

**Establishing Professional Learning Communities to Support the Promotion of Equality and
Celebration of Diversity: Reflections from a North-East Community Learning Teacher**

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Abstract

This article presents findings from our collaborative Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) project which employed an action research methodology to explore Equality and Diversity (E&D) practices within our settings. Identified issues included lack of staff confidence exploring E&D in the classroom; lesson observations reporting “tokenistic” or “strained” E&D work, and concerns that shared or collaborative E&D practice within or between educational settings rarely occurred. Our question therefore was how best to empower teaching and learning communities to effectively promote equality and celebrate diversity.

We attempted to establish a Professional Learning Community (PLC) (Vescio et al, 2008), whilst simultaneously seeking to engage learners more actively in the design and development of their E&D work. These processes helped enable symbiotic knowledge exchange between staff, and between staff and learners, enriching teaching, learning, and assessment practices as collective E&D practices began to travel within and beyond the realms of our settings. Future endeavours include further exploration of the impact of our E&D PLC upon learning and assessment outcomes, with particular focus on further collaboration with learners, examination boards, and third sector partners to aid diversification of both internal and external assessment practices.

Key words

Professional Learning Community; Equality and Diversity; Community Learning; Collaborative Practice.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to share our learning – what worked and what did not work – from our recent Equality and Diversity (E&D) action research project¹, which posed the question how best to empower teaching and learning communities to effectively promote equality and celebrate diversity.

Responding to Ofsted guidance, which states teaching and learning communities should ‘...*reflect and value the diversity of learners’ experiences and provide learners with a comprehensive understanding of people and communities beyond their immediate experience*’ (2016, p. 44), our project was established in response to local need as well as in relation to wider educational and political concerns relating to the importance of celebrating diversity and promoting equality within teaching and learning (Ofsted, 2016; DfE, 2013; Equality Act, 2010). Staff and learners from our predominantly white British, semi-rural, working-class settings were sometimes reluctant to engage with E&D practices, reporting contextual detachment; a sense of feeling detached from what could be interpreted as national policy concerns (e.g. Prevent, 2015) or city issues. Exposure to diversity is thought to be instrumental in developing understanding and tolerance (Knowles & Lander, 2011) and we found our lack of (obvious) exposure to particular elements of diversity sometimes fostered cultures of unchecked bias and ignorance, as well as limiting staff competencies and confidence in their ability to celebrate and promote E&D or deal effectively with prevailing issues. Observed E&D work was sometimes reported as “tokenistic” or “strained” and wider concerns were also expressed in relation to the scarcity of collaboratively-developed E&D practice, both within and between educational settings.

Running for approximately eight months, our project sought to explore these concerns, with the overarching aim of enabling more enriched and meaningful E&D experiences for our learners. A team of 12 staff was established, with representation from three distinct educational settings. Recruited staff held varying degrees of managerial responsibility, held teaching and non-teaching roles, and had different subject specialisms. This set-up enabled us to explore our research question from multiple perspectives, as we considered how E&D practices operated across different settings and specialisms. We also explored how our E&D practices operated within, and were affected by, the unique contextual underpinnings of our own settings (Kemmis et al, 2012).

¹ Our project was one of several 2017-2018 North East and Cumbria Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) collaborative action research projects, commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation.

Findings from our project were split into four broad themes: developing our E&D Professional Learning Community (PLC); (re)centralising our E&D practice; collaborative resource development; and using social media and flagship events as visual platforms for promoting and celebrating E&D. Each theme was then analysed in relation to changes in teaching, learning, and assessment practices. This article reflects specifically upon the first theme: developing our E&D PLC. I consider the practicalities of establishing a cross-setting PLC, including engaging staff, working virtually between settings, and maintaining momentum as the project developed. I also explore the impact of our PLC within my own Community Learning (CL) setting upon teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Finally, I consider recommendations for teachers' practice and next steps, including the extension of our virtual PLC and further collaboration with learners, examination boards, and equalities specialists to help diversify current internal and external assessment practices.

All together now; collaborating for the good of our learners

As a CL provider, a core aspect of our work involves harnessing learning as a tool for social justice, helping redress power imbalances, and working towards community cohesion. Austerity measures and the marketisation of education (Department for Education, 2015; HM Government, 2015; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011; Leitch, 2006) have posed challenges in this regard, with funding cuts, staff redundancies, and the systematic disbandment of non-statutory services constraining opportunity for collaboration within our own authority. Such cuts to services disproportionately affect poorer communities (Hastings et al, 2015) – a pertinent concern for CL – and whilst effective and creative partnerships have been established despite such difficulties, austerity measures have nevertheless '*...fragmented services and created barriers to collaboration due to the scarcity of resources and strain on basic services*' (Hastings et al, 2015: p. 1).

Given the current economic and political climate, and the inevitable pressures they place upon CL, coming together with shared values for teaching and learning feels especially important. PLCs can support this process, providing focused time for education practitioners to collaboratively investigate shared concerns, reconnect with existing educational policy and pedagogy, and offer fresh (grassroots) insight and challenge. Drawing upon situated learning theory (Lave, 1991), PLCs value the collaborative insight of practitioners into their own practices, with knowledge located in their everyday authentic experiences, understood most readily through '*...critical reflection with others who share this experience*' (Buisse et al, 2003: p. 267). It is assumed, therefore, that through the process of active engagement in PLCs, both professional expertise and

student learning will improve (Vescio et al, 2008). But how does engagement in PLCs help learners and when are PLCs most meaningful? In their review of research on the impact of PLCs on teaching practice and student learning in schools, Vescio et al (2008) assert that to be effective, PLCs must be specifically focused upon developing '*...knowledge of practice around the issue of student learning*' (p. 88–9). In this sense, to make a difference for learners, knowledge of practice must be reconfigured as knowledge for learning as practitioners consider their own positionality and practice as suitable grounds for internal investigation, as well as feeling enabled to scrutinise existing theory and policy in relation to learner experiences and outcomes. In this sense, '*...working collaboratively is the process not the goal of a PLC. The goal is enhanced student achievement*' (ibid: p. 89). Collaboration, however, brings many benefits in relation to a PLC's goal of learner achievement; for example, via the deprivatisation of practice (Hembree, 2010; Louis & Kruse, 1995), where instead of working in silos, educators come together to engage in open and honest reflection and feedback in order to improve, develop, and quality assure. Another example is via the opening up of a multitude of co-constructed approaches to teaching and learning that would otherwise be unavailable to learners in the absence of shared practice. Finally, via the opportunities collaboration offers to model inclusive, democratic practices (Blanchard, 2012), where diverse voices are heard and respectful challenge is appropriated. This encourages what Nagar et al (2016) describe as '*radical vulnerability*' (p. 504), where engaging in collaborative work enables the opportunity to recognise our own privileges, prejudices, and biases, acknowledging the harm(s) caused by each as we engage in a collective imagining of practice. Such collaboration via engagement in PLCs, with a '*...pervasive attention to meeting the learning needs of their students*' (Vescio et al, 2008: p. 88), appears therefore to be a promising method of addressing pedagogical concerns and finding learner-centred solutions to educational dilemmas.

Engaging colleagues in action research

Our project was undertaken with a very specific methodological ethos: practitioner-led action research, supported by colleagues from academia to help facilitate the cyclical linkage of theory to practice. Action research advocates the process of generating research from the ground up, enabling '*...practitioners from every walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work*' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011: p. 7). Action research in an educational context respects the expertise of practitioners and learners, allowing them opportunities to theorise, explore, and develop solutions in response to immediate concerns affecting teaching and learning. Our project took a predominately inductive, participatory approach (Charmaz, 2014), drawing insight from staff reflections and anecdotes in relation to their E&D practice, and learner insight and response to the nature and impact of the E&D work they were exposed to (and increasingly became more active in shaping

as the project progressed). Data was collected in four distinctive ways: staff reflections; learner testimonies; conversations captured as field notes; and self-assessment questionnaires (Loafland, 1976; Angrosino, 2007; Charmaz, 2014). Staff and learners also participated in a series of self-assessment questionnaires, rating their confidence and understanding in relation to various aspects of E&D teaching and learning.

Established at the project's outset, our PLC's principal aim was to support and enable action research processes. Our PLC thus became a '*communicative space*' (Kemmis et al, 2014: p. 16) to provide feedback and insight from wider staff teams, to openly discuss successes and frustrations, to explore ideas for practice, and to share what worked and what failed to work as we tried new ideas and approaches with learners. Originally, the hope was for our PLC meetings to be held across each of the settings where staff were based, with project members coming together as a coherent team. The reality was rather different, with time and teaching constraints making it difficult for staff to get out and attend meetings in other settings. As such, PLC meetings took place simultaneously within settings, with learning disseminated by project leads and uploaded onto Padlet², which became our virtual PLC.

During PLC meetings, we tasked one another to try one thing, reflect, and report back (Convery, 2017). This approach embodies core principles of action research in recognition that practitioners are experts in their own right (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; 2011), but also as a mode of validating individual practice, a core aspect of quality assurance within action research (Heikkinen et al, 2012; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; 2011). Research integrity was also sought externally to our PLC, as we presented interim findings and sought feedback from staff and learners both within and between our settings. Additionally, we shared emerging findings with colleagues involved in other OTLA action research projects across north-east England, acting as peer reviewers and offering constructive critiques in relation to the research. In each of these ways, different '*...validation groups*' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002: p. 82) helped ensure continuous movement throughout the project between reflection, action, and discussion. Modes of data collection were largely left up to individual staff, respecting professional instinct in relation to what best captured the unique contexts of their own experiences. Working this way allowed a rich and diverse data set to emerge, as well as a bank of new resources and reworked ideas for E&D teaching and learning that were disseminated to staff teams and uploaded onto Padlet. Emerging findings were used to adapt practice as the project progressed, and learners were also able to provide immediate feedback and make their own suggestions for future practice.

² Padlet is a virtual 'pin board', where a variety of resources can be uploaded and accessed remotely.

Ethical considerations

In some ways, our project focus was predisposed towards continual, mindful, ethical consideration.

Nevertheless, it was crucial that we considered power differentials at each stage of our research, especially during our work with learners (Freire, 1998). A specific consideration also included reassurance of staff in relation to confidentiality, especially where opinions and concerns challenged managerial aims or the commercial vision of our settings. We agreed names would not be attached to individual responses or reflections, and where naming of roles could easily identify the practitioner involved (for example, Exams Officer or Arabic teacher) they would not be used. Learners were also reassured in relation to the confidentiality of their responses and in relation to use of their personal data including examples of class or assignment work, retention, or achievement data.

Safeguarding was another key ethical consideration, and safeguarding procedures within each setting for responding to staff or learner disclosures were adhered to. A particular consideration for our setting was that many practitioners operate on zero-hour contracts. It was imperative, therefore, to ensure practitioners were able to be paid for time spent as researchers and/or participants. This was enabled by project funding, allowing myself, as project lead, to effectively buy staff time without placing additional financial pressure upon our service.

Utilising PLCs to establish and drive our community of shared practice

Being part of an E&D PLC helped initiate micro-changes across teaching, learning, and assessment practices within our setting. Some aspects of change felt relatively straightforward to implement, whilst others required continuous work and careful monitoring. I briefly discuss how engagement in our E&D PLC affected (or in some instances, failed to affect) change in relation to these practices. In particular, I consider the potential impact of each of these changes upon our learners, who we continually endeavoured to situate at the centre of our work.

Changes in teaching practices

Traditional narratives of teaching and learning suggest that the teacher knows and the student learns (The Conversation, 2014). The teacher is also expected to manage the class (Salkovsky et al, 2015) and drive academic progress (DfE, 2014a). As such, entering into the unknown and unpredictable world of E&D can feel risky and uncertain. This uncertainty was felt particularly strongly in relation to exploration of naturally-

occurring opportunities for E&D work, following a flippant exchange between learners perhaps or generalisations made in passing about a particular community or protected group. Staff cited lack of time and knowledge as well as fear of “*opening a can of worms [that] once out won’t go back in the tin*” (Engineering tutor in staff CPD meeting; Collins, 2017), with little consideration of our responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) and Public Sector Equality Duty to ‘...*foster good relations across the [nine protected] characteristics*’ (DfE, 2014b: p. 30). One of the operational goals of our E&D PLC was to support staff to feel the fear and do it anyway as we took calculated risks and developed creative and innovative ways of exploring E&D. Through developing our PLC and fostering a culture of teacher talk (Hardy, 2010) in relation to our work, we have been able to encourage one another to take a risk and co-construct ways of embedding E&D more effectively into our everyday teaching practices. The following remark (captured via field notes taken during a PLC meeting) demonstrates how shared practice breeds creative and innovative approaches towards E&D, as well as hinting at a shift in practice from our previous approach to E&D where I (as designated E&D Learning Champion) had sole responsibility for the design and dissemination of E&D resources and ideas for practice:

“It massively helps me to bounce ideas off people, share ideas, work on things together... I would never have even heard about what you’re doing in your class if we weren’t part of this (PLC)”.

(Business Management teacher)

This tutor’s comment demonstrates movement from individual, isolated practices of lesson planning, design, and reflection towards deprivatised practice (Hembree, 2010; Louis & Kruse, 1995), with staff members building upon, remoulding, and reforming one another’s ideas. This was beneficial for learners as well as for staff, as learners became exposed to new constellations of practice (Mycroft & Sidebottom, 2018; Wenger, 1998) and a multiplicity of knowledges developed through our PLC in addition to the individual practices of their ascribed teacher(s).

As well as co-constructing opportunities to embed E&D, our PLC became a way to collaboratively and non-judgementally share individual teacher responses to naturally occurring opportunities for E&D as they arose in lessons. This sharing of practice provided reassurance and peer support, as well as developmental challenge when required. Prior to our emphasis upon shared E&D practice, these exchanges may not have occurred, with staff more inclined to deal with issues themselves than seek help from their peers; perhaps for fear of being construed as a bad teacher or unable to cope. Emphasis on creating safe, non-judgemental

spaces for staff to ask questions and share concerns was crucial, enabling opportunity for ‘...*radical vulnerability*’ (Nagar et al, 2016: p. 504), where the rawness and complexity of E&D issues were embraced so transformational learning could occur (Nagar et al, 2016; Foote, 2015).

As well as our physical PLC, a digital collaborative tool (Padlet) was also established as part of the project and made available to all staff. The aim of our Padlet was to help facilitate the exchange of ideas between learning settings, as well as between staff from the same settings who were teaching on different sites. The hope for our Padlet was that it would allow staff to take a more active role in sharing and shaping E&D practices, as well as providing a virtual space to support the generation of ideas and informal discussion in relation to our E&D work. Whilst staff were keen to share ideas, and relatively happy (once supported and shown how to do so) to browse resources and articles uploaded to Padlet, engaging staff to upload their own contributions proved more difficult. When asked why staff were reluctant to upload material themselves, lack of knowledge and time were commonly cited, as well as fear of making a mistake when uploading to an open forum. Fear of failure can be a substantial block to creative teaching practices (Gurteen, 1998) so it was important for me to find allies within our service who were willing to take a risk and upload, whilst also striking the balance between gently encouraging others to take part and exploring, valuing, and respecting their wider concerns in relation to trialling a model of working that felt risky or alien to their usual practice. It was useful in these instances to provide a differentiated approach to help staff transition from *learning from* to *collaborating with*. I began by disseminating resources via email (a process staff were used to) in addition to uploading to Padlet. I then progressed to only emailing our Padlet link, necessitating engagement with the forum in order to access resources. Finally, I encouraged staff to upload their own ideas for practice, provide feedback on uploaded materials, and share learner input in relation to the nature and content of their E&D work. This final stage is ongoing, with staff operating at different comfort levels in relation to our virtual PLC.

We were keen to establish a PLC that represented the diversity of roles within each setting, including representation from teaching and non-teaching roles. A surprising shift arising from this arrangement came in relation to how the roles and contributions of non-teaching staff were interpreted and valued. The co-lead for our setting worked in an administrative role and was responsible for promoting and raising the visibility of E&D work within our service. Their creativity and expertise in digital literacy brought a trail of teachers to their desk, all seeking advice in relation to creative session design or ways of embedding digital technologies within their teaching practices. This was noticed by the management team, who asked the co-lead to teach ICT more frequently for the service as a paid addition to their everyday role in business administration.

Anecdotes such as this speak to the importance of PLCs as mechanisms for giving voice and challenging hierarchical structures within learning organisations (Adams & Bell, 2016), modelling inclusive practice and recognising multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011), as well as orientating towards the socially-just practices we aim to reproduce with learners.

Changes in learning practices

The collaborative nature of our PLC also inspired change within learning practices, illustrated by my Access to HE (AHE) group during our work together developing referencing and research skills. I was able to show learners how to create and access their own Padlet board so they could upload and discuss interesting resources and readings, as well as collectively reflect upon their learning. As part of their assignment work, learners were asked to access readings I had uploaded onto Padlet and share their interpretations of them as part of a group discussion. Learners were also required to upload and reference any other articles they used in preparation for the group discussion. Working this way encouraged digital literacy as, in previous years, suggested readings would have been provided by me as hard copies or uploaded onto platforms such as Moodle. As these learners commented:

“It’s actually really handy to have the stuff on Padlet. You can never get on Moodle at home and with this there’s no excuse really. Also I like if you lose your paper copy there’s the reading online and I can look at it on my phone, just click on my phone and there it is so that’s dead handy for me”.

(AHE learner 1)

“I’m always scrolling on my phone, Facebook, social media, so this way makes sense to me... I wouldn’t get paper out of my bag on the bus but I’ll look at my phone. Also [laughs] I like that if I see something good I can upload it straight away, otherwise I just lose it, can’t remember where I read it, whereas now I just go on Padlet and it’s there”.

(AHE learner 2)

As an Access to HE teacher, a core aspect of my role is to prepare learners for university study, developing independent research and enquiry skills that will enable them to respond with academic rigour to the demands of university work. Utilising forums such as Padlet allowed me to strike a balance between pointing students in the right direction in relation to recommended readings and enabling student autonomy over the nature and direction of assignment preparation.

Another change in learning witnessed within our setting was the ripple effect that occurred in relation to E&D work, with learners reporting they had shared learning with family and friends in the local community. As this learner reflects:

“Oh you have no idea what you started, no idea! Well we went on with it, what you taught us last lesson about protected characteristics. We went on with it right out the door and my daughter was waiting to pick me up and she said ‘what are you chatting about?’ So I told her about what we’ve been learning about...then when we got back we were looking it up together on the computer...we were up hours looking it up and talking about it”.

(AHE learner 3)

Finally, a change arose in relation to how some learners interacted with their E&D work, particularly as they began to feel that the work covered became more engaging and reflected their own concerns and questions about the world. A particular way we aimed to support this process was through the development and dissemination of monthly E&D teaching cards, co-produced by learners and staff. As this Entry Level 2 English learner and her teacher reflect:

“I came up with that, food banks. And now it’s on [the] cards and everybody’s learning about it”.

(EL2 English learner)

“My learners really appreciated being asked their opinion on what we should be teaching. They came up with great ideas, insightful ideas that we were able to explore and use as a basis for writing; speaking and listening work too. Then when they saw that their ideas and research were in the cards that were going out to teachers across the service the impact was visible, you could see it in their faces, their confidence. Feeling listened to is a big thing for my learners”.

(English teacher)

Encouraging these changes in learning practices feels especially significant in the CL sector, where work is regularly undertaken with isolated and stigmatised communities who may have little other opportunity to voice their views, explore multiple perspectives, or reflect upon their own positionality, attitudes, or values (Knowles & Lander, 2011). Learner consultation therefore feels especially important; first, so learners see themselves and their stories reflected throughout our settings; and second, as a way of identifying gaps in

knowledge and understanding. In this sense, consultation may simultaneously aid inclusion and help us introduce learners to new avenues of E&D enquiry.

Changes in assessment practices

Developing our PLC has enabled staff to begin to reconsider assessment methods so learners have access to a richer and more diverse range of assessment activities. A particular shift has occurred in relation to sharing assessment practice between subject areas, with teachers able to draw upon one another's expertise in assessment design and delivery. Nevertheless, there were barriers to changing assessment processes through collaborative practice beyond the remit and timescale of our project to address. Several staff members reported feeling stifled by the explicit demands of awarding bodies in relation to assessment:

"There's not a lot of wiggle room. There are very specific ways that we have to be assessed so we can't just reinvent that".

(Apprenticeship teacher)

"There are certain things that need to be done before we can sign off. Set processes to follow. It would be nice to have a bit more diversity in our assessment but the exam boards have to catch up to that first in certain circumstances".

(Manager)

In subject areas with greater room for creativity in assessment design, some shift in practice did occur, including the collaborative redesign of some assessment activities to better embed E&D work. In my own subject area, I was able to change assignment titles and focus to better embed aspects of E&D work into assessment processes, whilst also ensuring core learning outcomes were met. In recreational French, assignment focus was changed so learners had greater opportunity to explore the cultural heritage of different French-speaking communities. Despite our relative freedom to adapt assessment titles and focus, learners did not have an opportunity to decide how they structured their response (a video diary instead of an essay for example); something we hope to explore moving forwards as a way of developing more inclusive assessment practices (Kneale & Collings, 2015).

Conclusion and recommendations

Within the unique contextual setting of our project we explored different ways of empowering teaching and learning communities to effectively promote and celebrate E&D. The specific focus of this article has been

upon the impact of establishing our E&D PLC, with particular insight into how PLCs are able to support the development of collaborative practice. Further work is required before any claims of lasting change to E&D teaching, learning or assessment practices can be made, although the micro-changes observed over the course of this project have been promising. Unsurprisingly, the most significant changes occurred where staff were directly involved in our PLC, or where they had chosen to become actively involved in the collaborative practices stemming from it. As a result, their learners had access to new constellations of practice as creative and innovative ways of promoting equality and celebrating diversity were generated, trialled, critiqued, and reflected upon. Some learners reported the ripple effect of their learning as they discussed and explored E&D topics with families and friends, thus strengthening our reach within the local community. The symbiotic exchange of knowledge between learners and staff also ensured our E&D work became more learner-focused, with learner input helping ensure contextual relevance and staff input providing vital opportunity for learners to explore E&D practices '*...beyond their immediate experience*' (Ofsted, 2016: p. 44).

There is still much to do in relation to strengthening our E&D practice and moving forward. We intend to continue utilising action research to explore our E&D practices. Next steps include further investigation of the impact of our PLC upon learning and assessment outcomes, with particular focus upon extending our virtual PLC, and collaborating with learners, examination boards, and equalities specialists to help diversify both our internal and external assessment practices. In addition to our existing PLC, we hope to establish a research community with our learners, further developing the participatory ethos we strive to embody within CL (O'Neill, 2012; Pain et al, 2012), and enabling learners and staff to come together as co-researchers to further explore the impact of our E&D practice.

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