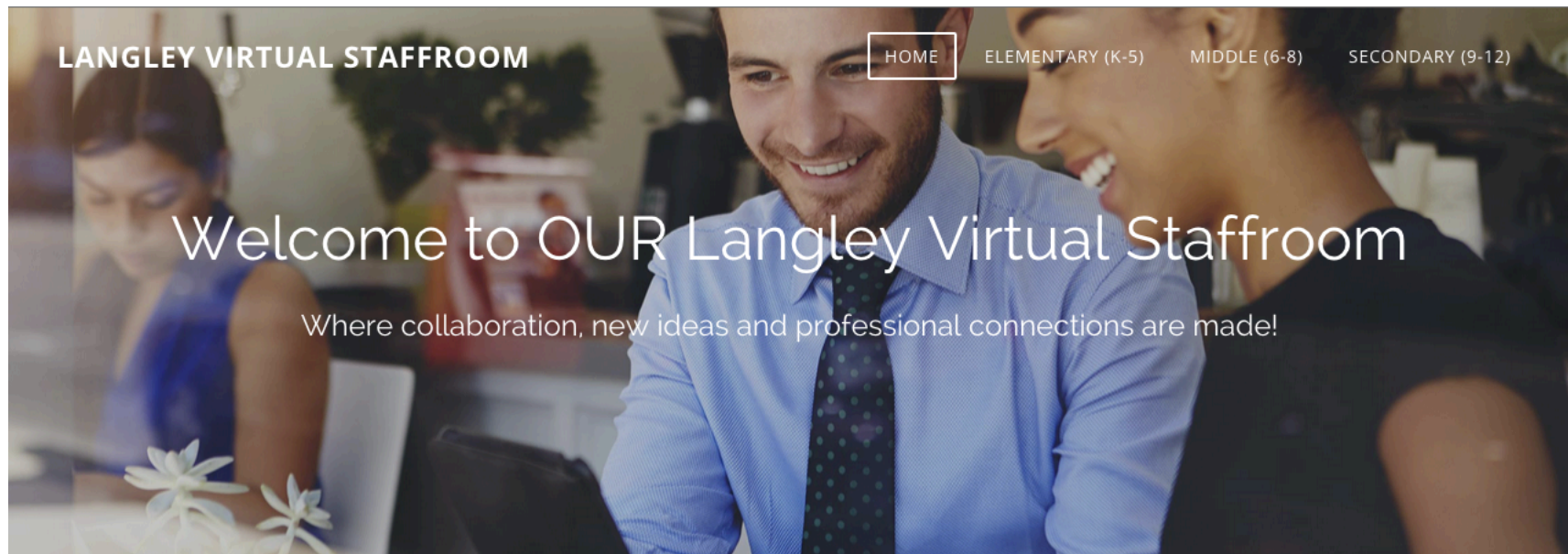
time and space barriers as they can be accessed at anytime, anywhere (Khalid et al., 2014; Seo & Han, 2013). From “a teacher professional development point of view, the findings imply that creating an environment where teachers freely share issues and emotions and receive appropriate advice and support is critical” (Hur & Brush, 2009, p. 298). Based on social capital theory within the community of practice, social ties and social connections are integral to the success of the community. Trust is a major factor to initial and ongoing participation. As these communities thrive, professional development becomes a continual process, rather than a ‘one-shot workshop’ and educators are able to address issues or share insights as they arise. With the primarily asynchronous nature (and occasional scheduled synchronicity) there is no fear of ‘disturbing others’ during busy schedules.

However, for this type of CoP to work, educators need to adjust their perceptions with respect to critique. Critique is not purely negative, rather, professional critique and critical reflection is absolutely essential to the improvement of thought and of lessons. Both students and teachers will benefit from professional critique, reflection, and revision.

Online professional communities do not just create themselves, however, and they cannot simply be left to run on their own once they have been created. Success depends upon the good design and strong and encouraging leadership. While that leadership can change overtime, the boundaries and expectations need to be clear. There needs to be an emphasis on trust, acceptance, and encouragement for thoughtful and deep reflection. Are there personal risks that one may take when joining an online community, such as personal pride, acceptance and concern of criticism? Yes, but by not taking these risks, professional development lacks growth. In a world changing as quickly as ours is, it becomes crucial to educate our students for what they may face in the future, which means educators need to invest in meaningful professional

development more than ever before.

Chapter Three: Reforming Professional Development with a Google+ Community for Langley District Educators



Created by: Lorrie Burnham and Tracey Thorne

Figure 1. Webpage header. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/>


Home Page

On our home page we wanted to create a personal and welcoming feel to our site. We included a YouTube video where we introduce ourselves and explain the story behind why we created the Langley Virtual Staffroom and what we hope other teachers in the district might take from it (see Figures 2, 3, & 4). We also included a text version of our video that will re-emphasize our story and rationale for building it. At the end, we included our email addresses in case there was a need to make contact with us.

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM

HOME ELEMENTARY (K-5) MIDDLE (6-8) SECONDARY (9-12)

Hello there....



The story behind The Langley Virtual Staffroom

Lorrie Burnham and Tracey Thorne have been educators in the School District #35 (Langley) for over 10 years. In 2013, we started on an adventure to obtain our Masters Degree. One of the most difficult decisions when completing this degree is deciding on a topic of interest, as there are so many areas in education to explore. As we talked, collaborated and brainstormed for hours, days and weeks, we came to the conclusion that our project needed to be something that would benefit all teachers in our district, a district that has become home for us.

Figure 2. Home page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/>

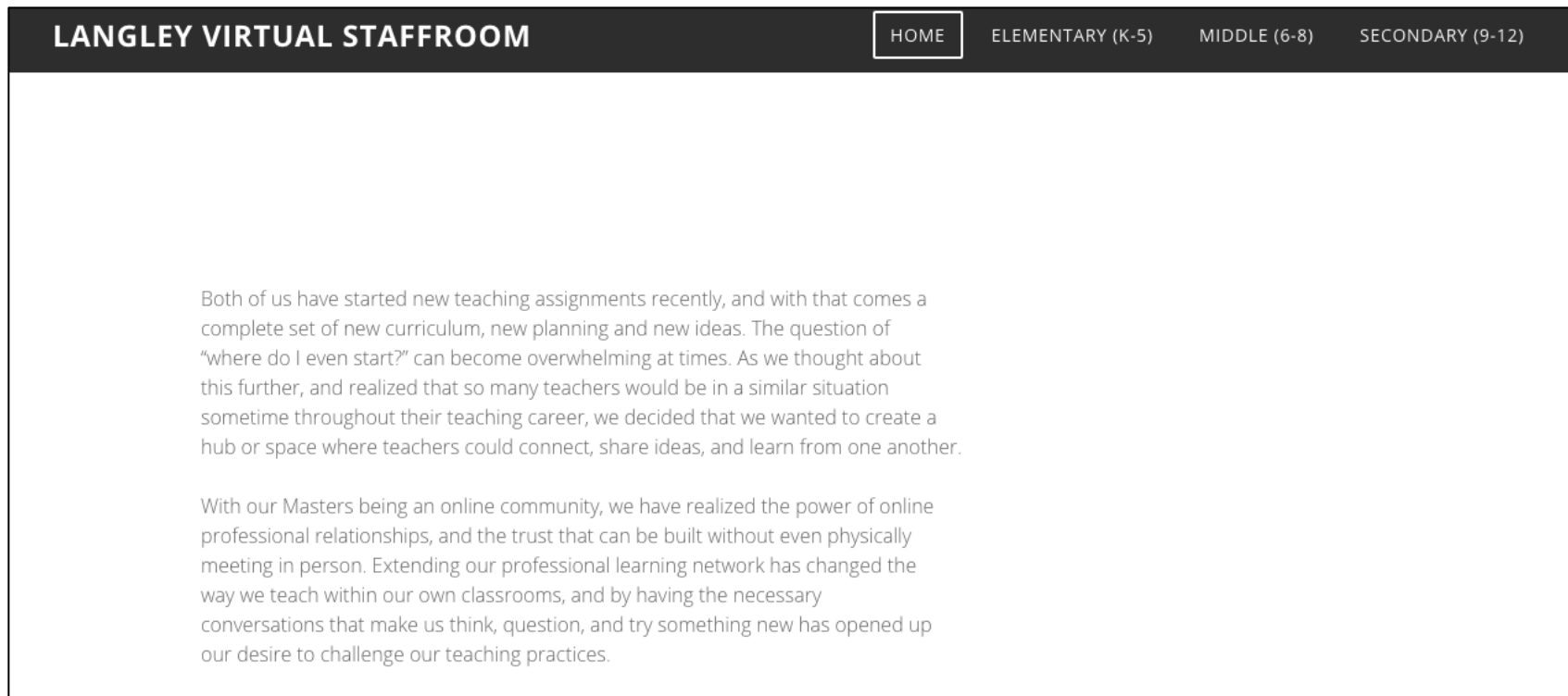
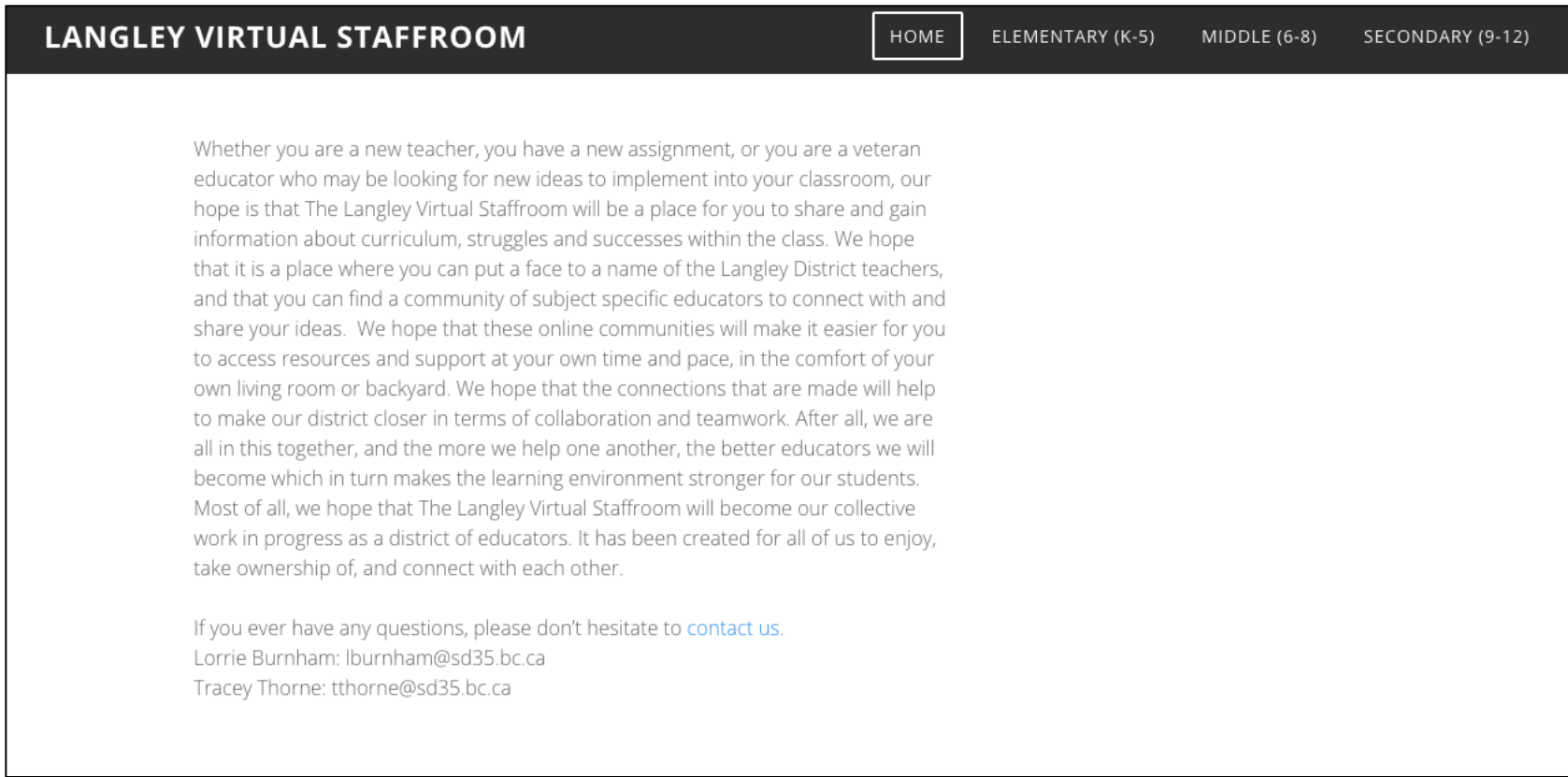


Figure 3. Continuation of Home page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/>



The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the Langley Virtual Staffroom website. The navigation bar is dark grey with white text. On the left, it says "LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM". To the right, there are three menu items: "HOME" (which is highlighted with a white border), "ELEMENTARY (K-5)", "MIDDLE (6-8)", and "SECONDARY (9-12)". Below the navigation bar is a large white area containing a paragraph of text and contact information.

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM HOME ELEMENTARY (K-5) MIDDLE (6-8) SECONDARY (9-12)

Whether you are a new teacher, you have a new assignment, or you are a veteran educator who may be looking for new ideas to implement into your classroom, our hope is that The Langley Virtual Staffroom will be a place for you to share and gain information about curriculum, struggles and successes within the class. We hope that it is a place where you can put a face to a name of the Langley District teachers, and that you can find a community of subject specific educators to connect with and share your ideas. We hope that these online communities will make it easier for you to access resources and support at your own time and pace, in the comfort of your own living room or backyard. We hope that the connections that are made will help to make our district closer in terms of collaboration and teamwork. After all, we are all in this together, and the more we help one another, the better educators we will become which in turn makes the learning environment stronger for our students. Most of all, we hope that The Langley Virtual Staffroom will become our collective work in progress as a district of educators. It has been created for all of us to enjoy, take ownership of, and connect with each other.

If you ever have any questions, please don't hesitate to [contact us](#).
Lorrie Burnham: lburnham@sd35.bc.ca
Tracey Thorne: tthorne@sd35.bc.ca

Figure 4. Continuation of Home page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/>


About Us

When building this site we felt it was really important to make a connection with the teachers who might be visiting our site. This is why we included an “about us” section (see Figures 5 and 6). On this page we again included both a YouTube video as well as a text-based biography, giving a brief history about our teaching career and some of our passions. We felt this was an important component to give the site a more personal feel and to help make a connection with other teachers.

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM

[HOME](#) [ELEMENTARY \(K-5\)](#) [MIDDLE \(6-8\)](#) [SECONDARY \(9-12\)](#)

Tracey Thorne



A video thumbnail showing Tracey Thorne, a woman with blonde hair, smiling. The video player interface includes a play button, a clock icon, and a share icon. The name 'Tracey Thorne' is overlaid on the top left of the video frame.

I have been an educator in the Langley District for over 10 years. As an 18 year old, I was able to travel and live in Monaco, where I learned to speak French, and despite me ever thinking I would teach French when I was in high school, I grew a deep passion for FSL teaching and have loved making my classes interactive and fun. This coming September, I have the opportunity to get back to a Grade ¾ classroom at Fort Langley Elementary, which I am so excited about!!!! My husband's office is nearby, so I should expect daily lunch deliveries, right???

I have 2 boys who keep me on my toes, a husband, who is very involved in the community, and 2 cats. Running is one of my hobbies, although I need to make sure to take the time to actually do it! I also love watching my boys play sports, and hanging out in our backyard.


I am VERY excited about the potential of this community. Many times I have wondered what other teachers might be doing in their classrooms, and I always wish for the time to be able to watch others in action. I believe this site will give us a chance, as Langley educators, to share our expertise, to learn from others, and to connect faces to names which will bring our district closer together. After all, this is OUR community, and it will be what we all make of it!!

Figure 5. About Us page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/about-us.html>

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM

[HOME](#) [ELEMENTARY \(K-5\)](#) [MIDDLE \(6-8\)](#) [SECONDARY \(9-12\)](#)

Lorrie Burnham



Welcome to Langley Virtual Staffroom! My name is Lorrie Burnham and I am so excited that you took some time out of your busy day to check it out! I have been a teacher in the Langley School District for 15 years (wow time flies!) where I have taught everything from Grades 2 - 12. My passion is for Science, Math, and Technology. This year I am currently teaching Math 8, 9, 10, 11 and Science 10.

I love to think outside of the box and push the limits of education, incorporating technology into my teaching. This was not always the case! Three years ago the extent of my tech knowledge was answering emails and writing report cards in Report writer! After embarking on a Master's program in technology and education I have changed my whole philosophy on teaching. I no longer view technology as a waste of time but rather an important tool for students to master. I am always looking to take it to the next level. My latest adventure has included a multi-access class, where I have students log in from around the province and interact with the students in my class.

As a parent of two boys, aged 9 and 3, I am very much aware of how the world is rapidly changing around them. They are one of my main reasons that I am so driven to help bring change to education and teaching.

Teaching can be a tough gig! My hope is that you view this community as a place to seek support. This could be in the form of resources and ideas from each other as educators in the Langley School District. So many times our teaching assignment changes and we are left scrambling to find new resources and lessons. Just last year I taught Science and Math 10 for the first time in many years. I am the only Math teacher at our school and I would have loved a place I could have connected with other teachers with similar teaching assignments.

As we begin to implement the new curriculum my hope is that this is an adventure that we can travel together! I look forward to connecting with you in the community!

Figure 6. Continuation of About Us page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/about-us.html>

How To....

We felt that a “How to” page was an especially important component to our project. From the drop-down menu on the Home page, this link will provide pertinent information on getting started within the Google community. On this page we included YouTube video tutorials that will help those teachers who are new to Google+ communities as well as those who need to be reacquainted with them (see Figures 7, 8 & 9). We included a video tutorial on “How to Create a Gmail Account,” “How to Use Google+ Communities,” “How to Make a Post in a Google+ Community,” and “How to Upload a Video to a Google+ Community.” It was our feeling that the easier it was for teachers to join the Google+ community, the higher the teacher ‘buy-in’ would be, which in turn, would make it more successful.

Feeling Lost? Hopefully the How To Videos below will help you find your way!

Here is a selection of videos on how to sign up for a community, create a post, or share a video/photo with the community. If after watching the video, you are still feeling like you need personal assistance, reach out and [contact us!](#)

How to Create a Gmail Account

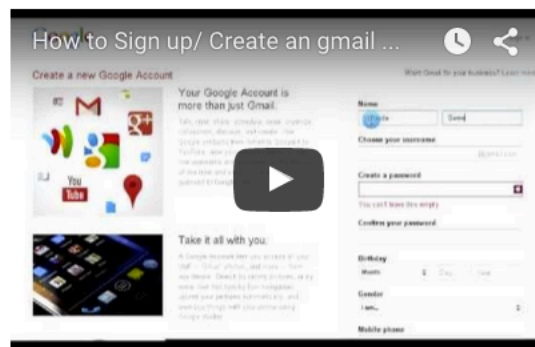



Figure 7. How To page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/how-to.html>

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM HOME ELEMENTARY (K-5) MIDDLE (6-8) SECONDARY (9-12)

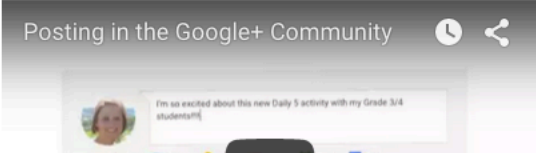
How to Use Google+ Communities



HOW TO USE GOOGLE+ COMMU... ⌚ ↻

Google+
Communities

How to Make a Post in a Google+ Community



Posting in the Google+ Community ⌚ ↻


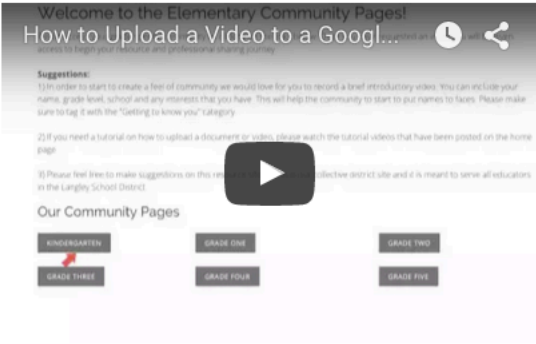
 I'm so excited about this new Daily 5 activity with my Grade 3/4 students!!!

Figure 8. Continuation of How To page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/how-to.html>

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM HOME ELEMENTARY (K-5) MIDDLE (6-8) SECONDARY (9-12)

How to Upload a Video to the Google+ Community



Welcome to the Elementary Community Pages!
How to Upload a Video to a Google+ Community

Suggestions:

- 1) In order to start to create a feel of community we would love for you to record a brief introductory video. You can include your name, grade level, school and any interests that you have. This will help the community to start to put names to faces. Please make sure to tag it with the "Getting to know you" category.
- 2) If you need a tutorial on how to upload a document to video, please watch the tutorial videos that have been posted on the home page.
- 3) Please feel free to make suggestions on this community page. We are a collective district site and it is meant to serve all educators in the Langley School District.

Our Community Pages

- KINDERGARTEN
- GRADE ONE
- GRADE TWO
- GRADE THREE
- GRADE FOUR
- GRADE FIVE

Figure 9. Continuation of How To page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/how-to.html>

Feedback

We wanted to provide a page where teachers could easily provide feedback to us. This prompted us to create a contact page (see Figure 10). This allows for teachers to contact us individually through email. This also makes it easy for novice teachers, who may not be as familiar with technology, to reach out for help if they are unable to sign up for a Google+ account. It can also be used to give us feedback, both positive and negative, and allows teachers to present their own ideas about possible future communities.

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM HOME ELEMENTARY (K-5) MIDDLE (6-8) SECONDARY (9-12)

We would love to hear from you!
Any input into our community is welcomed! Feel free to connect with us.

Name *

First Last

Email *

Comment *

SUBMIT

Figure 10. Feedback page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/feedback.html>

Elementary School Communities (Grades K – 5)

We divided our communities into three categories: Elementary (K-5), Middle (6-8) and Secondary (9-12). Within the *Elementary Community Page*, we divided the communities according to grade (see Figure 11). Each community link has been placed on a button that when clicked on will direct them to that specific Google+ community where they can ask to join. We included a link to create a Gmail account in case someone did not have one already. We also gave a few suggestions such as: leaving a brief introduction about yourself when you join the community, where to access help tutorials, and that suggestions to the site are always welcome.

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM HOME **ELEMENTARY (K-5)** MIDDLE (6-8) SECONDARY (9-12)

Welcome to the Elementary Community Pages!

Please access your grade specific community by clicking on the links below. This is a Google+ Community. You will require a [gmail account](#) to be able to access these communities. Once you have requested an invite you will be given access to begin your resource and professional sharing journey.

Suggestions:

- 1) In order to start to create a feel of community we would love for you to record a brief introductory video. You can include your name, grade level, school and any interests that you have. This will help the community to start to put names to faces. Please make sure to tag it with the "Getting to know you" category.
- 2) If you need a tutorial on how to upload a document or video, please watch the tutorial videos that have been posted on the home page.
- 3) Please feel free to make suggestions on this resource site as this is our collective district site and it is meant to serve all educators in the Langley School District.

Our Community Pages

KINDERGARTEN GRADE ONE GRADE TWO

GRADE THREE GRADE FOUR GRADE FIVE

Figure 11. Elementary community page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/elementary-k-5.html>

Middle School Communities (Grades 6 – 8)

Within the *Middle School Community Page*, we divided the communities according to subject area (see Figure 12). Each community link has been placed on a button that when clicked on will direct them to that specific Google+ community where they can ask to join. We included a link to create a Gmail account in case someone did not have one already. We also gave a few suggestions such as: leaving a brief introduction about yourself when joining the community, where to access help tutorials, and that suggestions to the site are always welcome. We will always be open to adding more communities if teachers approach us with a need.

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM HOME ELEMENTARY (K-5) **MIDDLE (6-8)** SECONDARY (9-12)

Welcome to the Middle School Community Pages!

Please access your subject specific community by clicking on the links below. This is a Google+ Community. You will require a [gmail account](#) to be able to access these communities. Once you have requested an invite you will be given access to begin your resource and professional sharing journey.

Suggestions:

- 1) In order to start to create a feel of community we would love for you to record a brief introductory video. You can include your name, grade level, school and any interests that you have. This will help the community to start to put names to faces. Please make sure to tag it with the "Getting to know you" category.
- 2) If you need a tutorial on how to upload documents, photos, or videos, please watch the tutorial videos that have been posted on the home page.
- 3) Please feel free to make suggestions on this resource site as this is our collective district site and it is meant to serve all educators in the Langley School District.

Our Community Pages

ENGLISH MATH SCIENCE

SOCIAL STUDIES PHYSICAL EDUCATION FINE ARTS

Figure 12. Middle school community page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/middle-6-8.html>

Secondary School Communities (Grades 9 – 12)

With the *Secondary School Community* page our rationale was the same as the Middle School Community page, where we divided the communities according to subject area (see Figure 13). We kept the format very similar to the other community pages, including suggestions and a link to sign up for a Gmail account.

LANGLEY VIRTUAL STAFFROOM HOME ELEMENTARY (K-5) MIDDLE (6-8) **SECONDARY (9-12)**

Welcome to the Secondary School Community Pages!

Please access your subject specific community by clicking on the links below. This is a Google+ Community. You will require a [gmail account](#) to be able to access these communities. Once you have requested an invite you will be given access to begin your resource and professional sharing journey.

Suggestions:

- 1) In order to start to create a feel of community we would love for you to record a brief introductory video. You can include your name, grade level, school and any interests that you have. This will help the community to start to put names to faces. Please make sure to tag it with the "Getting to know you" category.
- 2) If you need a tutorial on how to upload documents, photos, or videos, please watch the tutorial videos that have been posted on the home page.
- 3) Please feel free to make suggestions on this resource site as this is our collective district site and it is meant to serve all educators in the Langley School District.

Our Community Pages

ENGLISH MATH SCIENCE

SOCIAL STUDIES PHYSICAL EDUCATION FINE ARTS

Figure 13. Secondary school community page. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015). Retrieved from <http://langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com/secondary-9-12.html>

Sample Screen Shots of Google+ Communities

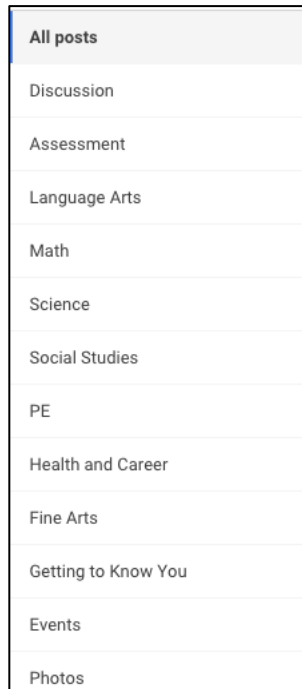
Within each community we included a description of what the community is about and how to use it (see Figure 14 - 19). We included a link back to the Langley Virtual Staffroom website. We also pinned a post indicating that by being a part of this community we are using cloud computing where personal information is stored outside of Canada. As it is a pinned post, it will always remain at the top of the feed.

Elementary Google+ community sample

The screenshot shows a Google+ community page for 'Langley - Grade One'. The page is titled 'Langley - Grade One' and is described as 'This is a community set for Grade One Educators in the Langley School District'. It is a private community with 2 members. The page features a navigation bar at the top with 'All communities' and 'Recommended for you' options. A central post by L Burnham, dated 5:24 PM, discusses participation in Google communities and includes a link to a document: www.oipc.bc.ca/guidance-documents/1427. The page also includes a 'Share what's new...' section with options for Text, Photos, Link, Video, Event, and Poll. An 'About this community' section on the right provides a welcome message and a link to the 'Langley Virtual Staffroom'.

Figure 14. Sample of an elementary Google+ community. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Elementary community post categories. These are the categories within the Google+ community (see Figure 15). When making a post in this community, you must tag it with a specific category. We determined that these communities would be most pertinent to elementary teachers.



All posts
Discussion
Assessment
Language Arts
Math
Science
Social Studies
PE
Health and Career
Fine Arts
Getting to Know You
Events
Photos

Figure 15. Elementary Google+ community categories. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Middle school Google+ community sample

The screenshot shows a Google+ community page for 'Langley - Middle School Physical Education'. The page is titled 'Langley - Middle School Physical Education' and is described as 'This is a community set for PE Middle School Educators in the Langley School District'. It is a private community with 2 members. The page features a navigation bar at the top with 'All communities' and 'Recommended for you' options. A central section allows users to 'Share what's new...' with options for Text, Photos, Link, Video, Event, and Poll. A pinned post by the owner, L Burnham, discusses the use of Google+ communities and mentions a document from the OIPC (www.oipc.bc.ca/guidance-documents/1427). The right sidebar contains an 'About this community' section with a welcome message and a link to the 'Langley Virtual Staffroom'.

Figure 16. Sample of a middle school Google+ community. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Middle school community post categories. These are the categories within the Middle School Google+ community. When making a post in this community, you must tag it with a specific category. As the Middle School Google+ Communities have already been divided into subject areas, we determined that these communities would be more applicable to Middle School teachers.

All posts
Discussion
Getting to Know You
Resources
Assessment
Events
Photos

Figure 17. Middle school Google+ community categories. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

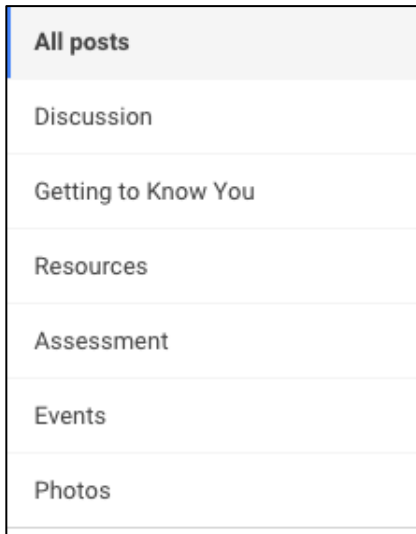
Secondary school Google+ community sample

The screenshot shows the Google+ interface for a community named "Langley - Secondary Math". The page is divided into several sections:

- Header:** Includes the Google+ logo, navigation tabs for "All communities" and "Recommended for you", and notification and profile icons.
- Community Profile:**
 - Name:** Langley - Secondary Math
 - Description:** This is a community set for Math Secondary Educators in the Langley School District
 - Notifications:** A bell icon with the text "Notifications on" and a gear icon for settings.
 - Image:** A large graphic with green and blue abstract shapes.
 - Privacy:** Labeled as "Private" with "2 members".
 - Search:** A search bar with the placeholder text "Search community".
 - Posts:** A tab labeled "All posts" is visible at the bottom.
- Share what's new...:** A text input field for sharing content, with icons for "Text", "Photos", "Link", "Video", "Event", and "Poll" below it.
- Pinned by moderator:** A section featuring a post by the owner, L Burnham.
 - Profile:** L Burnham, OWNER, with a profile picture.
 - Text:** "By accepting participation into these Google communities, you are aware that this is a Cloud based site, and that 'public bodies can store or access personal information outside of Canada'."
 - Link:** www.oipc.bc.ca/guidance-documents/1427
- About this community:**
 - Buttons:** "Invite people" and "Share this community".
 - Text:** "Welcome to the Langley Virtual Staffroom. We hope that you can connect with other educators in the district. It is our collective goal to share resources, ideas, and to get to know one another in order to build stronger professional relationships across the district."
 - Link:** [Langley Virtual Staffroom](#)

Figure 18. Sample of a secondary school Google+ community. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Secondary school community post categories. We kept the categories in the Secondary School Community very similar to the Middle School Community, as the Secondary had also already been divided into subject areas. We felt that these communities would be more applicable to Secondary School teachers.



All posts
Discussion
Getting to Know You
Resources
Assessment
Events
Photos

Figure 19. Secondary school Google+ community categories. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Google Form for Acceptance into Community

In order to align with FIPPA regulations and to ensure that teachers are aware that the information on this site is stored outside of Canada, as well as guidelines we have for the Google+ Community, we ask that before each teacher is granted access to the community that they must fill out a Google+ Form (see Figure 20). By submitting the form, they agree to the guidelines. This information will be stored in a time and date stamped Google Sheet.

Welcome to Langley Virtual Staffroom

In order for us to determine that you work in the Langley School District we would like you to fill out the following form. After you have completed and submitted this form we will approve your membership to the Google Community that you have requested access to. Consent is effective the date that this form is submitted.

If you do not accept this consent usage policy please close this browser and do not submit.

* Required

What is your full name? *

What is your district email? *

What is your position in the Langley School District

The expected use of email addresses or contact information will be solely for collaboration and contact for school-based conversations amongst Langley educators. This is to ensure that only those who have been approved to join this Google Community have given consent for their information to be shared with others within the group. By submitting this form, you give consent, effective the date of submission of this form, to store your personal information on the Google platform (community, drive, forms, hangouts, etc.), which is stored outside of Canada and within the United States of America. This personal information comprises your name and email address, but may expand to any other information you voluntarily provide in posts, such as your photo, video, and/or voice. For this reason, information about

Figure 20. Google form for acceptance into community. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Letter to the Superintendent

Dear Suzanne Hoffman;

Attached you will find a passion and Masters project proposal from Lorrie Burnham and Tracey Thorne. We have both been teachers in the Langley School District for over 10 years.

In September 2013, we were accepted into the MEd pilot program (#TIEgrad) through the University of Victoria. As this is a Master's program which focuses on a final project, we began to brainstorm ideas that we believed would be beneficial in a district we so dearly love. As we talked about many options and directions, we discussed the need for shared resources and a collaborative community for educators within our district. So often, there are so many amazing teachers with incredible lessons, and those lessons are seen solely by a small group of students. Master teachers retire and their strategies and resources are rarely passed onto other educators. Teaching can sometimes feel like an isolated profession due to the structure of schools and their rigid timetables. Teachers can feel isolated in their own classrooms, and due to time constricts, seldom communicate with fellow colleagues. Our hope is that by providing a district online educational community, teachers will connect and meet other educators in the district, where they can share resources and ideas, and seek support and advice with one another.

The site we have created is called www.langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com. Members will need to ask to join the community and complete a User Agreement. This will address any FIPPA concerns, and allow us to check the district staff directory to ensure that the member is a part of our school district. After careful consideration we determined that the community should be kept private. As we have seen with many public communities, there is no way to manage the members or content. Through our research, we found a Ministry of Education directed Google+ Community called Edtech Mentorship

Network. While we applaud the direction of the Ministry in creating and encouraging membership in this community, there are some questionable members, which, in our opinion, de-professionalised the community. As Google+ Communities are cloud-based, much like iTunesU and Office365, we want to make sure that members within Langley Virtual Staffroom are aware of the FIPPA regulations. We would enforce that they have completed a user agreement before being accepted into the community, and that it would be a closed community, solely open to Langley District employees.

As technology has become commonplace for so many of our students, we need to provide an opportunity for teachers to learn from each other. Having this community will add to the current professional development opportunities, as it can be accessed at anytime, from anyplace, and we believe that many powerful conversations can be had when educators have a chance to connect. Web 2.0 tools, like Google+ and Twitter, can support asynchronous and synchronous online communities of practice. Teachers no longer require the time needed to drive long distances or clear time after school for workshops. With careful consideration and design, an online community of practice is a feasible option for professional development.

We appreciate your time Mrs. Hoffman and we look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lorrie Burnham (Lochiel U-Connect)

Tracey Thorne (Fort Langley Elementary)

Figure 21. Letter to the superintendent. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Project Proposal for SD#35**Project Proposal for an
Online Community of Practice
(Langley School District)**

October 6, 2015

Purpose of the Project

- to provide a site where teachers can make connections with fellow colleagues within the Langley district
- to have a hub where resources and ideas can be shared, so that we are creating a teamwork, collective and collaborative approach to teaching in our district

Title of the Project

We have created a webpage called the “Langley Virtual Staffroom”, which houses focused, Google+ Communities in order to support the development and nurturing of an online CoP. It can be accessed at langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com. However, membership must be approved before access to the site can be granted.

Why? What is this project about?

How do we collaboratively create a necessary resource using social media in our district that allows for resource sharing, making connections, building community, and promoting an open concept of best practice for all teachers and students, which in turn lessens isolation? Once we have created a platform for resource sharing, how do we guide that effort to make it most productive for teachers? How do we engage teachers who may be skeptical about sharing their resources with others?

In the 21st century, as becoming a digital citizen is necessary in the workplace and, therefore in education, professional learning communities can provide an opportunity for teachers to learn from other educators within our own district. We have a community of well-versed and knowledgeable teachers with so many talents, yet that knowledge and those talents are seldom shared with one another. The Langley Virtual Staffroom provides the central hub where in-district educators can connect.

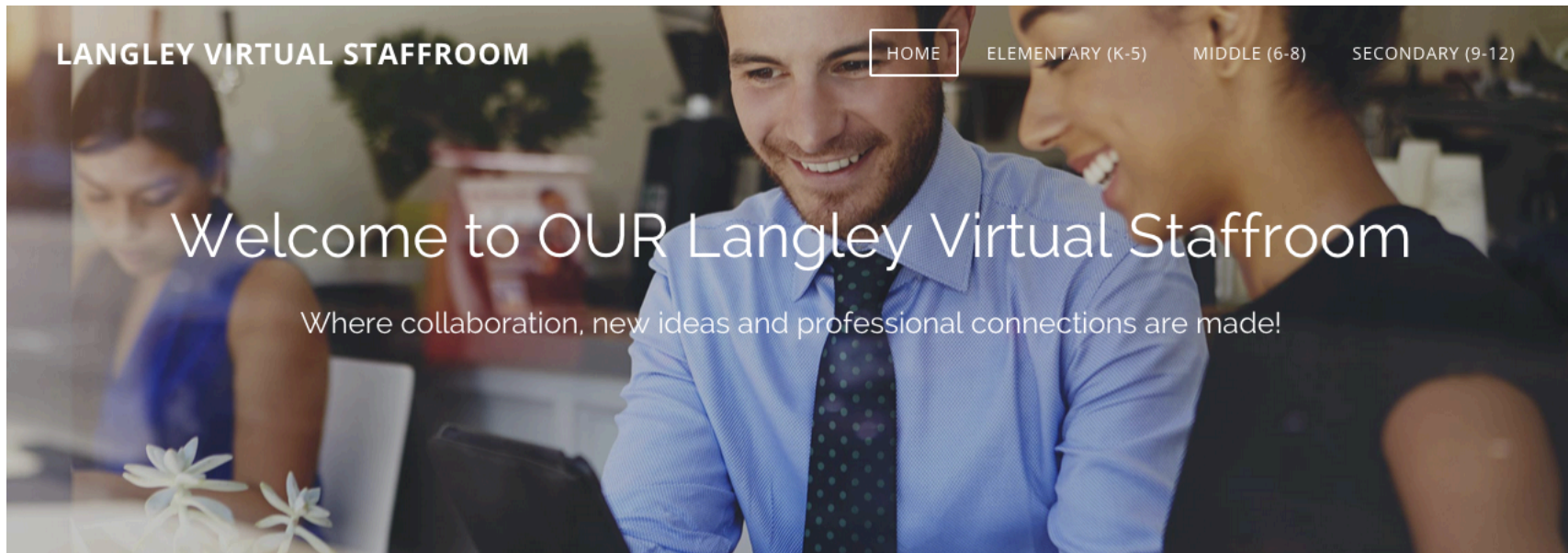
Inspired by a [Google community page out of Indiana](#), our goal is to create a virtual community space for teachers, “The Langley Virtual Staffroom”, within our school district. The subject-specific Google+ website will be hyperlinked with communities that will allow teachers to efficiently share materials with educators who teach similar subjects, or grade levels. The hope is that this site can also help to form professional connections between colleagues. The goal is to provide educators with a broad bank of resources and connections to support professional development, collegiality, efficiency and teamwork.

The central site will be clear, concise and organized. With the understanding that some teachers may not know how to upload documents or videos, there will be a help menu containing tutorials and step-by-step guides to support members. Facilitation, which will begin with Lorrie Burnham and myself, will also be key to help foster relationships, respond to specific requests, answer questions and to encourage teacher participation. Over time, those responsibilities can be shared with fellow colleagues.

The “Langley Virtual Staffroom” will be a private community, which means that members will need to be accepted to the site in order to become a member. This ensures that all members, before acceptance, have been verified as Langley School District employees, and that they have all accepted the FIPPA regulated User Agreement. They will need to adhere to the strictly professional regulations of the site, and that no students or non-members shall be mentioned.

Project

[The Langley Virtual Staffroom](#)



By creating an online community, teachers within our district will have the ability to brainstorm new ideas as the B.C. Ministry of Education is releasing a new scope on curriculum. This will create a more team-based, collaborative approach to building resources together. There is also an overwhelming collection of online resources, and educators can be flooded with cognitive overload. A collaborative curation system seems necessary, and this will also allow the district to capture the essence of lessons, units, and strategies of veteran teachers who may soon be retiring, fresh insights and tried and true resources.

Each teacher will be able to access a specific subject, and/or grade level. By creating smaller communities, within the virtual staffroom, educators will truly be able to connect with educators of similar grade compositions. Educators will also be able to access video tutorials, if help is needed (e.g., How to create a post, or how to upload a video). This will continue to be a work in progress as new questions may arise.

What is Required from the District Level

1. Your support!!!
2. To help promote this site within district and to encourage other teachers to sign up and to take on moderator roles for the communities

Conclusion

In this digital age, the global staff room is no longer a futurist idea but rather a reality. Teachers can now turn to online communities of practice to develop their knowledge base and resources. These virtual spaces satisfy a teacher's need for extended professional development and provide a rich repository of shared resources. This in turn can result in a teacher's improved practice and increased student achievement. With it being a grassroots community, we feel that teachers will have a greater investment in their own learning, as it will be information or connections that they are seeking out personally.

We would be thrilled to be able to bring this community into our district.

Lorrie Burnham & Tracey Thorne

Presentation for Langley School District Educators

This is the slide presentation that will be used when presenting the website to the district (see Figures 22-31).



Figure 22. Slide 1 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

What is it?

- Online community of practice
- Grassroots - from teachers for teachers
- Subject and grade specific communities for resource sharing
- Area for collaboration and connectedness
- Structured communities - Elementary, Middle, and Secondary communities

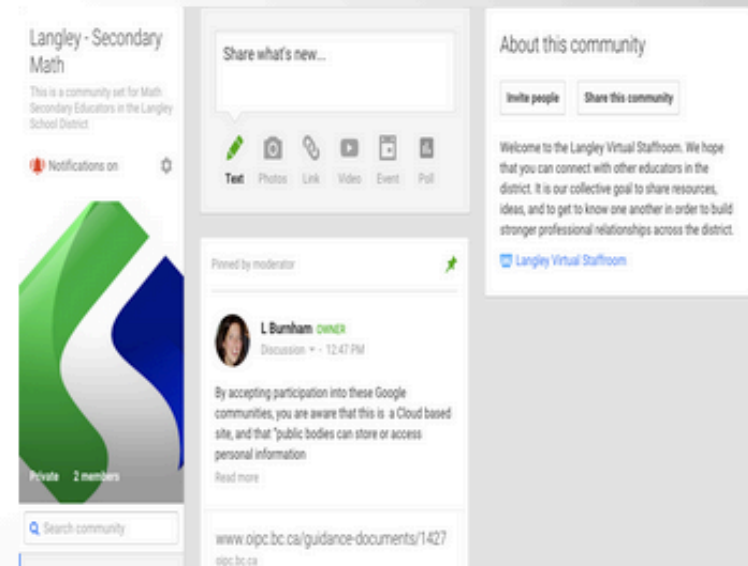


Figure 23. Slide 2 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Why is it necessary and what are the goals?

- Reduce teacher isolation
- Connecting new teachers with seasoned teachers
- From research and experience - traditional professional development (top down) does not allow for integration into the classroom, and reflection
- Rapid change of technology and need to gain insight and find support for these changes in order to captivate, motivate and communicate with digitally savvy students.
- Introduction of new curriculum - support for integration
- Curation of amazing teaching practice

Figure 24. Slide 3 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).


Maintaining Community - Role of Facilitator


- Facilitator - necessary for success: will need to help and manage members/posts within the communities
- Make it personal: teachers need to feel connected and take ownership
- Manage negative comments to keep it positive
- Role modeling participation: encourage feedback and constructive criticism
- Encourage “lurkers” to participate and contribute to the community

Figure 25. Slide 4 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Privacy Policy

- The Langley Virtual Staffroom is a private, closed community where teachers can gain access solely by invitation or request.
- Teachers are made aware of the Fippa document. Before joining, they are informed that this is a cloud-based site. After requesting access, they will receive a Google form that will need to be completed and submitted before access to the community is granted.

Pinned by moderator 

 **L Burnham** OWNER
Discussion ▾ - 12:47 PM

By accepting participation into these Google communities, you are aware that this is a Cloud based site, and that "public bodies can store or access personal information

[Read more](#)

www.oipc.bc.ca/guidance-documents/1427
oipc.bc.ca

Figure 26. Slide 5 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

How to Get Buy-in

- Present to digital literacy coaches, administration and the school board
- Posters in staffrooms - "Have you joined The Langley Virtual Staffroom?:
Where collaboration, new ideas and professional connections are made!"
- Send link to teachers and ask them to join the community
- Word of Mouth
- CTAP workshops?

Have you joined The Langley Virtual Staffroom?
Where collaboration, new ideas and professional connections are made!



Welcome to OUR Langley Virtual Staffroom

What is The Langley Virtual Staffroom?

Whether you are a new teacher, you have a new assignment, or you are a veteran educator who may be looking for new ideas to implement into your classroom, our hope is that The Langley Virtual Staffroom will be a place for you to share and gain information about curriculum, struggles and successes within the class.

We hope that it is a place where you can put a face to a name of the Langley District teachers, and that you can find a community of subject specific educators to connect with and share your ideas.

We hope that these online communities will make it easier for you to access resources and support at your own time and pace, in the comfort of your own living room or backyard. We hope that the connections that are made will help to make our district closer in terms of collaboration and teamwork.

After all, we are all in this together, and the more we help one another, the better educators we will become which in turn makes the learning environment stronger for our students.

Most of all, we hope that The Langley Virtual Staffroom will become our collective work in progress as a district of educators. It has been created for all of us to enjoy, take ownership of, and connect with each other.

Steps

1. Simply go to www.langleyvirtualstaffroom.weebly.com
2. Ask to join the community/connections that apply to you
3. Once you have been granted access, you will be free to peruse, share, and connect with other teachers in the district.

Figure 27. Slide 6 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Technology Guidance

Video on how to's:

- Intro of how the site works
- How to sign up or receive an invitation
- How to create a Gmail account
- How to access the Google+ community
- How to upload video
- How to create a post
- Providing individual assistance when needed

Figure 28. Slide 7 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Obstacles to Online Communities

- Time management- requires extra time to check messages, post comments, and read responses
- Level of engagement within the community: “lurkers”
- Creating an environment in which teachers feel confident to share and collaborate on developing teaching materials.
- The need to keep the community positive, and to encourage teachers to reflect, and provide constructive feedback
- Negative impact of dominators. Discussions can often get sidetracked. There can be misunderstandings and members can push personal agendas

Figure 29. Slide 8 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Future Potential of the Community

- Online professional development workshops
- Google hangouts on air with experts that are recorded and posted into communities.
- Group meet-ups to collaborate
- Interactive online events

Figure 30. Slide 9 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

What we need to move forward

- Your support
- To help promote this site within district and to encourage other teachers to sign up and to take on moderator roles for the communities

Figure 31. Slide 10 of district presentation. (Burnham & Thorne, 2015).

Chapter Four: Summary and Reflection

Professional development has remained stagnant for many years, as teachers attend one-day, top-down instructed workshops, on specific dates and times. As technology is quickly changing societal norms, students need to be better prepared for their entrance into the workplace. Yet, professional development opportunities do not always address the technological needs, or the changing dynamics in the classroom. One-shot workshops often do not provide the opportunity for educators to apply what has been learned, reflect on that practice, and revamp the lesson to make it more effective for the students.

Our Inspiration for the Project

The Langley School District has been home for both Lorrie Burnham and Tracey Thorne for over ten years. When brainstorming ideas about our project, we both reflected on our passion for collaboration and we thought that our district would also benefit from a community: a place for other educators in our district to meet, learn from one another, and share experiences and resources. In the past, there have been so many educators who have retired, and have taken their skills with them without the opportunity to share with others. Currently, there are so many incredible educational experts within our district, and their students are the only ones who benefit from the fruits of their labour. Our hope, and vision, is that we will create a community where teachers can learn and share with one another, and in turn, provide new, and fresh ideas within their classrooms.

Inspired by a Google Community out of Indiana, (<http://www.doe.in.gov/elearning/online-communities-practice>), we contacted the creators, and asked for feedback. Michelle, one of the creators, shared with us that the size of the community could be a concern. She stated that, “the scale of the communities does make it a bit more

challenging than if it were a district level initiative.” Therefore, we decided to start with solely our district, which we hoped would better build connections amongst members. We feared that if we started too big, members would be less likely to engage, as they would not feel comfortable contributing or sharing with a larger audience. We also wanted to create a community where educators in our district could get to know each other online, which in turn will lead to a familiarity in person, and help foster connections around the district.

Why a Google+ Community? Educators continue to learn new technologies alongside our students. Many teachers are beginning to feel more proficient with the use of technology in this digital age. A Google+ Community provides simplicity of use. It is easily accessible by anyone with a Gmail account. Within our TIEgrad cohort, Google+ communities were often used, and we found that it was very effective when wanting to post or share information.

Our Project Specifics

We began building a website, using Weebly as our platform. On this site we included our reason for this project, information about our background, how-to videos, and grade and subject specific Google+ communities. Educators within the district can ask to join a grade/subject-specific Google+ community. Here, they can connect with other educators with similar grade-level compositions or subject levels. Once they have joined, they can add an introductory video, share resources, their struggles and successes, chat with others and build connections within the district.

“How-to” videos have also been created in case a member needs guidance or a reminder on how to create a Google+ account, how to post, and how to upload to the Google+ community. This was included to help ease potential struggles educators may have if technology is an initial hurdle when joining the community.

We have included a feedback form on our Weebly site where teachers can easily share their ideas and concerns. We hope that they will contact us if they require an additional Google+ community, or if they require more assistance when attempting to join a community. We will use their ideas and comments to continually build upon our project.

Our Google+ communities are designed to run asynchronously, but access to a Google Hangout could provide the ability for educators to meet synchronously face to face, once a connection has been made. Our hope is that this will create new opportunities for professional development to occur. Teachers will be able to connect online with other educators in the district to collaborate, and in turn, will not have to travel in order to meet. These hangouts could also be recorded and posted to the community for educators who were unable to watch it live.

Privacy

While online collaboration and cloud computing is a solution to the demands of teacher time, giving educators the opportunity to collaborate anytime and anyplace, there is the concern of privacy. While there are professional, educational communities such as the EdTech Mentorship Network (n.d.), that are public and have little control over members, we felt that it was important to adhere to the FIPPA privacy policy. Therefore, the Langley Virtual Staffroom is a private site. Once members ask to join, we will consult with the district staff directory to ensure that they are School District #35 members. They will then be asked to complete a Google form where they will be required to provide their name, school district email, and their position within the district. Within the form they will need to check a box indicating that they agree to the user agreement. Once their completed form has been received they will then be granted access to the communities.

Reasons for the Community Categories

After conversations with colleagues, and personal decisions, we felt that it was integral that the communities initially be divided into specific categories: Elementary K-5, Middle 6-9 and Secondary 10-12. At the Elementary level, K-5, the communities were split into grade specific groupings, while at the Middle and High School levels, they were divided into subject-specific groupings. This way, the material or conversations posted would be relevant to those involved.

Feedback and involvement is also always encouraged. While we have created specific communities for educators, there is a contact form for members to provide feedback or suggestions. There may be certain requested communities to be added, or communities that exist and are not being utilized, so should be removed.

At first, we may need to be strong moderators or facilitators within the communities. We will need to monitor the postings, and help to maintain a positive, communal atmosphere. However, the hope is, over time, subject-specific or grade-specific teachers will emerge as facilitators for their small community of teachers, which would alleviate our personal time constraints.

Teacher Buy-In

Through our research and after talking with the creators of the Indiana Google community, one of the major drawbacks to an online professional community is the initial buy-in and continued participation. Often, the problem is that many educators may ‘lurk’ in the community, and they will access the resources, but they may not contribute to the actual communities themselves. Our goal is to build trust with members so that they feel more secure and confident. With that confidence, we hope, comes more of a desire to share with others and

not simply take ideas without contribution. Our hope is that when a teacher has posted resources or lessons, others will comment and add feedback to that posted lesson. The end product will be a resource that has been created collaboratively and the result will be a better resource or lesson overall.

After quick conversations with teachers in our district, they seemed eager and willing to contribute because this is a grassroots project: to teachers from teachers. When building the community, our aim was to make the Langley Virtual Staffroom about all of us and for our entire district. Our hope is also that if the members feel more ownership over this project, they will be apt to contribute to its success.

In order to increase interest in our site, we plan to present our project to the digital literacy coaches for the district. This will ensure that at least one teacher at every school in the district will have been introduced to our website. From that word of mouth will be a large part of letting others in the district know about the existence of our site.

Our Journey

Being a part of the #TIEgrad cohort at the University of Victoria has been a major motivator for our project. It has shown us that online professional relationships are powerful, real, and influential. Trust is a key concept to sharing in an online community. As trust develops, community members are more apt to sharing personal successes and struggles. While some may argue that online professional relationships differ from real-life encounters, we would disagree. The members of TIEgrad feel like family. We recently met for the first time, in person, and the gathering felt much more like a reunion rather than an introduction. They have been our biggest supporters.

TIEgrad has also challenged the way many of us initially thought about collaboration and

resource sharing. Unfortunately, in the teaching world, many educators hold tightly onto their own lessons, as they were the ones to spend countless hours creating them. TIEgrad has shown us that so many other educators want to share. They want to improve the profession as a whole. They want to do whatever they can to help colleagues best reach their students, and as a result, they are open and willing to exchange lesson ideas, stories and provide suggestions or feedback.

Before TIEgrad, we were much more stringent with student choice. We were honestly afraid to let students have choice with projects and assignments. TIEgrad has encouraged us to focus on our passions and to choose what would be truly meaningful to us. We have, in turn, brought this to our classrooms. As a class, we may need to cover a certain concept, but by allowing students to have choice over how to represent their own learning, they are more engaged and excited to showcase what has been understood.

Our hope is that, over time, many of the Langley School District educators will see value in our Google Community. With it being a grassroots community, created by teachers for teachers, we are hoping that they will see the benefit of sharing with colleagues within the district and will trust the honesty and passion that went into building it. We are realistic that the community will take time to build, but by word of mouth, and positive experiences within the space, the hope is that the community will continue to grow and that Langley educators will see the value in sharing with one another.

Recommendations for Other Educators

Research your theories. What are you wanting to accomplish? For us, it was the decision between the Community of Inquiry and the Community of Practice. After careful consideration, we focused on the Community of Practice as we felt that our community needs to be collective and reflective, where collaboration between inexperience and experience will help

to guide conversations around a common profession.

Collaborate on the project with a colleague. It has been an absolute honour to create the Langley Virtual Staffroom together. We are not simply colleagues; we have become best friends over the years. When one of us was uncertain about the next direction to take, the other was there to talk through the scenario and come up with a solution. Two heads are always better than one, and each of us had insight into how to make this community effective for our district.

Reach out to others who have created communities of practice. It has been our experience, that these are the people who have great feedback and suggestions, as they have already gone through the growing pains of initial community development. So often, they are also completely willing to share these experiences, as their philosophy is also to spread the word, share what we know, and learn from one another.

We hope that the Langley Virtual Staffroom is just a tool in order for Langley district employees to have meaningful conversations - conversations that matter. It is our goal for our colleagues to feel supported, and in turn, less isolated in individual classrooms. It is our hope that members of the community will understand the benefit of learning from each other and sharing resources in a give and take environment. I strongly suggest that you also search my Master's of Education partner, Lorrie Burnham (@_lburnham), on Dspace (<https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/>) to find her corresponding Master's project for more information on our topic of online CoP's.

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