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Recommended Citation

Dineen, R., Evers, S., Floersch, N., Ilett, D., Markowski, B. (2023). Transforming Together: Developing a Professional Learning Community of Information Literacy Educators. In Amanda Nichols Hess (Ed.), *Instructional Identities and Information Literacy, Volume 1: Transforming Ourselves* (vol. 1). Chicago, Illinois: ACRL Editions.

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Transforming Together:

Developing a Professional Learning Community of Information Literacy Educators

Rachel Dineen, Stephanie Evers, Natasha Floersch, Darren Ilett, and Brianne Markowski

Beginning in 2016, we formed a professional learning community in our small information literacy department focused on increasing our understanding of relevant learning theories. Since then, we have expanded our discussions to include concepts related to pedagogical approaches and social justice. Through a concerted effort by all members of the group, this learning community has become a consistent reminder of our commitment to continued learning, critical self-reflection, and working in the best interests of our students. We have shaped our individual instructional identities through these discussions as well as informed our values as an information literacy department in an academic library setting.

We use our learning community as an opportunity to inform our instructional identities through a better understanding of our students and their experiences. Our regional, doctoral-granting university is an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and boasts a large population of first-generation students, Pell-eligible students, and students who work twenty-plus hours each week. Reading works by critical pedagogues and authors with BIPOC identities and examining perspectives that represent voices outside of

academia helps us expand our lens for viewing the educational environment. We have structured our learning community to provide members with a sense of belonging and mutual support. Through our discussions, we, as white educators, challenge our assumptions of privilege, equity, and inclusivity among trusted colleagues. Our group includes four early- to mid-career information literacy librarians and a library technician who is currently earning her master's degree in educational technology. We include a conversation about how we might apply these new ideas to our current practices during each of our meetings. Though we cannot always immediately apply what we have learned from the readings in the classroom, each reading sharpens and renews our focus on student success and how to facilitate it. With our self-initiated, self-governed, and non-evaluative learning community, we hope to share a model of professional development that is not only accessible and ongoing but also one that prioritizes personal meaning-making and transformation. In this chapter, we offer our reflections on our individual experiences with this professional learning community.

DISORIENTING DILEMMAS AND CATALYSTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

We were inspired to form our learning community by Melinda Malik's particularly engaging presentation at the 2016 annual LOEX conference, which introduced a professional development initiative focused on adult learning theory.¹ The two authors who attended this session, who were relatively new academic librarians at the time, had been hearing a lot about learning and critical theories but felt ill-equipped to engage in any meaningful conversations or apply these ideas when teaching. The idea of a professional learning community appealed to us as an approachable way to tackle new and challenging concepts among trusted colleagues. We brought the idea to our department chair, who instituted the learning community model.* Although the department has evolved over the last five years, our learning community has remained the cornerstone of our professional growth and transformation.

"I had been teaching for a few years and was feeling fairly confident in the classroom, but it seemed like all of a sudden everyone was talking about critical librarianship and educational theory. I kept running into these conversations in various venues, and I felt like I could not really engage in the conversation or begin to understand how to apply the theories to my work because I just did not know enough. It was overwhelming, and I felt like I did not even know enough to know where to start. Then we attended that LOEX presentation on educational theories and it was like, OK, maybe we can start here." – Brianne

While Malik's presentation served as a catalyst, it was not necessarily the epochal event or disorienting dilemma that prompted our desire to transform as educators.² Each of us has our own experiences or moments of doubt that have informed our ongoing development

* Our chair at the time was Lyda McCartin. She was instrumental in developing the structure of our professional learning community as well as making it a priority for our department.

and shifts in perspective. Similar to what Amanda Nichols Hess found through surveying other academic librarians, our catalysts ranged from major life events, such as taking a new job, to continuous shifts over time, like keeping up with trends in librarianship literature.³ Through reflective writing, each of us has explored what has kept us engaged in our learning community. Two major themes that we identified in our writings were feeling a sense of anxiety over everything we did not know and feeling under- or unprepared for the needs and responsibilities of our new positions.

“My catalyst for transformation was starting a new position focused on supporting first-generation students in collaboration with the TRIO programs.[†] Many of the students are also BIPOC and low-income. Learning about inclusive and equitable pedagogies was crucial to my new position where I worked with students from these historically and currently marginalized and underserved communities. Some early experiences with students revealed to me that I was unprepared to work with them in culturally responsive and sustaining ways. In particular, my tendency to police student behavior impacted and alienated students who had experienced years of racist, sexist, and classist abuse in education. These interactions lent urgency to my learning in our development meetings.” – Darren

“For me, I had really just started at UNC. I was feeling ambitious and excited, but also completely overwhelmed by everything I did not know. I was feeling a bit of imposter syndrome—was I really qualified to teach a credit-bearing information literacy course? My new colleagues felt so knowledgeable and confident. Being part of the learning community helped to assuage my anxiety by giving me a forum to ask questions and learn from my peers.” – Rachel

Though we each have our own reasons for initially engaging in a professional learning community, we are all motivated to learn and grow professionally. We all recognize the need for continued learning to better connect with our students, engage with our peers, and grow in our positions. This buy-in from all participants contributes to the ongoing success of the group.

EXAMINING, EXPLORING, AND REFLECTING

Kathleen P. King described transformative learning as “an exploration and discovery of meaning-making for the individual.”⁴ They outlined a process that encourages individuals to critically question information and use it to fuel “new constructions or manifestations of knowing and understanding.”⁵ Jack Mezirow added to this definition by stating that transformative learning is “a rational, metacognitive process of reassessing reasons that support

[†] TRIO is an umbrella term used to describe federally funded, student-support programs aimed at providing services to underserved or disadvantaged students. On our campus, TRIO refers to the Center for Human Enrichment (CHE), a Student Support Services (SSS) program that focuses on the academic achievement of first-generation college students. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>.

problematic meaning perspectives or frames of reference.”⁶ Making meaning of the world around us and examining our current perspectives are underlying goals of our professional learning community. We work toward these goals by engaging in critical reflection and dialogue and offering respect and support for each other’s personal growth, as a group.

Reflection is a foundational concept in transformative learning and is an objective of our learning community. According to Mezirow, reflection can be as simple as an awareness of an object or feeling, contemplation of an idea or action, or a consideration of alternatives.⁷ This basic form of reflection is seen as separate from critical reflection, which involves the examination of choices and the decisions behind those choices.⁸ As participants in a professional development group, we strive to foster critical reflection, particularly as it pertains to our assumptions and our approaches to the information literacy classroom. We use critical reflection as a tool for our continued growth as empathetic and informed educators. As Patricia Cranton and Merv Roy noted, “We transform frames of reference through critical reflection on our own and others’ assumptions and beliefs.”⁹ Essentially, we engage in critical reflection to better understand our own and others’ frames of reference and to make more informed decisions in our work. Carolin Kreber expanded on this understanding of the practice, noting that critical reflection in our professional work helps us identify systemic problems or inequities and work to envision alternatives.¹⁰ By choosing topics like critical librarianship or culturally sustaining pedagogies to discuss and reflect upon in our learning community, we are working to better understand our students by increasing our own awareness of diverse perspectives and nurturing critical reflection in our individual professional practices.

Dialogue is one way that we can foster critical reflection among the members of our professional learning community. Mezirow asked us to take one step further by engaging in discourse or a form of dialogue that works to achieve a collective understanding and questioning of a common belief—discussion that identifies and critically questions our own assumptions.¹¹ They argued that, through discourse, we can build on our individual experiences to develop a collective judgment that is better informed. In discussing the difficult work of taking part in effective discourse, Mezirow argued for a level of emotional engagement that includes awareness, empathy, and emotional control from participants.¹² Victor X. Wang, Geraldine Torrisi-Steele, and Catherine A. Hansman built on this idea by encouraging educators looking to promote critical reflection in their learning environments to foster a culture of safety, trust, and honest communication.¹³ We strive to achieve this climate of empathy and trust in our professional learning community. It informs our decisions about how we structure individual meetings, the readings we choose to discuss, and even the physical locations of our meetings.

Steven A. Schapiro, Ilene L. Wasserman, and Placida V. Gallegos argued the importance of working within a group to support transformative learning. They claimed that “the qualities of a dialogic group provide a unique container for transformative learning, in that the norms and directional force of the relationships foster critical self-reflection, brought on by members’ commitment to the group.”¹⁴ According to Schapiro and colleagues, our professional learning community most closely represents a group for personal growth and self-awareness.¹⁵ We are committed to working collectively to support each member’s

personal learning journey through critical self-reflection and discourse. Through this discourse, we develop meaning for ourselves while collaboratively constructing better judgments regarding our professional practice.

BUILDING SKILLS AND CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE

Since 2016, our professional learning community has met on over thirty occasions, discussing nearly twenty unique topics ranging from self-directed learning to engaged pedagogy, critical information literacy to information-seeking behaviors, and critical pedagogy to antiracism. We frequently meet in locations off campus to minimize work-related distractions—generally in places where we can relax and share some food and drink. All members of the group have been involved with choosing discussion topics as well as facilitating discussions and/or providing supplemental learning materials. While in our annual evaluation documentation we highlight our engagement in a professional development group, we do not assign any evaluative measures to our work within the group. Our learning community has no administrative oversight, though we do have the support of our administration.

Our ability to sustain the momentum of our professional learning community over the last five years is a testament to our individual commitments to personal meaning-making and transformation. The membership of the group has fluctuated only slightly to accommodate new hires to the department and one member leaving to take on a new position in the university. Through reflective writing, we have identified some of the key aspects that continue to make our learning community successful. For some of us, it is all about the autonomy we have for making decisions about the trajectory of the group. For others, our success is due to the climate that we have cultivated around our personal and professional development.

The importance of autonomy in faculty-initiated and -facilitated learning communities is not unique to our group. Misa Mi listed multiple reasons for their librarian-led learning community's success, including what they refer to as “community design” or the engagement of group members to determine aspects of community, such as topics discussed and format of the meetings to “invite active participation and evoke lively discussion.”¹⁶ Members of our group also saw the value of a community-designed program, and several noted their appreciation for things like “the readings and topics [following] the interest and curiosity of the group” (Brienne), or “having opportunities to choose what we read, and [deciding] as a group how we would like to discuss it” (Darren). Our group autonomy expands beyond reading topics and facilitator responsibilities. We, as a learning community, ensure that members also determine logistics like the frequency, time, and location of each meeting. Members appreciate being able to schedule meetings “around the ebbs and flows of the semester” (Brienne) and “meeting with enough frequency to keep us all engaged, but not so frequently that we all get annoyed or overwhelmed” (Rachel). Members of the group make all the following decisions:

- the frequency of our meetings
- the concepts or themes of our meetings
- the specific readings to guide our discussion
- the specific time and location of each meeting

- the organizational structure of each meeting
- the people responsible for facilitating discussions

A second aspect of the professional learning community that members reflected on positively was the environment that we have cultivated and maintained. In some of their earliest writings about transformational learning, Mezirow wrote that the self-confidence needed for a perspective shift can be gained through discussions within a “supportive social climate in which provisional tries are encouraged with minimum risk.”¹⁷ This concept of a low-stakes atmosphere is echoed in the reflections of some of our group members.

“First of all, I appreciate that our meetings are informal and low-pressure, which helps make for a more comfortable discussion environment.” – Stephanie

“I appreciate not being graded or judged. In formal classes, I feel like my discussion posts and other writing must be polished, but thinking (especially about difficult topics) is messy, non-linear, ongoing work. In our discussion group, I feel comfortable asking questions, ‘thinking out loud,’ and bouncing ideas off other members, even if they are not fully formed.” – Natasha

Considering the aspects we value in our professional learning community—autonomy and a culture of support—our work as a group reflects the affective nature of transformative learning. Dirkx wrote extensively on the importance of attending to the soul in adult learning. They argued that the soul draws on our experiences, relationships, and emotions to help us better understand our world.¹⁸ Nurturing the soul means acknowledging and embracing our authentic feelings to foster personal growth.¹⁹ Having a safe and comfortable space to develop our thoughts and ideas around new and possibly uncomfortable concepts helps us to shift perspectives and eventually apply these new perspectives to our work.

PLANNING AND PILOTING IN PRACTICE

At each of our learning community meetings, we include a discussion of how we can collectively work toward praxis. These discussions help us develop what Schapiro and colleagues refer to as relational empathy and critical systemic consciousness—progressing beyond personal development to collectively construct new meanings and question social realities.²⁰ Through reflection, we identified multiple ways that our participation in this learning community has translated into our work as information literacy educators.

All of us have noted significant shifts in perspective in our reflective writing. For some of us, the learning community has prompted a shift in our approach to the classroom and how we interact with our students.

“The learning community has allowed me space to engage with the theories and research on teaching and learning. It has encouraged me to think more deeply about what I do in the classroom and why. It has also helped open my perspective to experiences outside of my own narrow and privileged experience with higher education.” – Brianne

“When I first started teaching, I felt the need to be an authority—to be an expert. I think our learning community has helped me to see that I am an authority, but I do not have to constantly prove that. Also, my students are authorities too! This realization goes for classroom management, too. As a small-statured woman, I always felt like I would not be taken seriously by my students if I did not establish myself as serious. But I hate the role of disciplinarian, and I am pretty sure students hate it, too. Through our discussions, I have learned so much about democratic classrooms and giving students power. I think these concepts have really resonated with me in my everyday approach to teaching.” – Rachel

For some of us, these perspective shifts have been catalysts for specific changes to course policies or how we develop community in the classroom.

“One of the big ways our readings and these meetings has impacted my teaching is in my switching to a more flexible teaching style. The first semester I taught (before we had development meetings), I was strict with due dates, timeframes for make-up work, etc. After some of our readings and discussions with others in the group, I was able to see a way to still be an effective teacher but without necessarily being so strict on all aspects of the class.... I specifically made the point to give students a chance to re-do assignments if they did poorly—keeping in mind that the goal is to make sure the students understand the material.” – Stephanie

“An important shift for me is a transformation in the way I interact with students. Earlier in my career, I was focused on covering the content I taught and on policing student behavior. Through our readings and discussions, I have discovered that learning about students’ lived experiences, cultivating connections with students, and sharing power with them are more important. We learn through relationships with others, so the people in the room have to be the top priority. This shift in perspective impacts everything I do in the classroom. I spend time learning about students’ lives in and outside of college, their interests, their previous research experience, etc. I incorporate time in class for students to check in with each other and with me about how college is going so that we can build community. We also create course policies and grading rubrics together and we choose the course topic as a group.” – Darren

As an information literacy department, we have even worked to translate our shift in perspective to not just how we teach, but what we teach.

“I find it hard to pinpoint specific examples because the change has happened gradually over time, but if I compare the shared lesson plans we were using for one-shot instruction when I started in the department to the lesson plans we are using now, I definitely see a shift. Before we put a lot of emphasis on practicing skills, so for our first-year writing courses, we designed activities and games to build search skills in the discovery layer. Now I think we put more emphasis on drawing on students’ experience, so our lesson for the same course is now about reflecting on expertise and analyzing authority in a discourse community.

I do not think we would have agreed to collectively make these changes if we had not been participating in the learning community.” – Brianne

Reflecting on our work within the learning community shows how we have individually experienced shifts in perspective that have informed our approaches to developing course policies, building classroom community, sharing power with our students, and determining the curriculum of our information literacy classrooms. These shifts continue to shape our personal instructional identities as well as our identity as a department.

TAKING TRANSFORMATION FORWARD

We will likely need to make some changes to our professional learning community in the near future. Our library is restructuring in a way that will impact the makeup of our small department. While we know that such events can be catalysts for change and reflection, we are hopeful that our learning community will continue, in some form. We are committed to our continued learning and personal development and see the immeasurable value of critical reflection. In considering the impact participation in our learning community has had on us, the authors have identified perspective shifts that permeate our professional practice as well as our personal lives.

For some of us, our group work has prompted critical reflection on past professional experiences that highlighted previous, problematic frames of reference.

“In my previous job, I facilitated digital storytelling workshops for Native American community members to address local health issues. Although we made efforts to be culturally competent, there was no resource like this discussion group, and I made plenty of mistakes along the way. I wish I could use the tools, resources, and understanding that I have now to go back and fix them! However... it is good to know that I will be able to apply my learning from the discussion group to my future instructional design work. I know I will still make mistakes, but hopefully I will be able to recognize and rectify them more effectively.” – Natasha

“This work has transformed me personally and professionally. I came from a predominantly white field in the humanities where we taught and did research individually. There was little discussion of the impact of our teaching practices on BIPOC students, low-income students, first-generation students, etc. Both US culture and my field centered whiteness and discouraged discussions about or awareness of that fact. Our development meetings have raised my awareness of many forms of oppression in US society generally and higher education specifically. They have challenged my previous approach to teaching and alerted me to the need to look beyond myself and not to view my assumptions and ways of working as universal.” – Darren

Some of us reflected on the role our professional learning community has played in helping us to define our professional identities as well as our departmental identity.

“I think beyond awareness, this group has made it very clear to me that I really value the perspectives of my colleagues. I think we push each other to continually improve and grow. I think our learning community is a perfect example of that.” – Rachel

“On a personal level, participating in the discussion group has helped me form deeper bonds with colleagues. When you feel comfortable discussing difficult topics, as we do in our meetings, it transfers to other work situations as well, providing a level of trust that otherwise might not exist.” – Natasha

“I think for me, I continue to do this work because I want to keep learning and growing as a teacher. For me, the collective takeaway is about transforming our instructional identity as a department.” – Brianne

This type of reflection centers what we collectively value about our learning community—a forum for open and honest communication. While our group has discussed a wide range of critical and cultural issues from diverse perspectives, ultimately our conversations circle back to how our new knowledge can be applied to our work as educators. Stephanie wrote about learning from our collective experiences specifically in her reflection.

“The other thing I appreciate about these meetings is having time to talk about our experiences in the classroom and with teaching. Often the book or article will start the conversation and then we will end up really getting into some challenges or difficulties (or success stories) one of us experienced with their teaching, and it is helpful to have an opportunity to work through that. Though we are a collaborative department all the time, having this time set aside to just talk about various aspects of teaching I think helps with our collaboration outside of the meetings.”

Thinking about the future of our learning community, the authors reflected on discussion topics for future meetings, offering multiple suggestions varying from practical information literacy curriculum and inclusive teaching practices to examining problematic practices within higher education.

“What comes to mind right away is perhaps looking into readings about how to help combat misinformation and teach students to recognize misinformation and think critically about what they are reading online (and how to respond to those who are firm in their beliefs based on misinformation).” – Stephanie

“I would like to read about working with a couple of groups of students we have not considered yet directly or explicitly: students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs)... We also have not focused on sexism in (higher) education. I guess my point is that we could focus on particular identities as we move forward.” – Darren

“I am interested in discussing equitable and culturally responsive assessment because I think it could change how we approach assessing students learning in our information literacy program.” – Brianne

It is clear that despite the shifts that our learning community may encounter, our focus will remain on working in the best interests of our students. We will continue to engage in discourse that helps us to question our current perspectives, and we will continue to foster an environment in which we promote critical reflection while supporting the affective aspects of transformative learning.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IDENTITIES

In considering why we feel like our group has been successful, we have compiled a list of suggestions we would offer others who may be interested in developing a professional learning community at their institution.

- Prioritize autonomy. The group should collectively determine what topics to cover as well as when and how often to meet. Buy-in from participants is key.
- Minimize hierarchy. All group members should actively participate in the selection of readings, the structure of the meeting, and the facilitation of discussions.
- Eliminate evaluation. This type of community should be about personal development and professional growth, not about job performance. Work in the group should not be tied to tenure, promotion, or annual reviews.
- Be mindful of group dynamics. A culture of trust and respect is crucial to this type of work. Try to keep the group small to encourage participation and comfort among members.
- Keep it informal. Strive for a low-stakes environment. Try to host meetings away from the typical work environment and include things that make the meetings more enjoyable, like food and drink.

For us, transformative experiences within our professional learning community are possible because of the group culture we established. We all have individual catalysts for transformation as well as evolving motivations for change. What we share is our commitment to continued personal growth and a desire for cultivating more informed instructional identities.

NOTES

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